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Pandemic Media: Preliminary Notes Toward an Inventory

edited by

**Philipp Dominik Keidl, Laliv Melamed,
Vinzenz Hediger, and Antonio Somaini**



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FACE MASK

TEXTILE-OBJECT

ALTERITY

FASHION

ETHICS

FRAGILITY

Textile-Objects and Alterity: Notes on the Pandemic Mask

Marie-Aude Baronian

This essay looks at the pandemic mask as a material object, which—beyond a means of immunization—measures the global fragility we experience and the way we relate to and encounter radical otherness. The face mask embodies what I term a “textile-object”: a tangible medium that one wears and handles, but also that one reflects on and contemplates. Drawing on an ethical reading of the mask, the essay questions this pervasive item as both a fashion object that crystallizes our contemporaneity and an accessory that tackles and seizes instances of alterity. Ultimately, wearing a mask forces us to infuse fundamental ethical thoughts into the way we inhabit the world and the way we engage with material objects.

Nowadays, the mask can be seen as the ultimate material object, and it is arguably one of the most widely and frequently used sartorial items: in such a short time span, the face mask has become a ubiquitous, routine, and enforced wearing practice. If the mask is a medial and prosthetic sartorial

object, protecting the body from inside-out and acting as a barrier and a means of immunization, it also measures the extreme fragility of life, in its social and material sense. As viral as the virus itself, the mask is not only analogous to current modes of investing in public spaces and platforms; it has come to circumscribe and dictate how we occupy and inhabit the world. Indeed, masks orient the way we perceive and feel the world, others, and ourselves, and define—affectively and socially—the fragile global situation we are experiencing. If the pandemic mask represents a material sign of vigilant precaution, or *fin du monde*, it concretely reminds us that behind every mask there is a tangible and friable life and world at stake, waiting to be *un-masked*.

Undoubtedly, the viral circulation of the pandemic mask makes us face a myriad of compelling questions. Here, I propose some brief thoughts on the mask as a sartorial medium and fashion object that seizes and tackles certain modalities of alterity.

Imposing itself as the most globally distinctive sartorial object, the face mask had already been vividly considered by various fashion designers who—motivated by sociopolitical concerns¹ and other inspirations—reimagined and worked with this accessory. One relevant example is to be found in a *défilé* by French designer Marine Serre,² who dressed her models in masks in order for the fashion industry to meditate on the ecological crisis and apocalyptic matters.

The self-referential mask has very rapidly transcended the medical field (as well as religious, cultural, cultural, and military uses) and migrated to the field of fashion, even becoming the ultimate object in fashion since it concentrates the heart of our contemporaneity.³ The mask is exemplary of what I call a “textile-object”: an object which, by and through its very materiality, textures the way we connect to ourselves, to others, and to the world. The textile-object animates the body in its physical and reflexive gestures. The textile-object is simultaneously matter and text; it is the medium that one wears and handles, but also that one reflects on and contemplates. What is more, the textile-object traces in its weft what happens here and now, and also serves as a memory-object as it holds the imprint of the event.

From an historical and sociological point of view, many clothes and accessories have been conceived to protect the self from others, to take distance from them, or to extract oneself from the mundane.⁴ In the context of the

- 1 See Corinne Jeammet’s online article, “Sept créateurs de mode expliquent les raisons qui les ont poussés à imaginer des masques, bien avant la pandémie du Covid-19” (2020).
- 2 Her Autumn–Winter 2020–2021 collection was presented during the fashion week in Paris in February 2020.
- 3 See, for example, Giorgio Agamben’s essay, “What Is the Contemporary?” (2009).
- 4 Let us think, at least in the history of western fashion, of the crinoline, hats, and veils for women, or armor and doublets for men. I would like here to thank Sophie Kurkdjian for

