

NETWORKED SCREENS TOPOLOGIES OF DISTANCE AND MEDIA REGIME OF IMMUNIZATION

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Media theory usually foregrounds transmission, storage, and processing as elementary media operations, neglecting the role media play in protecting living beings. However, the biopolitical and discursive reactions to the spread of Covid-19 have evidenced how protection and establishing safe distances can be implicated in the media process of transmission, which viral infection is, basically. Taking the window photos reacting to the pandemic-induced isolation in early 2020 as a starting point, I propose to examine the dynamics of distance and proximity by focusing on the protective functionalities of small networked screens. Today, networked screens such as laptops, tablets, smartphones, or television

dominate our everyday and personal media use. Their omnipresence and our permanent attachment to them became even stronger during the Corona crisis, giving the screens new political significance. Placed between the self and the world, screens are able to co-create protective topologies of distance and, thus, to fulfill immunitary functions in addition to their communicative and connective ones. In order to elaborate on this double operativity, I will draw on etymological, media archaeological, and media theoretical understandings of screens as protective 'shields', 'barriers', and 'filters' and combine them with the philosophical perspectives on immunization developed by Roberto Esposito and Peter Sloterdijk.

INTRODUCTION

Looking directly into the camera, gazing into the distance absorbed in thought, alone or shoulder to shoulder with relatives –Bianca Taube’s photo series *Fenstergast* (Window Guest) portrays single persons, couples, and families in domestic confinement during the months of Corona lockdown in early 2020. The Munich photographer records moments and impressions of people located behind the windows of their flats, corridors, kitchens, or living rooms –preferably on the first floor. In these photos, the windows stand out. They are not only marked by wooden or synthetic frames, but also by the reflections on the pane. They function as fragile barriers between the photographer situated outside in front of the houses and the people inside. While most of the pictures are taken in head or shoulder close-ups establishing aesthetic proximity, the windows highlight the in-between space and negotiate the distance between the photographer and her subjects. In these images, the windows fulfill the task of differentiating between inside and outside, while simultaneously collapsing the distinction by means of playful reflections of the photographic off. Hoping to exhibit her photos in a gallery one day, Bianca Taube posts them on her *Instagram* profile *erstesahne_blog* for now. The ‘outside-in’ aesthetic of her window pictures corresponds to and inverts the ‘inside-out’ aesthetics of numerous windows pictures taken with smartphones and populating *Instagram* under hashtags such as #viennafrommywindow, #parisfrommywindow, #stuttgartfrommywindow or #parisjetaime. Several European cities initiated comparable photo projects inviting people to record their city in the months of lockdown. While Bianca Taube photographs people inside, the ‘from-my-window’-initiatives feature outside views that the city population have from their homes and roofs –mostly in long or medium shots. Although the views offered vary considerably depending on the streets, districts, and cities, the window as a threshold between the domestic photographer and her/his subjects is

again a prominent and recurrent motif in these and related hashtags. Positioned in the middle between inside and outside, at the front or back of the photographic composition, open or closed windows serve as an internal frame in the photos. If the opposite side is a windowed façade, the images unfold a Hitchcock-esque aesthetic, measuring the distance between two window views intertwined in an asymmetrical play of gazes. In his photo series *Covid-19-Isolation* (2020) presented on the *Instagram* page *chrisfernhello*, the London-based photographer Chris Fernandez consequently cultivates this Hitchcock-esque composition and strengthens the cinematic look by taking the pictures at night. Photographing his neighbors and later other people, the photos display dramatically illuminated windows—functioning as cinematic screens—, which show and conceal the inhabitants on the other side and address the viewers once more as (photo-) cinematic voyeurs.

