



The Pandemic Visual Regime

Visuality and Performativity
in the Covid-19 Crisis

Edited by Julia Ramírez-Blanco &
Francesco Spampinato



THE PANDEMIC VISUAL REGIME

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Fig. 1. Detail from Hieronymus Bosch, *Ship of Fools* (1490–1500)

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Wearable Virus Shields: From Futuristic Dystopias to Actual Dread

Francesco Spampinato

During the Covid-19 pandemic, a new wave of face shields aimed at protecting and/or isolating users emerged. These included various types of masks, helmets, visors, and even body capsules that would allow avoiding direct contact with the surrounding space and other people who could be possible carriers of the virus. Working as screens behind which one confines oneself, these inventions inevitably raised issues of vision and visibility, or else how they would affect our ways of seeing. Questions of what reality looks like from behind a face mask or shield — and how this “vision” implies feelings of isolation, alienation, dread, and distrust — are crucial not only for better understanding our perception and psychological condition during pandemic peaks but also to imagine what the postpandemic new normal might be like. Some of these coverings are practical solutions for contaminated airborne prevention, most are design speculations addressing the shift from futuristic dystopias to actual dread that we witnessed since the outbreak.

To begin with, a brief history of the medical mask against “contagions” will be outlined, from seventeenth-century plague doctors’ beaked masks to the earliest cloth masks in the late nineteenth-century up to the birth of the disposable surgical mask in the 1960s. Since the 1920s — when, along with medical masks, gas masks that had been employed in World War I officially entered the collective unconscious — a new genre of face and head protections started to appear. These include futurists’ man-machines, Hugo Gernsback’s *Isolator* (1925), Cold War paraphernalia, 1960s space-age fashion, radical design projects, and proto-cyberfeminist bodies, up to postmodern cyberpunk narratives and the posthuman imagery at the turn of the millennium. This new genre of conceptual “inventions,” which some of the Covid-19 coverings discussed here draw inspiration from, are based on artistic imagination and critical thinking. They are either dysfunctional or exploring alternative ways to relate with our surroundings, often taking cues from sci-fi visual imageries.

In a review of the monumental two-volume publication *Project on the City* (2002) edited by Rem Koolhaas, pivotal postmodernism thinker Fredric Jameson mingles architecture theories with references to sci-fi literature, arguing that “it is the end of the world that is in question here; and that could be exhilarating if apocalypse were the only way of imagining that world’s disappearance[. . .] Someone once said that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism. We can now revise that and witness the attempt to imagine capitalism by way of imagining the end of the world.”¹

Jameson’s prophetic words resonated with the Covid-19 pandemic. The time, indeed, seemed just about right to get ahold of masks and plastic shields to keep shopping during the apocalypse or get inside a body bubble to enjoy again clubbing or a live concert. The truth is that we will never go back to our pre-Covid-19 lifestyle. These new wearables are here to signal that, like it or not, we are at the dawn of a new era.

1 Fredric Jameson, “Future City,” *New Left Review* 21 (May/June 2003): 76.

The question is not whether the virus would be defeated or when. Instead, how the ways we were coping with the pandemic were changing for good how we saw and thought of ourselves in relation with the world and other people. For example, how the extreme measures of containment were eliciting alienation, distrust of the other (does one have symptoms? Vaccine? Green Pass?), the loss of empathy, and a perennial feeling of dread. In light of this consideration, face protections should be considered an extension of and a metaphor for the LCD screens behind which we conduct an increasing number of activities. Just as in the 1920s when Walter Benjamin thought of warfare technology, including gas masks, as part of the same set of apparatuses at the base of modern society — namely, media and the arcades of Paris enforcing a consumerist lifestyle — so the 2020s started with a pandemic that suddenly accelerated our usage of and reliance upon audiovisual technologies. These affect our perception and psychological conditions even more deeply than face protections.