pandemic, however, the mask reveals the persistent, undeniable, and striking frontality of the Other. This accessory, as it is now repetitively stressed, is not only protecting the self from an epidemiological and invisible entity but also protecting others: it is protecting the lives of those we don't know and who do not belong to our familiar and domestic fields of vision. The mask is (following a Levinasian⁵ line of thought) both proximity and distance. It is not the proximity akin to the tangible risk of contagion, but the ineluctable confrontation with the Other, even in the most vacuous and unexpected spaces. Such proximity is thus not to be understood in terms of physical distancing, but, on the contrary, it indicates the social proximity of an Other who is always already distant because the Other is not mastered or appropriated. Wearing a mask is more than an empathic gesture because empathy is always conditioned and generated by a certain sense of knowledge and delineation beforehand. Empathy still relies on principles of recognition (of certain familiar structures), of choice and decision, and on potential identification, wherein the Other is not perceived in its otherness but as an "alter ego." Wearing a mask does not translate to a "good conscience," but it disturbs the comfortable and contented Self. The mask is exposition to the most unexpected, fortuitous, or enigmatic encounter. In that sense, the mask is more than a signal of civility, solidarity, or benevolence because the mask can always be confronted with a radical Other, who will cross our way and will break the rules of the consensual come-and-go. The mask makes us invisible (without hiding us) while opening up a new type of anonymity. It is therefore crucial that beyond the primary sanitary function of the mask, a non-serial anonymity emerges. In other words, the mask should not turn this non-visibility into mere statistical data, which are controllable and which de-singularize.

Within the specific realm of fashion, where the mask has so quickly found its perfect host and market, such an accessory condenses "stylish solidarity," capitalist opportunism, and disguised wariness. But if fashion is essentially to be understood as the materialization of the Self, it is also where the relationship with others and the "outside" becomes the most apparent. What is more, the mask epitomizes the "other" of fashion, since it implicitly acts as the magnifying glass, revealing how material objects—valuable or futile—are somehow necessary for accompanying the unpredictable and singular encounters of life. Not such a long time ago the mask was considered suspicious, offensive, and synonymous with identitarian closure, at least in the western part of the world. While altogether a marker of anxiety, precaution, discipline, and obedience, it has become, without irony, the most indispensable—fashionable—accessory of the season. But might it also simply become the most tangible

her helpful addition on this.

- 5 Here I am indebted to the ethical thinking of Emmanuel Levinas, such as in his seminal works *Totalité et Infini: Essai sur l'extériorité* (1961) and *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence* (1974).

accessory of alterity? Could we conceive of the mask as urgency without fear, as solidarity without moralism? The mask is the textile-object that says: “we are affected by what is to come.”

The mask indicates that we are no longer in control of the living. The physical body is to be protected and shielded by the mask in order to defy infection, and also to face and confront the social body in a different way. The seemingly trivial and unsophisticated object has suddenly become critical as it stands for our being-together and our relationship to the living. At once iconographic of fear and hope, the mask is extra-ordinary because it constantly reminds us that we are living through unprecedented moments in time. It is ordinary and always already prosthetic as it imposes on us a matter of indispensability. It is similarly banal and exceptional, common and subversive, typical and atypical.

Drawing some ethical thoughts from the pandemic mask does not exclude the important fact that, as Soncul and Parikka (2020) convincingly explain, “[f]rom gas masks to surgical masks, the covered mouth and nose has become a sign of affected bodies” that are regulated technologically, culturally, politically:

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. ... 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.

Therefore it seems even more decisive to rethink and to reinvest in—beyond the urgent necessity of elaborating alternative and viable socio-political configurations—elemental approaches of alterity, and to bring these in close relation to everyday objects through which expressions and manifestations of vulnerability do not engender or consolidate forms of “co-morbidity,” such as the juxtaposition of “the virus and racism” (Ronell 2020). The social reduction that the coronavirus has brought about forces us to engage seriously with critical modes of decolonizing our habits and senses of living. If the world seems organically and politically disconnected while increasingly digitally connected, it appears conflated, reflecting the fact that everything is so closely linked, such as, for example, “environmental racism,”⁶ in which ecological, medical, and social exclusion can no longer be approached separately. In that respect, and unsurprisingly, the mask does not solely symbolize the global invasion of the virus but also numerous invading paradigms of exclusion for which “Black

6 This term, coined by African-American civil rights leader Benjamin Chavis (in 1981), refers to the ways that waste, pollution, and the climate crisis disproportionately impact Black people, indigenous people, and other people of color. According to him, there is a direct correlation between racial demographics and toxic waste locations, racial segregation, and land use policies.