The Corona crisis has produced diverse iconography to date. Circulated on television news, (online) magazines, or social media, the imagery ranges from curves and diagrams to masks, empty city streets, talking heads using video conferencing apps, and, last but not least, windows. The window photos on *Instagram* are just one instance of newly emerged or reemerged window practices, which include not only photographing them but also window talking, making music from a balcony, or using windows as a platform for displaying children's drawings (Vollmuth, 2020). These social and media practices tell of our desire to break out of the isolation during the time of domestic confinement, to reconnect, and to bring the world closer again. While making and sharing window photos on social media is an extension of these practices evolved during the pandemic, the window pics are also meditations on the very screens they appear on. Besides being an old metaphor of the image, windows also offer metaphors for thinking screens, which traditionally emphasize the possibility of unobstructed, direct access to reality and knowledge, but also a mode of distant privileged observation (Casetti,

2015, pp. 157-158; Elsaesser, & Hagener, 2007, pp. 24-26). Especially photos taken inside and showing open windows suggest the possibility of direct access to the world; however, slightly shifting the realistic undertones of the metaphor towards the phatic functions of seeking and establishing social contact in the midst of isolation. When looking at these pictures on our smartphones, laptops, or tablets, we are looking through the eyes of these photographers, through their windows at other windows. Window photos seem to literally turn our digital screens into apertures, collapsing the motifs into the sites of their consumption and—in the case of smartphone shots—also of their production. As such, they not only bear witness to the intensification of networked communication we could observe in the last months. Rather, we can read the window pictures as allegories of our current confinement in the mediated apartment glued to digital screens within.

Today, small networked screens such as laptops, tablets, smartphones, or television especially dominate our everyday and personal media use. Situated within reach of the body or handheld, they afford direct interaction and enable intimate and individualized manipulation—either via tactile surfaces or via their “complementary media” such as remote control, mouse, or keyboard (Engell, 2003, p. 75). Small screens are smart, often portable, responsive, and sustain a relationship not only with the user, but also to each other. They mediate our knowledge and access to the world, connect us with others, represent and display audiovisual material, or help to phatically affirm our very being (Sobchack, 2016, p. 158)—to which the windowed *Instagram* aesthetics, of course, attest. The omnipresence of screens and our permanent attachment to them have become even stronger during the Corona crisis. For many, their private and professional lives took place on screens and still do to a great extent, increasing media consumption and digital communication from safe distances as a result of the politics of distancing. For in many European countries, Corona politics is first and foremost a politics of spatial relations. People are urged to keep a distance

from each other. This applies not only to unknown persons, acquaintances, friends, or colleagues, but at times of lockdown even to family members. The imperative of distancing regulates our movements in public space and also extends to the private sphere: retreat into the private becomes a social strategy of distancing in itself—even at the risk of isolation—, thus delegating the task of bridging the spatial and social distances to digital screens and networked communication. Of course, these media functions are not specific to our current state of affairs. It is one of the basic assumptions of media theory and media history that media overcome space (Abend, Haupt, & Müller, 2012, pp. 9-11; McLuhan, 1994, pp. 3-8). By no means merely a matter of geography, the collapsing of distance is also associated with establishing communicative, social, and/or aesthetic proximity.

However, the window photos also complicate this account, and the metaphorical tradition of screens they refer to, by accentuating the intermediary position of photographed windows, the materiality of their frames, and even their obstructive operativity, all of which re-introduce distance and unfold ambivalent topologies of being together apart. These images remind us that if distance is one of the main issues of media, as Sybille Krämer emphasizes (2015, p. 23), their functionality cannot be reduced unilaterally to overcoming it. As the transparent and at the same time reflective window glasses perfectly illustrate in the photo series, media not only connect but also separate. Not only can they bring closer what is far away, they can also create gaps and intervals in the first place. Accordingly, the status of networked screens during the pandemic would be inadequately described if we were to focus only on their capacity to be digital windows, cancel distances, and facilitate psycho-social bonding, i.e. by turning physical and social distancing into forms of “distant socializing” (Dickel, 2020, pp. 80-83). Inasmuch as ‘social distancing’ is an immunity political strategy dedicated to saving life, our media use needs to be addressed within the discourse of protection. By referring to immunity, I do not mean a biological mecha-

nism of one single body, but rather a modern biopolitical power formation that closely intertwines life and politics and medicalizes the latter (Esposito, 2011, pp. 14-16). One of the principle mechanisms of the modern immunization paradigm is to protect by producing atomized individuals and negating community (Haraway, 1991; Esposito, 2006; 2011; 2013; Sloterdijk, 2016). With it, the question arises whether screens contribute to the anti-communitarian politics of immunization and to what extent they might fulfill protective, and thus, distancing tasks themselves. Because protection, so the hypothesis, requires a minimum of distance and detachment.