Masks and media technologies are both apparatuses that isolate the wearer/user from the physical surroundings as if one were inside a capsule, whether life-size or as big as your apartment. In one of her short lockdown stories collected in *Intimations: Six Essays* (2020), Zadie Smith suggests a comparison between our current psychological state and that of the schizophrenic:

The profound misapprehension of reality is what, more or less, constitutes the mental state we used to call “madness,” and when the world itself turns unrecognizable, appears to go “mad,” I find myself wondering what the effect is on those who never in the first place experienced a smooth relation between the phenomena of the world and their own minds. Who have always felt an explanatory gap. The schizophrenic. The disassociated[...] What is it like to have always seen, in your mind’s eye, apocalypse in the streets of New York, and then one day walk out in those same streets and find — just

as it is in your personal hellscape — that they are now desolate, empty and silent?²

Either mass-marketed or self-made, either coping with actual risks of contamination or exploring “other” ways of seeing and performing the everyday, either practical solutions or purely speculative design projects, these new face coverings allowed us to see reality not for what it is, for real, but for what we think of it in our mind. Driven by anxiety and fear, our misapprehension of reality was not unjustified — the virus was genuinely out there and was deadly — but was undoubtedly amplified by our new habits. A simple disposable surgical mask would have sufficed, but artists and designers were coming up with solutions that, especially when they are dysfunctional and/or conceptual, seemed to point out that reality had not changed much. Instead, it is the way we see reality that had changed, and that depended on the apparatuses that mediate our perception of and connection with this reality, whether a face shield worn to go shopping or a smartphone display on which we keep scrolling the latest feeds on social media.

From the Black Death to the Modern Era

From the earliest moments of the Covid-19 outbreak, it was clear that the surgical face mask would become “a symbol of our times,” as *The New York Times* stated in a headline as soon as March 17, 2020.³ Wearing surgical masks in public was already a common habit in Asia, notably in Japan, China, Taiwan, and South Korea, for either cultural or environmental reasons, particularly during flu seasons, with a surge in the early 2000s because of the SARS epidemic. In other areas of the world,

2 Zadie Smith, *Intimations: Six Essays* (London: Penguin Random House, 2020), 61.

3 Vanessa Friedman, “The Mask,” *New York Times*, March 19, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/17/style/face-mask-coronavirus.html>. A version of this article appeared in print on March 19, 2020, D1, of the New York edition with the headline “What a Mask Uncovers.”

including Europe and the United States, the use of face masks was common at different ages, usually in connection with the burst of respiratory diseases or acute forms of air pollution as a by-product of industrialization or some chemical disaster or gas weapon. The origins of face masks in general — funerary, ritualistic, ornamental — and helmets as forms of armor get lost in the history of numerous civilizations, but the evolution of face masks for protection from infectious agents transmitted by air is much more circumscribed.

In his *Book of the Marvels of the World* (ca. 1300), Italian explorer Marco Polo recounted how servants in thirteenth-century China, at the time of the Yuan dynasty, were required to cover their faces with silk scarves woven with gold thread when bringing food to the emperor, to prevent any possible contamination through their lower-class breath. The first masks to be employed in health care emerged in fourteenth-century Europe, worn by doctors treating patients affected by the so-called black death, the bubonic plague that as is still the deadliest pandemic in human history, causing the death of approximately 30 to 60 percent of the European population. According to the miasma theory — deemed to be overcome by the germ theory in the nineteenth century — endorsed by most medical doctors at the time, the disease spread through poisoned air perceived as an unhealthy smell or vapor. People then started covering their faces, yet the pestilence remained a regular part of everyday life for at least three centuries.

An incarnation of the black death dread was a sinister crow-like beaked mask, usually paired with heavy leather robes, which plague doctors apparently wore in seventeenth-century Europe. In 1619, during a plague outbreak in Paris, French physician Charles de Lorme — who assisted many European royals, including King Louis XIII — described a protective outfit made of Moroccan goat leather. This consisted in a waxed coat, boots, hat, gloves, and a mask with a nose “half a foot long, shaped like a beak, filled with perfume with only two holes, one on each side near the nostrils, but that can suffice to breathe and carry



Fig. 1. Paulus Furst of Nuremberg, *Doctor Schnabel von Rom*, etching, 1656.

along with the air one breathes the impression of the [herbs] enclosed further along in the beak.”⁴ Plague doctors wearing beaked masks started being represented in paintings and illustrations, a popular one being Paulus Furst of Nuremberg’s etching *Doctor Schnabel von Rom* (1656), in the British Museum, whose rigid posture and reptilian hands are telling of how these figures were perceived as terrifying (fig. 1).