Lives" and "other"⁷ affected bodies, for instance, are distinctively representative and that, therefore, require crucial and active ethical-oriented reflections.

If my reading of the mask is guided by some central motifs at the heart of the ethical metaphysics of Levinas, there are certainly further perspectives that offer ways to debunk stances of subjectivity and alterity, and to overcome and resist the idea that the mask conjures the end of sociality. For instance, Lukáš Likavčan states:

By wearing a face mask, you publicly announce that the conditions of your existence do not end at the tip of your nose. ... Face masks do communicate that you pose some limits to yourself; wearing a face mask is a cultural behavior that makes vulnerability socially acceptable. Once we are here, we can open vivid debates on how to build an ethical framework around politics of vulnerability, from the standpoint of the non-oppressive governance of bodies we need. (2020)

More than a pervasive and over-depicted item in the public and media sphere,⁸ the mask itself becomes the focal material object, enabling both proximity and distance. It differentiates and closes off, but also orients and intrigues. The face mask is simultaneously "look at me," "look at others," "look at us," and "look at the world we live in." As a wearable and global textile-object, the mask signals the inextricable close link between intimacy and publicity, between disguise and disclosure, between subjectivity and exteriority, between in and out.

Such an identifiable and iconic material object forces us to reconsider the contours of our social ethos. The mask crystallizes the frontality of otherness and, as a material object itself, also invites us to infuse fundamental ethical thought in the way we produce, handle, and experience material objects in the first place. Altogether, the mask indicates the fragility of the object in its current historical context, the fragility of the systems that fabricate and disseminate them, as well as the fragility of life, which is deemed to be protected and reinvented. Be it taken in a sociological, consumerist, or symbolic register, the mask is a textile-object that concretizes the time we are caught in, in its material and social sense. Even if the mask hinders us from fully recognizing one another, it nevertheless reveals a collective singularity and the vulnerable living. The virus does not limit itself to infection or to its media representation and propagation because it already lies at the heart of the object while bringing us so close to a non-virtual, larger, and pressing reality. What is the future

7 In a comparable vein, Soncul and Parikka (2020) point to "the stigmatisation via physical, visual cues such as masks builds up in relation to already existing racist infrastructures of emotion and affect."

8 One could also further and closely analyze and distinguish the various media instances and depictions of the pandemic mask (such as in news and social media, in instructional media and public announcements, as well as on retail websites).

of this material object that will take residence on our faces, and will lodge itself in our pockets, bags, and drawers, ready to “vitalize” and arm the affected body at any moment?

In migrating from the surgical realm to the fashion and everyday realm, the mask does not obliterate the distress that it refers to: it discloses a wider and more complex field—that of the exhausted living waiting to be un-masked.

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**Philipp Dominik Keidl, Laliv Melamed, Vinzenz Hediger,
and Antonio Somaini (eds.)**

Pandemic Media: Preliminary Notes Toward an Inventory

With its unprecedented scale and consequences the COVID-19 pandemic has generated a variety of new configurations of media. Responding to demands for information, synchronization, regulation, and containment, these “pandemic media” reorder social interactions, spaces, and temporalities, thus contributing to a reconfiguration of media technologies and the cultures and politics with which they are entangled. Highlighting media’s adaptability, malleability, and scalability under the conditions of a pandemic, the contributions to this volume track and analyze how media emerge, operate, and change in response to the global crisis and provide elements toward an understanding of the post-pandemic world to come.

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