Taking the window pictures as a starting point, I would therefore like to reflect on the protective functionalities of networked screens and to ask how they regulate proximity and distance by focusing on the specific situation with which many of us are familiar by now –namely, sitting in front of a networked screen (often alone), communicating from a distance, and being located in a mediated apartment. Thus, before coming back to the ‘communitarian’ (Sloterdijk, 2016, p. 538) capacities of small screens, I propose to examine their ‘immunitarian’ ones, paying particular attention to the different topologies involved. For this, I will draw on etymological, media archaeological, and media theoretical understandings of screens as protective ‘shields’, ‘barriers’, and ‘filters’ (Huhtamo, 2006, pp. 34-37; Kress, 2006; Strauven, 2012, pp. 162-171) and combine them with the philosophical perspectives on immunization developed by Roberto Esposito (2006; 2010; 2011; 2013) and Peter Sloterdijk (2016).

PROTECTIVE SCREENS

One of the best-known conceptual links between screens and protection probably stems from Siegfried Kracauer’s interpretation of the Medusa myth. In the myth, Perseus uses a polished shield made for him by Athena in order to guard himself against the gorgon Medusa, whose unmediated

view would turn everybody into stone. The shield, of course, not only protects but also reflects, serving as a mediating, mirror-like device. In his *Theory of Film*, Kracauer (1960) refers to the myth in order to elaborate on the protective features of the cinema screen, calling it “Athena’s polished shield” (p. 305). The mediatization of horrors as ‘mirror images’ makes real-world threats perceptible without ‘petrifying’ the viewer in the process. For Kracauer, the shielding function of the screen operates on the representative level and because of what it shows and how. His considerations are associated in particular with literally terrifying images such as war films, documentations of concentration camps, or assassination videos (Avezzù, 2006, p. 37). Here, visual media immunize by controlling stimuli and affects.

Stanley Cavell, on the other hand, touches particularly on topological features that screens display as protective media. In his analyses of the frame in painting, photography, and moving images, Cavell gives an unusual and brief comment on the cinema screen, denying that its primary objective is to be a surface or a support for projection. Instead, he emphasizes its in-between position: “A screen is a barrier. What does the silver screen screen? It screens me from the world it holds –that is, makes me invisible. And it screens that world from me –that is, screens its existence from me” (Cavell, 1979, p. 24). Comparable to the accentuated window glasses in Bianca Taube’s work or to visual concealment in Chris Fernandez’s photo series, the screens form an obstacle between the spectator and the world and exhibit a distancing and separating operativity. Interestingly, this shielding off works in both directions, relating to both the spectator and the screened world, and implies reciprocity.

Kracauer’s and Cavell’s reflections, different as they are, refer back to an older meaning of screens. Today, we call projection and display technologies intended to show (audio-) visual material and present information ‘screens’. Although this understanding might seem natural, media archeological and etymological studies have recently emphasized that it is

actually quite a late phenomenon: In English, this meaning dates to the early 19th century, used especially for phantasmagoria, later magic lantern projections, and other forms of public display (Huhtamo, 2006, p. 36; Elsaesser, & Hagener, 2007, p. 54). Before, the word screen had a much older meaning of protection, shielding, defense, barrier, or concealment in many European languages (Kress, 2006, p. 203), often implying a topological relationship of being in-between.

Before entering the field of entertainment and spectacle and denoting display and representation surfaces, the English word screen had three broad meanings “sheltering from observation”, “providing a partition”, and “a coarse riddle or sieve” (Kress, 2006, p. 200). The first meaning derived from the middle French word *escran*, which referred especially to “a screen to set between one and the fire” (Kress, 2006, p. 200), thus designating an intermediary placed object. In the 16th century, the English word screen usually meant floor-standing fire furniture objects, consisting of a frame and some kind of translucent material, or hand-screens, little decorated objects like fans, which were used for aesthetic pleasure, erotic play, or as fashion items (Huhtamo, 2006, p. 35). In turn, the French *escran* is related to the Old High German *skrank*, which is equivalent to Schranke (barrier, fence, rail, or limit) in today’s use (Kress, 2006, p. 200). The aspects of shielding and partitioning are also entailed in the third meaning, which specifies an instrument for separating and filtering coarse elements from fine ones (Kress, 2006, p. 201). In 1900, in the early days of cinema, this use of screen was still very present and especially linked to the coal industry, indicating “screening out the coals by sieves” (Strauven, 2012, p. 170). In Italian, French, and German etymologies, the understanding of protection is also well documented (Casetti, 2015, p. 157; Kress, 2006, pp. 201-202). The contemporary German word *Bildschirm* in particular still clearly provides the sense of protection, shielding, and separation. The word is a compound of image (*Bild*) and shield (*Schirm*) and refers especially to television, computers, and information displays in public space, whereas the