To wish away the fear, the plague doctor became a recurring character of Italian commedia dell’arte and carnival celebrations, notably in Venice where eerie beaked masks hanging in closed souvenir shops during the Covid-19 lockdowns seemed to predict again that the end was near. As much as the miasma theory itself, these outfits were hardly protective against diseases transmitted by air, no matter what aromatic substances one could put inside the mask and the distance between doctor and patient enforced by the beak. According to a *Lancet* article published in May 2020, the first proper surgical masks date back to 1897 when surgeons Johann Mikulicz in Poland and Paul Berger in France began wearing a face mask in the operating room.⁵ Later on, with the arrival of the Manchurian plague in 1910–11 and the influenza pandemic or Spanish flu of 1918–19, more and more medical workers, patients, and even the general public started wearing cloth masks covering mouth and nose.

The poor sanitary conditions brought by World War I probably triggered the Spanish flu, which escalated with soldiers returning home packed into trains and trucks. Along with surgical masks, another mask that protected the wearer from inhaling contaminated air entered the collective unconscious at that time: the gas mask. Sealed covers over the whole face, equipped with respirators made of sorbent compounds, gas masks began to be mass-produced during World War I to protect soldiers against chemical weapons. Coincidentally, narratives of war

4 Charles de Lorme, quoted in Michael Tibayrenc, ed., *Encyclopedia of Infectious Diseases: Modern Methodologies* (Hoboken: John Wiley, 2007), 680.

5 Bruno J. Strasser and Thomas Schlich, “The Art of Medicine: A History of the Medical Mask and the Rise of Throwaway Culture,” *The Lancet* 396, no. 10243 (2020): 19–20.



Fig. 2. Hugo Gernsback wearing his invention, “The Isolator,” 1925.

and technology started interweaving in artistic speculations on cold and merciless man-machines, as in Jacob Epstein’s sculpture *Torso in Metal from “The Rock Drill”* (1913–15) and Italian futurists’ costumed performances, such as Ruggero Vasari’s *L’Angoscia delle macchine* (1923), with costumes by Ivo Pannaggi, and Fortunato Depero’s *Annichiam del 3000* (1924). They represented automata or cyborgs, metaphorical of the increasing automation of modern life.

In 1930, Benjamin, one of the most critical observers of modern society, argued that the Great War was “the result of the gaping discrepancy between the gigantic power of technology and the minuscule moral illumination it affords.”⁶ In other words, both impressive technological advancement and human brutality. A contemporary of Benjamin, Hugo Gernsback, an American inventor — who is credited for establishing science fiction as a literary genre, notably through stories filled with futuristic inventions and space travels in magazines, such as *Amazing Stories*, which he founded — produced a helmet named “The Isola-

6 Walter Benjamin, “Theories of German Fascism: On the Collection of Essays *War and Warrior*, edited by Ernst Jünger” (1930), trans. Jerolf Wikoff, *New German Critique* 17 (Spring 1979): 120.

tor” in 1925 (fig. 2). Its function was to isolate the user from the surrounding soundscape and limit the field of view while providing oxygen through an attached tank. Worn in a photoshoot by Gernsback himself sitting on his desk, the dysfunctional device, reminiscent of a diver helmet, clearly resonated with Benjamin’s view of warfare technology’s dystopian impression on the public imagination.

Cold War Anxieties, Space-Age Utopias, and Radical Design Responses

According to Riccardo Venturi, Gernsback’s Isolator “responds, in its own way, to the crisis of concentration and attention, to the impact that new audiovisual devices such as cinema have on our perceptual plexus.”⁷ That is the angle adopted by Benjamin to look at modern society, which to him was characterized, at least since the 1920s, by an increasing presence of media overstimulating the human sensorium with glows of manufactured reality. Modern warfare with its “invisible” weapons was just the pinnacle and the testing ground for a set of devices that, supposedly deceiving users to achieve a better quality of life, were, in fact, indoctrinating them to obey a set of interconnected power systems. This view was aligned with the anticapitalist thought proposed by Karl Marx in the nineteenth century and later perfected by the thinkers of the Frankfurt School, of which Benjamin was a notable associate. Face masks, of whichever type, symbolized new screens distancing and at the same time mediating human beings’ perception of the outside world.

