ATMOSPHERE

Airborne: Air as a Social Medium
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Air has long been associated with health and disease. Affirming this, we need look no further than the disquieting images of seventeenth-century plague doctors, whose unsettling, beak-like masks were thought to protect their wearers from the dangers of miasma, “bad air.” In “Airborne: Air as a Social Medium,” Eva Horn acknowledges the ways in which we proceed with this same line of thought today, in the midst of an airborne pandemic, and how we now use — or disuse — factual science to uphold our systemic, social beliefs. Looking specifically at the effects of COVID-19 on media and interpersonal communication, Horn cautions us to remember that air, as a topic of discussion, also serves as a vessel for society’s ills. Unlike plague doctors, we can not wave a wand through the breeze and pray for the dissipation of pathogens — whether politically, economically, or in terms of our collective health, we have no choice but to breathe in the social atmosphere around us.

- The Editors
Airborne:  
AIR AS A SOCIAL MEDIUM  
Eva Horn

Since antiquity, it has been the winds that bring disease. In Hippocrates’ writings on epidemics, certain kinds of winds were said to transport particular varieties of fever. According to Hippocratic medicine, the seasons and the particular courses they take — whether it be a markedly cold or excessively mild winter, for example — were responsible for the prevalence of certain sicknesses in a region. And there was of course the widely held belief that the local climate could be either beneficial or harmful to one’s health. For centuries and across many different cultures, it has been the air that was thought to bring disease. In traditional Chinese medicine, fever is referred to as shangfeng, which means “injured by the wind,” and in Indonesian the term for a cold is masuk angin, or “the wind has entered.” In Europe, people believed for centuries that the soil, and in particular wet areas like bogs or stagnant waters, were the source of foul and harmful gases. In the cities, sewage canals, cesspools, tanneries, and even cemeteries were suspected of spreading disease with their stench.

And so, long before the air pollution of today, the air was the subject of the worst health fears. It contained the evaporations of the earth, and other bodies, the by-products of putrefaction processes (so-called “miasmas” or “exhalations”), flakes of skin, small stones, plants, sweat, dust, insect larvae, pollen, seeds, fats, gases, steam, sulfur, salts, ash, and much more. Neither in the city nor the country were you thought to be safe from these vapors, which is why there was a flood of advice on how to protect yourself from them: the frequent airing out of a room (or precisely not), fragrant essences to be held under the nose, not sleeping facedown, allowing the north winds into your house but by no means the south winds. The Sirocco, it was thought, could trigger contagious disease, insanity, and outbreaks of violent crime. The air, by this regard, not only carries diseases from human to human (as today we know). The wind itself was seen as a pathogen.

As outdated as these medical theories may sound, they express something that still holds true today: air is not only a medium of the physical life of humans, animals, and plants. It is also a medium of society. To socialize with someone means not only to breathe the same air but also to occupy the same atmosphere as they do. It means sharing something with each other that consists not only of moods and emotions, but is situated somewhere between culture and nature, such as aerosols, particulate matter, body odors, CO₂ — and of course germs. This makes air, in the words of Bruno Latour, not simply a “matter of fact,” a factual given, but also — as we have discovered since the advent of air pollution and climate change — a “matter of concern,” a contentious issue of political debate. Air is society; society is the shared experience of “being in the air.”

In Adalbert Stifter’s short story, “Granit,” written in the middle of the nineteenth century, we read of the plague: “We do not know where it came from: Did people bring it with them, did it come in the mild spring air, or have winds and rainclouds brought it? No matter, it has come...” Is it the people or the weather? There was beautiful spring weather in mid-March when COVID-19 came to Vienna, the city where I live. In the initial days of the Austrian lockdown, it was seductively warm, the city was in full bloom, and the Viennese swarmed out into the parks and forests. Friends shared a Coca-Cola, small groups enjoyed a picnic, young men stood smoking together. No one complied very closely with the order issued by the police to only take walks alone or with members of the same household. At the very moment of its disappearance, I realized that being social means sharing the same air — even at the risk of becoming infected.
SARS-CoV-2 is an airborne pathogen, as we know from the crash course on epidemiology conveyed to us by the media and politics. It spreads primarily through fine droplets emitted in a cough or a sneeze and can hover, as recent studies have shown, in the air as an aerosol for quite some time. COVID-19 is a sickness that floats through the air. And so, the air, in all of its variants — as seasonal weather, as a medium of transmission, but also as a suddenly declining level of air pollution — forms a kind of omnipresent backdrop to the COVID-19 crisis. Over and over we heard epidemiologists — but also non-epidemiologists like Donald Trump — exasperate on the question of whether the wave of infections could wane with the onset of spring. Once it got warmer, the American president prophesized in early March, the whole thing would be over. Many contagious diseases do in fact have seasonal rhythms, most famously the flu. But the plague often arrived in spring, being transmitted by fleas that only become active at temperatures above 10 degrees Celsius. Pestilences are like the weather conditions. Only COVID-19 — thank God! — is not the plague and has so far, evidently, not kept to the seasonal rule.