second translation of English screen, namely *Leinwand*, is reserved for cinema and literally signifies the cloth, linen, that the projection surfaces could be made of. The protection implied in the German word is attributed to the early years of radar technology where a *Bildschirm* was meant to shield from dangerous radiation (Elsaesser, & Hagener, 2007, p. 53).

For the most part, screen theory in media studies does not rely on these old meanings and practices. Instead, as Francesco Casetti (2015) has shown, conceptualizations of the screen revolve around metaphors such as window, mirror, frame, or, less frequently, door, which draw attention either to representational transparency, an identificatory relationship, or compositional formalism, respectively (pp. 157-159). Of course, we can find some exceptions, for example Wanda Strauven's (2012) archaeology of early touchable screens arguing for the continuation of older meanings in the early cinema (pp. 162-171), or Giorgio Avezzi's (2016) work on the shared genealogies of the protective and monstrative meanings and traditions of the concept screen. However, it is especially today, in the middle of the Corona crisis, that the protective and shielding functions of the screens become apparent, actualizing the older traditions and meanings. Screens hold a prominent place within our current biopolitically restructured lives and are thus gaining biopolitical purposes themselves. Of course, screens do not lose their capacities to display, to be surfaces for information or images; to act as windows; to provide access, or to establish social or aesthetic proximity; rather, they are gaining additional functionality that brings their protective topology of in-betweenness to the fore.

IN-BETWEENNESS: MEDIATED TOPOLOGIES OF IMMUNIZATION

It is exactly this in-betweenness that is powerfully exhibited in the window pictures by Bianca Taube, Chris Fernandez, and the numerous 'from-my-window'-photographers on

Instagram through carefully positioning the windows within the composition, deploying an aesthetic of internal framing, visual concealment, or literal obstruction by means of curtains, blinds, and overlapping reflections. In this way, these windows, being metaphorical screens, are turned into barriers and shields sheltering people from bodily contact as well as direct looks. Chris Fernandez's photograph 6 from the series *Covid-19-Isolation*, which he posted on *Instagram* in April, is exemplary of such entangling of literal and metaphorical screens, windows, and barriers. The photo shows a flat façade with three windows, subdivided by sashes and thus multiplying the internal framings. In the middle, a half-open window offers an intimate view of a couple lying on a bed in a dark room, illuminated only by a small Macintosh laptop. The screen is situated almost on the same image plane as the window opening, extending its sill and the in-between position. The window frame frames the couple as well as the digital screen, being itself framed by the photographic image and the screen edges of the viewer's displaying device such as a smartphone. The wall, the window frames and sills, together with the depicted and displaying screens, clearly distinguish the inside from the outside while re-connecting both spaces. Being a reflexive image, this photo also superimposes the depicted and actual spaces of private consumption, positioning the *Instagram* user simultaneously on the side of the photographer and the viewing couple, on the inside and outside of the in-between screens—both digital and architectural. More straightforwardly, this window photo of course features an everyday media activity during the imposed domestic confinement—using a networked screen at home.

During the months of lockdown, our networked screen activity took place—and for many still does—mainly in the domestic sphere, unfolding ambivalences of proximity and distance, protection and distant (re-)socializing. If possible, professional interaction and communication shifted to remote work from home, performed mostly via networked screens such as laptops and smartphones. Private communication and

entertainment were relocated into the digital realm, too: video telephony in particular became popular and compensated for personal get-togethers of all kinds, while intensifying well-established routines of writing messages, sharing images, making calls, playing games, watching news, series, or films. Even portable screens such as mobile phones or the laptop in Fernandez's photo, which typically traverse public and private spheres or help to create provisory private bubbles in public spaces (Beugnet, 2013, pp. 199-202; Casetti, 2015, p. 48; McCarthy, 2001, pp.121-122), have become more limited in their mobile use. Together with their users, they have been immobilized in the home. This applies not only to the phases of lockdown, which lasted from mid-March to the beginning of May in Germany, for example, but also afterwards giving way to a progressive relaxing of control¹. In educational institutions such as schools and universities, home office, distant teaching, and domestic isolation were still in effect months later, and are still valid for many European universities until today.