With the rise of totalitarian regimes in the 1930s, the traumas of World War II, and the establishment of an enduring state of imminent conflict in the Cold War era, gas masks and other protective devices shifted from emblems of fear and death to functional inventions employed in sci-fi narratives, and from there back to the Earth, worn as futuristic accessories in erotic

7 Riccardo Venturi, “The Isolator,” *Antinomie*, March 28, 2020, <https://antinomie.it/index.php/2020/03/28/the-isolator/>.

or fashionable settings. In the 1960s, gas masks, combined with leather or latex clothing outfits, started playing a central role in BDSM practices, such as bondage, as symbols of fetish or punishment. At the same time, fashion designers such as Pierre Cardin, André Courrèges, and Rudi Gernreich demystified the fear of atomic attacks by prefiguring an otherworldly lifestyle, reinterpreting spacesuits, body armors, and helmets popularized during the moon race. Ranging from utilitarian to playful, these designers turned Cold War anxieties into space-age utopias revealing, as argued by Jane Pavitt, “a concern to insulate the wearer against the shock of the new.”⁸

The 1960s were characterized by conditions similar to those of the 1920s, namely, a further degree of mimesis offered by audiovisual media, the entrance of computer technology in the collective unconscious, the increase of automation in urban life, and a renovated sense of the future, all brought on by a new economic boom that reinvigorated the faith in capitalist liberalism and related fantasies of a longer, safer, and happier life. As much as Benjamin was the perfect interpreter of modern society, Marshall McLuhan became the key thinker of this new electronic age. Indebted to Norbert Wiener’s cybernetic theories — encapsulated in bestsellers such as *The Human Use of Human Beings* (1950) — with his idea that “by continuously embracing technologies, we relate ourselves to them as servomechanisms,”⁹ McLuhan inspired an emerging generation of artists and designers to experiment with prostheses and wearable technologies as “extensions” of the human sensorium, speculating on a new technology-enhanced being: the cyborg.

In the 1960s and ’70s, Renate Bertlmann, Haus-Rucker-Co., Lynn Hershman Leeson, and Ugo La Pietra, among others, explored the cybernetic body through performances and installations. In 1968, crucial radical architecture figures Haus-

8 Jane Pavitt, *Fear and Fashion in the Cold War* (London: v&a Publishing, 2008), 10.

9 Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), 41.



Fig. 3. Ugo La Pietra, *Immersione “Caschi Sonori,”* audio-visual environment (with Paolo Rizzatto), Triennale, Milan, 1968. Courtesy of Archivio Ugo La Pietra.

Rucker-Co. and La Pietra presented moon age–inspired translucent helmets isolating users from the surrounding reality. Unlike Gernsback’s *Isolator*, which forced the wearer to decompression and immobility, these wearable devices pushed users to develop different sensorial properties. From within the translucent green double hemispherical mask of Haus-Rucker-Co.’s *Flyhead*, *Environment Transformer*, the user perceived reality through prismatic eyepieces and audiovisual filters that supposedly facilitated a fly’s perspective. Similarly, La Pietra’s *Caschi Sonori* were methacrylate helmets equipped with headphones transmitting various sounds and pornographic stories, which he presented at the Triennale museum in Milan within an inflatable environment (fig. 3).

These, and other projects by artists and designers working at the intersection of art and technology, such as Ant Farm, Gruppo 9999, USCO, and *Utopie*, reckoned with the spread of computers

technologies, CCTV cameras, and screens that was taking place at the time, or else how this new set of apparatuses was producing new visual and perceptual dynamics. Their recurrent tactic was to employ technologies in unexpected ways and to demystify the ideas of the future and progress they embodied. Douglas Murphy, who has discussed some of these practices in a recent book, has argued,

In those days of the Cold War and the space race, it was common to imagine the future in terms of visually striking advanced technology of a massive scale[. . .] But these futures failed to arrive[. . .] In the experiments in architecture and urbanism of the post-war era, we see that many of the abandoned and defeated futures that the era dreamed resonate strongly with our current experience, at times giving us a sense of déjà vu.¹⁰

Similarly, Bertlmann's and Hershman Leeson's cybernetic bodies anticipated current ideas of cyberfeminism, adopting technology as a tool for women's liberation. Hershman Leeson's *Breathing Machines* (1966–67), her earliest work, are sculptural self-portraits based on masks made with a wax mold of the artist's face, painted black (in solidarity with the civil rights movement) and with a wig attached. One of them is presented within a hemispherical space-age helmet featuring the sound of the artist's own breathing. Rather than technology, Bertlmann employed rubber pacifiers, a reference to child care and maternity, in sculptural works and performances as prostheses extending and mediating the body's connections with its surroundings. The artist's android-like *Pacifier Mask* (1976), like Hershman Leeson's *Breathing Machines*, condemns the increasing processes of automation in daily life and, at the same time, suggests forms of gender emancipation, deconstructing the patriarchal beliefs in technological progress.