On the contrary, pandemics quite often cause the dissolution of every rule and regularity, including social ones. They are a completely different type of catastrophe from earthquakes, floods, or even war. In these cases, disaster sociology has observed, societies often come together in a spirit of spontaneous solidarity, which while fragile and often fleeting, can for the moment create an uplifting, productive energy. People survive because they help each other. Rebecca Solnit described this phenomenon as “A Paradise Built in Hell,” a groundswell of social closeness, pragmatism, and individual heroism. Contagious diseases, by contrast, affect not only individual bodies but also the social fabric itself. Helping is dangerous, if not deadly for the helper — and often of no effect for the patient. Stifter said of the plague with brutal laconicism: “The children no longer loved their parents, nor the parents their children, they just threw them into the ditch and walked away.” Diseases such as the plague or Ebola hardly allow for taking care of the sick (except in massive protective suits). And they prohibit taking final leave of the deceased in customary burial rituals. Contagious diseases isolate people, as we all have learned in the past months. Not only were we not allowed to touch each other, we were not allowed to breathe the same air. That is the essence of social distancing.

It is an irony of history that through the radical reduction of air traffic, automobile and industrial emissions, and not least of all the sharp drop in production of goods of all kinds, air quality has suddenly improved worldwide. In China, the levels of harmful particulate matter fell by 25% during the shutdown. Some cities saw blue skies for the first time in 20 years. There, the deaths that COVID-19 causes are counteracted by the temporary decline in deaths from respiratory and heart disease that come as a result of the heavy air pollution. While you can perceive good or bad air, at least to a certain extent, through the senses, through smell, through the feeling of breathing, or simply by the sight of the grayish-yellow smog, there is another pathology of the air that is completely imperceptible: the share of CO2 and other greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, or climate change. The imperceptibility is what SARS-CoV-2 and climate change have in common: an undetectable component in the air.

Climate change, and the numerous other massive changes to the earth system which we now summarize under the keyword Anthropocene (species extinction, land use, the ozone hole, ocean acidification, changes in the phosphorous and nitrogen cycle, toxins in the environment and much more) is, as I wrote some years ago, an imperceptible catastrophe without event. A stealthily creeping shift in the factors which make up the highly complex earth system and which contributed to the unusual stability that characterized the Holocene epoch. The COVID-19 crisis, by contrast, is a catastrophe as an event per se: the sudden, traumatic collapse of many of the structures that have shaped and defined our social and private life. This means not only our jobs and our workplaces by which we make a living, but also the social networks and activities which determine who we are. Now we are realizing: sharing the air with others was in many respects a defining aspect of our existence.

However, this social and economic existence of ours — as travelers, workers, or consumers — was one that, in turn, by way of climate change, air pollution, and the ozone hole, affected precisely that medium which it is based on: the air. The COVID crisis disrupts not only economic life, but also the rapidly accelerating, yet imperceptible process of...
climate change. It forces us to pause, to break through routines and the lack of alternatives. It is — for good and for bad — a testing laboratory of political contingency. Now we see: everything can be different. For a brief and uncanny moment, the imperative of economic growth, the laws of the labor market, the necessity of working to the point of burnout, the inevitability of mass consumption and travel — all of that has proven to be optional. There are alternatives to them. Maybe in this way, COVID-19 provides an opportunity for reflection and change, and for training our sense of possibility. Before the crisis, any significant carbon tax was deemed inconceivable in most European countries, and, as we had repeatedly heard, with a view to the economy or the transport sector, "impossible to implement." And this despite the fact that, e.g. a carbon tax has been successfully implemented in British Columbia and Sweden.\(^\text{11}\) By now we have learned that in the event of a grave threat to the population, much heavier things than a simple tax can be implemented, such as lockdowns, massive interventions in the national budget, and radical transformation in the way people work.

COVID-19 will continue to change our lives long after we are all immune, or dead. Perhaps this pandemic is a wicked, bitter ruse, a revenge of the air. It reminds us that it is a medium, a medium of life, but also of being social. The most individual, intimate necessity of breathing connects us both to a pandemic and to the planet’s atmosphere. Yet, the consequences of climate change will make the effects of COVID-19 pale in comparison — but maybe only for our grandchildren. Whereas climate change — despite it being a known fact for 40 years — has only marginally managed to become a matter of concern, an occasion for radical measures and an internationally coordinated political effort, COVID-19 has at least achieved the former in one brutal, previously unimaginable coup. It is teaching us a lesson — and not only about inadequate disaster protection, the disadvantages of just-in-time production and globalized supply chains, the lack of political foresight, an idiotic skepticism of science, and our fragile healthcare systems. COVID-19 also reminds us of our political, economic, and individual scope of action. Once we return — and hopefully soon — to the social space of being together in the air, once we are back together at a table dining with friends and discussing with colleagues, we will have to put this lesson into practice. Until then: hold your breath.

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**Notes**

5. Andrew Freedman and Jason Samenow, "Coronavirus may have a seasonal cycle, but that doesn’t mean it will go away this summer, experts warn," *Washington Post*, 11 March 2020; [online]: https://www.washingtonpost.com/weather/2020/03/11/coronavirus-may-have-seasonal-cycle-that-doesn-t-mean-it-will-go-away-this-summer-experts-warn/
7. Stifter, "Granit," p. 34.
11. Several concrete examples have long proven that it is possible, and that it even works well. See Government of British Columbia: British Columbia’s Carbon Tax, https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/environment/energy/climate-change/planning-and-action/carbon-tax

Translated by Peter Rigney

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