The dynamics of distance and proximity, which networked screens co-mediate by being in-between, are at the core of the immunitary paradigm and can therefore help us to grasp the ambivalent functionalities of media. Discourses of immunity are organized by topological relationships and boundaries between inside and outside, self and non-self and, thus, negotiate questions of contagious contact and its avoidance. The pandemic virality of Covid-19 can be described in terms of a mediality of closeness. Involving a process of transmission, biological viruses raise basic questions of mediality (Krämer, 2015, p. 96). As Sybille Krämer notes, infection is a genuinely physical process in which the distance between a source of infection and a host is spanned (Krämer, 2015, p. 96). The body is contaminated and infected by close contact. Therefore, infection can be regarded as "transmission through contact", offering a materialist model of mediality (Krämer, 2015, p. 96). In this regard, protection means, among other things, the interruption of transmission and the maintenance of distance. It aims at preventing contact,

contagion, contamination, and mixing, all of which are etymologically and conceptually related to the sense of touch, the sense of proximity *par excellence* (Derrida, 2005, p. 68; Esposito, 2013, p. 59). Everything that stands in-between and helps to secure the boundary between self and non-self, body and virus may serve as a medium of protection.

Window pictures exhibit and reflect on the mediality of in-betweenness that has started to proliferate and to dominate our everyday activities in many forms. Many European countries currently deploy all kinds of protective intermediary devices materializing the politics of distancing: masks preventing aerosols from spreading; plastic walls placed in supermarkets, libraries, and public institutions; distance markers on the floors; apartment walls, and last but not least networked screens in private spaces. In all of these cases, something is placed between the self and the other and acts as a literal or metaphorical shield: be it an object or simply space. Similar to Cavell's brief observation, these screen-shields exhibit a reciprocity of protection. By putting a digital, plastic, textile, or a glass screen between the me and the world, it is not only the self who is protected, but also the others. Under conditions of mutual endangerment, maintaining distance, avoiding physical contact, using all kinds of protective shields, which might have been experienced as asocial conduct before, can even be regarded as cooperative behavior, a form of relating to each other, and showing consideration (Alkemeyer, & Bröskamp, 2020, p. 75).

However, the reciprocity of screening can only partially be explained as an expression of solidarity and social thoughtfulness, which are of course involved, too. More than that, the need to be protected from each other reveals that sociality is deemed the main source of risk and danger. According to Roberto Esposito, this constitutes the crucial ambivalence of the modern immunization paradigm. Following Foucault's work on biopower (2004), Esposito examines the rise of modern biopolitics and situates immunity at the intersection of life and politics (2006, p. 24). Instead of deploying the mili-

tarized logics of friend and enemy that characterized many immunity discourses of the 20th century (Esposito, 2011, pp. 153-158; Haraway, 1991, p. 211, 224), Esposito foregrounds the dialectic relationship immunity forms with community by interrelating the biological meaning of protection with the juridical meaning of exception. Both terms derive from *munus*, which means “gift”, “duty”, or “obligation” (Esposito, 2013, pp. 58-59). Esposito draws on these different meanings at the same time, in order to conceptualize community in an anti-identitarian, anti-possessive way. In his account, the common is not what is owned and proper, but actually begins where property and gain end (Esposito, 2010, p. 3). The community derives from the debt, the shared obligation to give the gift, i.e. *munus*, de-emphasizing taking or the reciprocity of giving as the foundation of the social association (Esposito, 2010, pp. 5-6). Being its negative, immunity is a mechanism releasing the individual from this obligation towards others: “Immune is he or she who breaks the circuit of social circulation by placing himself or herself outside it” (Esposito, 2013, p. 59).