10 Douglas Murphy, *Last Futures: Nature, Technology, and the End of Architecture* (London: Verso, 2015), 1–5.

Issues of Emergency and Sustainability

With cyberpunk since the 1980s and posthuman culture since the 1990s, masks, helmets, face shields, and visors keep popping up in the arts and visual culture alike, every time there is a hint to some future. Most of the time, this is a dystopian one, in which inexorable corporations and street violence rule society, often recovering from some apocalyptic event, and in which people have lost empathy and conduct alienated lives mediated by screens. Sound familiar? Mark Fischer was undoubtedly right when he wrote in 2014:

While the 20th-century experimental culture was seized by a recombinatorial delirium, which made it feel as if newness was infinitely available, the 21st century is oppressed by a crushing sense of finitude and exhaustion. It doesn't feel like the future. Or, alternatively, it doesn't feel as if the 21st century has started yet[. ...] The slow cancellation of the future has been accompanied by a deflation of expectations.¹¹

Fisher took his life before he could see that the twentieth-century futures have become our present.

As the twentieth century started to delineate in the 1920s, or at least that's when some features of the century appeared distinctively, one can argue that the twenty-first century begins precisely in the year 2020, with the Covid-19 outbreak. Since the arrival of the pandemic, face masks were no longer employed as a symbol of some projected future but necessary protection to prevent a contagion that might be deadly for anyone. Narratives of isolation, alienation, dread, and distrust reincarnate, then, from media fantasies directly into our everyday. If when the airplanes hit the World Trade Center in 2001, people thought that that must have been a movie because they had already seen those images in countless feature films, so when we took aware-

¹¹ Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* (London: Zero Books, 2014), 8.

ness of the Covid-19 emergency, our mind went back to media dystopias, starting with Steven Soderbergh's 2011 *Contagion*. This movie predicted many aspects of "our" pandemic, to the point that since the outbreak, it was on TV every other night: that was our present, prophesied ten years earlier.

Ranging from functional to playful, from fashionable to conceptual, a new generation of wearable solutions to prevent airborne respiration droplets from touching the user's face started to emerge in this dawn of a new era. At first, it was the utilitarian ones. The most in-demand accessory of the season, in the first few months of the pandemic, surgical masks immediately were sold out (as were hand sanitizers, latex gloves, and various types of disinfectants and antiseptics) and were not even available for Covid-19 patients and healthcare workers. As the number of patients in intensive care grew exponentially, hospitals soon were in short supply of respirators too. To face the emergency, engineer Cristian Fracassi's company Isinnova from Brescia in Lombardy, the first and most affected region in Italy, came up with a resourceful invention: a respiratory valve that could be adapted to the Decathlon Easybreath diving mask. From the happy days of beach vacations to the quest for survival, it was but a short step, wasn't it?

Some epidemiologists praised face shields over masks because they were more effective at protecting the eyes, nose, and mouth from Covid-19, but face masks were easier to produce, circulate, and, more importantly, replaced. According to the *Lancet* article cited above, reusable and washable medical masks gave way to single-use paper masks in the 1930s, but masks made of synthetic materials, such as those in use today, started being produced in the 1960s. It is at the end of that decade that more and more hospitals developed a disposable system that included masks, syringes, surgical instruments, and other material because "disposability was supposed to reduce the risk of compromising the precarious state of sterility,"¹² endorsing in this way what the authors of the article define as

12 Strasser and Schlich, "The Art of Medicine," 19.

a “throwaway culture.”¹³ As in any uncanny media dystopia, our hyperproductive society, inundated by useless gadgets, proved unable to face the most urgent and basic needs at the beginning of the pandemic.

Issues of sustainability were immediately at stake, and though most companies rushed to produce as many masks as possible in the minimum time frame, in observance of the industry’s standards, others risked having their products removed from the market for not conforming to the features required. London-based children clothing brand Petit Pli, for example, in 2020 started producing the [MSK], a nonmedical, reusable face mask whose fabric, made from recycled plastic bottles, expands to adapt to face contours. Even though it features an “antiviral coating,” this is less protective than any usual surgical mask. At the same time, it is a feasible ecological solution for situations in which the wearer is less exposed to contagion risks. At the 2020 Triennial exhibition of the National Gallery of Victoria, Australia, British designer Alice Potts presented a series of biodegradable face shields made of food waste and dyed with flowers, more a lyrical cry for attention on ecological issues than effective protection.