Importantly, the common itself represents the risk to which modern immunity dispositifs respond (Esposito, 2011, p. 5; 2010, p. 12). For the members, this form of community, resting upon alterity and the improper, necessarily includes exposure to an outside, always risking the possibility of self-dissolution and the loss of boundaries (Esposito, 2010, p. 8). Therefore, modern immunization is installed to form a “defense against the expropriating features of *communitas*”; it protects against risky contact, relationality, and being in common (Esposito, 2006, p. 27). The protective mechanism of individualization structurally connects immunity and modernity: “Behind the self-legitimizing account of modern immunization, the real biopolitical function that modern individualism perform is made clear. Presented as the discovery and the implementation of the subject’s autonomy, individualism in reality functions as the immunitary ideologeme through which modern sovereignty implements the protection of life” (Esposito, 2006, p. 34).

This individualizing, de-socializing function is one of the problematic impacts of immunization, and it is where Esposito's analysis of biopolitics differs significantly from Foucault's conception. This negativity helps to reflect on the implications of current Corona politics and the protective role of the media. The governmental strategies reveal that it is precisely the sociality and togetherness that become the source of danger of infection and contagion, leading to politics of demarcation, individualization, and even the isolation of subjects within public and private spheres. Especially the measures of lockdown and domestic confinement, as aggravated politics of distancing and restricting contact, make the anti-communitary dimensions of protection obvious. The private apartment in particular has become a milieu and a sphere of isolation, privatization, and individualization.

Located in such protective milieus, the networked screens by means of which we communicate with other people visually, verbally, or in writing, therefore fulfill immunitarian functions before communitarian ones, giving their personalized and individualized contemporary use a new political significance: Communicating via video conference tools, sharing images on social media, or chatting via *WhatsApp* during the Corona crisis, at least in the middle of the lockdown, cannot be experienced only as collapsing space. This is because the omnipresent sense of jeopardy, insecurity, boredom, or loneliness deeply affects the communicative and community-building situation, emphasizing the risk of the social, the need to protect the self and the others, as well as the immunitary logic of *pharmakon*: by protecting life, biopolitics end up negating life, sacrificing qualified forms of life, by reducing it to simple survival and bare existence (Esposito, 2013, p. 61). With this, the conditions of social distancing and remoteness become even more marked—as overtly mediated by the window pictures. Placed between us, the screens screen us from each other while (re)connecting us. These strategies, however, remind us that immunity, being an exemption or exception, also implies privileges and their unequal distribution:

Nursing staff, delivery men, or shop assistants, for example, are not able to withdraw from close contact. Homeless people cannot retreat into the protective privacy of the home, while the privilege of interacting with the world from safe mediated distances also deepens the structural inequalities of the digital divide. While for some digital inequalities mean the impossibility of participating and accessing the common, for others it might mean increased exposure to platforms as economic actors, granting those platforms even more access to our “behavioral data” (Zuboff, 2019, p. 70) or letting them enclose us in the algorithmic filter bubbles (Pariser, 2011), which, by filtering out possible symbolic incoherencies and disturbances, alternative opinions and world views, may act as symbolic immunization and ideological insulation.

CO-ISOLATION: BEING TOGETHER APART

In the window images, the sense of individualization and isolation is provided in different ways: In ‘from-my-window’-photos, it is evoked by deserted apartments, empty unmade beds, or single persons sitting or standing beside or in front of a window. Many of Chris Fernandez’s photos employ the same strategy. Mostly, the windows isolate a single person captured from the outside, singularizing him/her by an enclosing darkness of the night. The window-screens in his pictures partition the social and physical space. Although Bianca Taube’s pictures also show many individuals, they seem to de-emphasize isolation and loneliness. By placing the bodies in spatial and aesthetic proximity and by depicting them in close framings separated by glass, they instead reinforce the sense of physical fragility and necessity of mutual protection. Often, the reflections interweaving the outside and inside spaces turn the persons into ghostly, oddly displaced apparitions. Moreover, the window images not only express a socio-topology structured by the logics of protective remoteness, but themselves result from it. They are taken under the

conditions of isolation and by means of in-between screens. Especially the ‘from-my-window’-images, shot at home and directed towards the outdoors, deictically highlight the positionality of the photographers, being isolated inside and dependent on small networked screens for recording and sharing their views as well as for communication in general. This way, they not only convey a topology of in-betweenness structured by screens/windows, but also of embeddedness in dwellings that serve as “protective milieus” (Cuntz, 2020) by enclosing and surrounding. Using a networked screen in the domestic sphere, therefore, implies two topologies nested into each other: in-betweenness and environment. It is by analyzing this nesting that we can more fully account for the distant sociality mediated by networked screen media, combining their immunitary and communitary functions.