Along with production, sustainability tackled the question of disposability. Once mask production started to keep pace with the pandemic evolution, how were we to dispose of the trillions of masks used every day worldwide? Horrified by the number of masks abandoned in the streets, Dutch designer Marianna de Groot-Pons came up with a rice paper mask embedded with flower seeds for her brand Marie Bee Bloom. Once used, one can plant it and wait for flowers to bloom, a metaphor of a new optimistic era to begin. Others experimented with ways to reuse surgical masks as a building material. At Suzhou Cultural & Creative Cultural Industry Expo in China in 2020, the Portuguese sustainable architecture collective Convergent Architecture Studio (CAS) presented *Face-to-Face*, an immersive installation employing 117,539 masks. Similarly, Italian designer Tobia

¹³ Ibid.



Fig. 4. Martino Lombezzi, A man walking in Via Ugo Bassi during the first Covid lockdown wearing a self-made protecting suit. Bologna, March 21, 2020. Courtesy of Martino Lombezzi.

Zambotti collected thousands of masks from the streets and filled an iceberg-shaped sofa called *Couch-19* (2021), linking mask pollution to global warming.

Do-It-Yourself, Playful, Fashionable, and Futuristic

In the first months of the pandemic, the mask shortage generated numerous do-it-yourself responses, from people covering their nose and mouth with bandannas and balaclavas to those sewing their own cloth masks. Desperate as much as inventive

people improvised lo-fi solutions of any type. Italian photographer Martino Lombazzi took a picture of a man in Bologna walking around during the first lockdown in March 2020 inside a capsule made with an umbrella with attached plastic sheets as a shield (fig. 4). Day by day, online design magazines *Designboom* and *Dezeen* featured new speculative solutions to cope with the pandemic. Known for handcrafting sneakers into tribal-looking masks, Beijing-based designer Zhijun Wang made a Covid-19 mask out of an IKEA Frakta bag. Likewise, Korean design studio mmm thought of a hilarious way to reconsider consumerist waste. Its ANYTHING (2020) face shield is a 3D-printable frame onto which one could apply empty packaging of pasta or Haribo sweets plastic bags.

Several designers developed do-it-yourself solutions to facilitate the self-production of masks and visors through 3D printing and laser cutting. Japanese designer Tokujin Yoshioka circulated a template design that would allow anyone to create an “Easy-to-make FACE SHIELD” (2020) attachable to the wearer’s eyeglasses by hand-cutting an A3 sheet of PVC plastic. Others focused on the bright side of the pandemic, namely, that we all had more time for ourselves at home and — before adapting to new and even more stressful conditions of remote labor — could rediscover play. German studio Aerosoap, whose projects stand at the crossroads of art, design, and science, developed a wearable soap bubble maker in the shape of a face shield, *Soap Mask: Lockdown Project* (2020), which admittedly “does not provide efficient or even long-lasting protection. Not a bit. But it enriches some lockdown monotony, in which new experiences are often limited to the digital space, with new, surprising, real and optimistically colored perspectives”¹⁴ (fig. 5).

Fashion houses immediately responded to the insufficiency of masks by producing some. Following a request from the Tuscany region, in March 2020 Prada and Gucci began producing of surgical masks to be provided to healthcare workers and hos-

14 Aerosoap, *Soap Mask: Lockdown Project*, 2020, <https://www.aerosoap.com/en/soapmask/>.



Fig. 5. Aerosoap, Soap Mask, 2020. Concept, design, photography: Frédéric Wiegand & Thomas Wirtz. Courtesy of Aerosoap.

pitals. The same month LVMH, the world's leader in luxury fashion, announced that it would supply around 40 million surgical masks to France. Other fashion brands that went in the same direction included Balenciaga, COS, H&M, Mango, Yves Saint Laurent, and Zara. As soon as this urgent need was met and face masks became part of our everyday outfits — even though our only public activity was, for long, just lining up in front of a grocery store — fashionable and often pricey products entered the market. Louis Vuitton was the first high-fashion brand, in September 2020, to introduce a face shield with a monogrammed strap, sold at approximately €900. From Burberry to Ralph

Lauren to Off-White, hardly any fashion brand did not have its mask in a few months.

Fashionable and reusable cloth masks are not fully protective, so all of a sudden, we all became experts in the types of masks that are defensive — the surgical mask, the N95, the FFP2, the FFP3, and others — their filtration of airborne particles, or else the percentage of aerosols and droplets that might go in and out, and how to properly wear them. However, considering the number of people leaving their masks off their nose, wearing them below their chin, and sometimes just on the elbow, the doubt is that not everyone took it on the same degree of seriousness. Even some tech companies soon entered this sector of the market, developing futuristic wearables. For about €250 one could buy South Korean multinational electronics company LG's PuriCare air purifier AP300AWFA, which features dual H13 Grade HEPA filters blocking up to 99.95 percent of airborne particulates as small as 0.1 microns (the coronavirus is approximately 0.125 microns), a dual fan system, and a battery with four to eight hours of autonomy.

Many projects were based on shields resembling space helmets, taking inspiration from sci-fi imageries or workwear and sportswear conceived for extreme situations. Instead of being paired with pressure suits, maybe made of nonflammable or aluminized fabric, these ball-like shields enveloping the whole head were usually presented along with casual, often avant-garde clothing revisiting the space-age-inspired fashion of Cold War-era designers, such as Courrèges, Cardin, and Gernreich. However, whereas these designers speculated on otherworldly adventures across the galaxies in the style of postwar sci-fi, from *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951) to *Barbarella* (1968), the futuristic helmets of the Covid-19 era do not need to project our current anxieties onto the life in another planet or some alien species looking for the extinction of humanity. These projects are very aware of the terrestrial conditions from which this pandemic has emerged. Futuristic face coverings are the ultimate emblem of the future's collapse into the present.

More than masks, shields appeared the perfect accessory for our dystopian present because of their space feel. After a successful crowdfunding campaign in April 2020, Toronto-based company VYZR launched its €300 BioVYZR, a boosted version of whatever that man in Bologna was wearing: a capsule-like shield with a wide-angle view, air-purifying system, and an internal positive-pressure environment. Sphere helmets reminiscent of *The Jetsons* or *Futurama* cartoons came along, their ironic dimension reinforced by video tutorials and photoshoots normalizing their everyday use. A video shows emotionless members of Berlin-based collective *Plastique Fantastique* wearing the *iSphere*, a clear plastic ball, while riding on the U-Bahn. Another shows two friends chatting, laughing, and taking selfies under a Covidvisor. The bobblehead respirator, produced by a New York start-up, could not have a better promoter than style blogger Michelle Madonna, who wore it at NYFW in September 2020.

The Postpandemic New Normal

As soon as it became clear that socializing, in the flesh, was what we missed the most, finding expedients to socialize again without putting ourselves at risk became an utmost priority. The closure of museums, cinemas, theaters, and music venues was particularly painful and a reminder of the significant role that the arts play in society and our lives. The world of pop music was the first to take note, pointing out that music is needed more than ever during a pandemic. The 2020 edition of MTV's popular Video Music Awards was a case in point, which included new categories for "Quarantine Performance" and "Best Music Video from Home." The show was marked by multiawarded pop star Lady Gaga's appearances in nine different outfits, each completed with futuristic face masks designed by Lance Victor Moore, MaisonMet, Diego Montoya, and Cecilio Castrillo. The last, a leather designer from Madrid, made a pink gas mask-like goggle strapped to Gaga's head that would fit great in an installment of *Mad Max* postapocalyptic saga.



Fig. 6. The Flaming Lips, still from video made in preparation of the Space Bubble concert, The Criterion, Oklahoma City, us, December 11, 2020. Video directed by Wayne Coyne and Blake Studdard.

Through the lens of pop music, another dystopian yet ironic prefiguration of post-Covid-19 new normality, was offered by American indie rock band the Flaming Lips, which performed various socially distanced concerts since the outbreak, with musicians and audience standing inside individual life-size bubbles. They had already performed in Zorb balls in the past, and Wayne Coyne, the band's lead singer, is known for walking on top of crowds inside one, so they immediately thought this was the perfect solution to play live in the quarantine era. After some testing appearances on Stephen Colbert's and Jimmy Fallon's late-night tv shows, in October 2020 they played two gigs at Criterion, a concert venue in Oklahoma City, for an audience of one hundred. In preparation of these Space Bubble shows, Coyne and Blake Studdard directed two videos documenting the band's theatrical performances of the songs "Brother Eye" and "Assassins of Youth" for an audience of individuals, each standing inside an inflatable ball, and happily dancing and lip-synching, firm in a designated square on the gridded floor (fig. 6).