It is worth noting that both topologies involve different degrees of shielding: Like any protective environment, the home is characterized by the dialectic of refuge and confinement (Cuntz, 2020, p. 176). Protective milieus always run the risk of turning into an unbearable restriction and perverting their effect (Cuntz, 2020, p. 173, 176). The lockout of the potentially threatening world becomes self-imprisonment (Cuntz, 2020, p. 173, 176). Media creating a topology of in-betweenness, such as screens, are more permeable, more flexible, and more punctual and partial in their effects than protective surroundings. Screens do not seal, but rather filter, i.e. hold at a fragile distance or oscillate between shielding off and letting in alterity, thus helping to mitigate the effects of encompassing milieus. Aesthetically, this alleviating modulation can be described by the dynamics between veiling and revealing, deployed in many ‘from-my-window’-photos. Such photos hide identities and conceal the bodies by withdrawing them completely from view, emptying the habitation, showing only parts of the body such as hands or by partially obstructing them with objects placed in front. At the same time, they reveal the formerly hidden by showing private interiors, often carefully staged, prolonging the exhi-

bitionistic impulse of social media, or just by opening vistas. Thus, the metaphorical and real screens are both protective shields and windows: they let the world in, while covering it, and bring it closer, while keeping it at a distance at the same time. However, relating the mechanism of distancing only to the outside world would give a rather partial account of the mitigating effects. In addition to insulation and detachment, politics of distancing also result in an unbearable proximity, which, depending on personal circumstances, can take on many forms—from physical violence to claustrophobization of home, to an experience of mediated violation of privacy. Like the open windows in the photos, digital screens perform both distance-bridging tasks towards the outside, reducing the anti-communitary impact of immunization, the experience of isolation, or loneliness, and distance-creating tasks towards the inside, constituting a psycho-social immunization against too much closeness at home. These aporias of immunitary and communitary tasks reveal sociality as a *pharmakon* itself, i.e. being simultaneously poison and cure in physical and mental terms.

Topologically, we can describe this aporetic structure of sociality by drawing on Sloterdijk's term "co-isolation" (2016, pp. 53-58). Co-isolation or "connected isolation" (p. 537) negotiates the simultaneity of insulation in a protected interior and the partial re-mediation of contact. In his trilogy on Spheres as immunitary and protective interiorities, Sloterdijk explicitly addresses sociality and subjectivity in topological terms (2016, p. 499). Similar to Esposito's diagnosis, he analyzes modern immunization as a process of individualization. Co-isolation is basically a mode of distant socializing that takes place under conditions of immunitary individualization. *Foam*, also the title of the last volume of the trilogy, provides the topological metaphor for this form of protected, mediatized being together apart. In foam, each individual bubble represents a small autonomous cell, a self-contained and protected interiority, which is connected to other monadic cells on several sides in an agglomeration

of shared fragility (Sloterdijk, 2016, pp. 46-52). The cell wall perfectly embodies the simultaneity of connection and separateness expressed by the term co-isolation. While being a boundary and dividing two spheres, it nevertheless belongs to both and constitutes a shared interface (p. 53). Social association is, thus, a form of partitioning –another form of screening. Sloterdijk uses the metaphor of the foam in order to conceptualize a characteristically modern form of sociality, in which older ideological, theological, or cosmological monospheres have lost their integrative value (pp. 58-59). It is a pluralized, acentric sociality of co-isolated, yet flexibly connected and neighboring cells –a conception which is openly neo-monodological in orientation (p. 58).