Fig. 7. Tosin Oshinowo and Chrissa Amuah, *Ògún* headpiece from the series *Freedom to Move*, 2020, inspired by Lexus. Photo by Mark Cocksedge.

One last type of inventive Covid-19 mask to be mentioned is that aimed at enhancing the wearer's personality, drawing from sci-fi, surrealism, and subcultures, with a penchant for the 1980s New Romantics scene. Inspired by the deconstructed clothing and makeup style of Blitz club-era performers, such as Leigh Bowery, Grace Jones, and Steve Strange, some designers have focused on the sculptural properties of face masks, realizing accessories for postpandemic youths who are free from any precodified construction of either gender or ethnicity. London-based designer Freyja Sewell's *Key Workers* (2020) is a series of eight ornamental masks celebrating frontline workers, taking cues from media fantasies à la *Star Trek* or *Hunger Games* (the character of Effie Trinket seems particularly at stake). At the same time, Nigerian architect Tosin Oshinowo and Ghanaian designer Chrissa Amuah's series of bronze headpieces *Freedom to Move* (2020), such as *Ògún* and *Egaro*, recall the Afrofuturist imagery of R&B singer Janelle Monáe or *Black Panther* (fig. 7).

Practical, playful, or conceptual, most of these projects call attention to the fact that the containment measures adopted

worldwide—forms of lockdown and quarantine, mask-wearing, social distancing—had the inescapable consequence of alienating people, pushing them to prefer staying behind a screen instead, safer. Every pandemic in history, viral or bacterial, from the black death to the Spanish flu, from tuberculosis to AIDS, was fought with physical containment measures. In Gesualdo Bufalino's novel *The Plague-Spreader's Tale* (1981), Marta, the patient of a TB sanatorium in postwar Sicily, embodies the awareness and fears that any contagious patient probably feels in a pandemic, such as when she admits: "I feel, I know, that every breath I breathe out is poison, that everything I touch or that touches me gets infected[. . .] And I feel, I know, that everywhere I go I am spreading and smearing death — on walls, on napkins, on the rims of dishes."¹⁵

That isolation was mandatory for Covid-19 patients and doctors, despite the inevitable side effect of alienation, was not up to discussion, and the same was probably correct for anyone during the pandemic peaks, symptoms or not. Nevertheless, what about the conditions in which isolation takes place? What are the effects of hyperconnectivity online and saturated media exposure? In an illuminating essay to understand our era, but published before the pandemic, Byung-Chul Han discussed the psychological effect of the neoliberal regime under which we live, a regime that relies upon "a highly efficient, indeed an intelligent, system for exploiting freedom. Everything that belongs to practices and expressive forms of liberty—emotion, play and communication—comes to be exploited."¹⁶ According to Han, electronic media and the internet play a central role in this regime. "A person playing a game," for instance, "being emotionally invested, is much more engaged than a worker who acts rationally or is simply *functioning*."¹⁷

15 Gesualdo Bufalino, *Diceria dell'untore* (Palermo: Sellerio, 1981), 119, translated into English as *The Plague-Spreader's Tale*, trans. Patrick Creagh (London: The Harvill Press, 1989).

16 Byung-Chul Han, *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power* (London and New York: Verso, 2017), 3.

17 *Ibid.*, 49.

The phenomenon of gamification — the adoption of video-game dynamics to engage users or consumers in nongaming situations — is emblematic for understanding the appeal of these new types of futuristic inventions for contaminated air prevention. Like the schizophrenic described by Smith, deserted cities during lockdowns look like a natural extension of our virtual infrastructures. So, wearing a face shield, better if air-ventilated, looks like a logical thing to do. Ranging from functional to playful, from fashionable to conceptual, even when they are introduced as commercially viable products, these speculative design projects cannot escape revealing our “profound misapprehension of reality,”¹⁸ our inability to discern what stands in front of our very own eyes, be it an “invisible” virus, a phantasmagoric fantasy, or simply someone else on the other side of the screen. A quintessential symbol of our pandemic times, these face coverings show that ours might become just another of those futures that will remain in the past.

18 Smith, *Intimations*, 61n2.

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