In Sloterdijk's account, the mediated apartment –a nested topology dominating our experience during the Corona pandemic, especially in phases of lockdown– is the prototypical architectural manifestation of modern immunization and its aporetic form of co-isolated sociality. On the one hand, the modern way of habitation caters to flexibilized individuals and their needs for isolation and protection, turning the home into an immune space of “non-cooperation on the joint work”, as Sloterdijk remarks, drawing on Esposito's reading of *immunitas* as the negative of *communitas* (2016, p. 500). Immune spaces originate from boundary-drawing practices and “inclusive exclusivity” (p. 502). Being a defense mechanism, it is “an ignoring machine” materializing “the right to ignore the outside world” (p. 504) and to break off communication. On the other hand, in order to prevent this interiority turning into a closed container, the rejection of the world must be complemented by an openness towards it, which is fulfilled by media technologies re-introducing communicative-communitary elements. Media complete the house, ensuring “that the cell, even though it reliably performs its defensive functions as an insulator, an immune system and a supplier of comfort and distance, still remains a space with world-content” (p. 555). A mediatized residence is, therefore, “a perfectly insulated egosphere and an easily ac-

cessible point in a network of manifold online communities. It is an interface for the darkening of the outside world and for admission to reality on demand” (p. 523).

Read philosophically, Sloterdijk’s spherology has rightly been criticized for being prone to affirming an ideology of insulation (Cuntz, 2020, p. 173, 187) and one that might unwillingly support reactionary fears of the other and phantasies of the own and the pure (Sutherland, 2019, pp. 209-212). Read mainly diagnostically, however, it is a helpful tool not only to highlight the political risks involved in dealing with the Corona virus by closing borders, cultural othering, referring to ideas of the healthy public body, impeding democratic protest, or strengthening the cocooning power of digital moguls, but also to grasp the precarity and mediated tensions of being in common vis-à-vis the pandemic. Especially, co-isolation quite accurately describes the nested socio-topologies elicited by the in-betweenness of screens within the domestic enclosure. However, networked screens are not only implied by the ‘co’ in the co-isolation, as Sloterdijk’s arguments on the primarily communitary functions of media might imply. Instead, their role is better understood by the shared walls in the foam agglomerate –so perfectly metaphorized by architecturally embedded windows in the Corona photography. Within the socio-topology of immunization, media are such walls simultaneously performing operations of separating and connecting, distancing and approximating. Being a kind of “psychic ventilation”, they regulate the degree of communitary openness and immunitary insulation (Sloterdijk, 2016, p. 538), also being able to create insulations and ego-spheres in the first place (which might be regarded one of the outcomes of the personalized content and feeds we consume on small screens). Besides being regulative in this way, the foam walls, like the glass in Bianca Taube’s photos, also give both the individual and the common a strong sense of fragility –which, within the topology of co-isolation, might subversively mark the limits of current individualistic as well as monospheric protectionism. While Sloterdijk tends to un-

derstand environment or the outside of the self as mainly toxic, reducing immunity to a defensive mechanism, the co-fragility and shared topologies of foams undermine the notion of an impenetrable micro- or macrospherological self.

CONCLUSION

Every society expresses a need for protection, as Esposito and Sloterdijk both acknowledge. However, they also emphasize that organizing all of societal, political, and cultural life around protection is a quite recent, modern phenomenon giving immunization a paradigmatic and systematic character and leading to historically specific aporias. Both see the loss of a solidary community as well as perverting the protection of life into its destruction as the main risks and paradoxes of excessive and structurally individualizing immunization. During the Corona crisis, the priority of protecting each single life as a political *raison d'être* becomes apparent and, with it, the mediality involved in the process. The transmission implied by the Covid-19 virus raises questions of both the mediality of closeness on the one side, and protection and mediating distance on the other. Therefore, it invites us to think about the role media play within the modern “immunitary *dispositif*” (Esposito, 2013, p. 59) and to analyze protection as an elementary media operation. By examining the immunitary media functions first, I have shown the broader political implications of our highly individualized and cocooning contemporary small screen media. In doing so, I have offered a mainly topological and screenological examination, highlighting the protective, distancing in-betweenness of screens and their dynamics of co-isolation. Advancing further research on immunitary media regimes, however, might also mean including politics of representation and affective dimensions such as media-induced fear, as well as interrogating newer biological accounts of the immune system that de-emphasize the antagonistic, defense-oriented,

virologic paradigms omnipresent in the current dispositif of immunization and, therefore, might offer new philosophical and political models (Mutsaers, 2016, pp. 48-56).

NOTES

1 While I am writing these sentences, several European countries are imposing a second lockdown.

2 I am grateful to Sven Grampp for drawing my attention to the distinction between reading Sloterdijk's trilogy in philosophical, or, alternatively, in historical/diagnostic terms.

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