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WIEDER TANZEN GEHN?



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JETZT MASKE TRAGEN!

LIFE

IN THE PANDEMIC



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Behind a mask, at a distance or in digital space

Where can people meet up in times of the pandemic and how can lively get-togethers take place?

By Dirk Frank

The coronavirus pandemic has led to a massive drop in physical encounters and meetings. But what does it mean to meet our fellow human beings solely in Zoom conferences, with a mask and at a larger distance – or not to meet them at all? What consequences does this have for social interaction? And how is the cultural sector, for which the audience's physical presence is still essential, dealing with this?

Staythefuckhome was the name of a popular hashtag conceived at the beginning of the pandemic as a “self-isolation manifesto”. In the spring of 2020, staying at home had yet to be learned as a key measure for containing the virus. Yet spending time in the public space has by no means ceased entirely, although shops and precincts also had to close from a certain point onwards and strolling around them largely stopped. Under coronavirus conditions, probably more people overall are underway in parks and other green spaces than before. However, while at the beginning it was still quite common for people to meet up in larger groups at popular places such as Friedberger Platz in the Nordend suburb of Frankfurt, as measures tightened these small oases also disappeared. People are obliged to keep their distance from each other outside too; there are signs everywhere with warnings and bans. What, then, does the public space still offer and – above all – to whom?

Nowhere to chill out

For Antje Schlottmann, professor of human geography, the public space is a “space which is educational, but also appropriated in a wide variety of ways and in any case fought over”. However, the pandemic is not leading here to any general developments, she says, but to shifts that have to be considered in terms of space, time (of day) and social context: “There are too few park benches and playgrounds, also because these are now increasingly being used as gym equipment. On Frankfurt's main shopping street, the Zeil, there is more space again for needs that go beyond consumption, for teenage skateboarders in particular.” Above all young people are suffering from the ban on being allowed to meet outside in groups. Adults tend to overlook their need to “hang out” on park benches and in similar places – perhaps because it is not of general social relevance? This is the conclusion at which two educational scientists, Professor Sabine Andresen and Johanna Wilmes,

have arrived, who have examined, together with colleagues from the University of Hildesheim, how young people are dealing with the coronavirus pandemic. One important result from the study “Youth and the Coronavirus”: Above all, young people miss open spaces. “Chilling out is a way to escape from everyday life, reduce stress levels and exchange experiences with peers. In general, this first of all applies equally to most young people. However, during the lockdown it became a particular issue for those living in cramped conditions because it’s hard to stay in a small flat the whole time together with your family,” says Johanna Wilmes.

Masks trigger mistrust

The restrictions regarding meeting in groups and interacting with lots of people, whether friends, acquaintances or random people, might have consequences for the underlying mood in society. “You can put it in a nutshell quite simply: Trivial communication is missing,” says sociologist Professor Tilman Allert. “Gossip and chit-chat are what cements our social order together.” Because everyday conversation at the cheese counter, bus stop or on the park bench is

shape the social situation in a binding way, it is, however, an unreasonable demand under coronavirus conditions: “The uncovered face is an entry into communication; it’s a first greeting, even before we start speaking. The mask, by contrast, is a disguise with which we give mistrust a stage.” When facial expressions are missing, the look in our counterpart’s eyes becomes ambivalent, says Allert. And he even goes one step further: The coronavirus pandemic creates a certain mistrust; the mask becomes a symbol that our counterpart in the supermarket or on the bus could be a superspreader. “I’m pretty sure that this mistrust will disappear again once the pandemic is over because in principle no society can function permanently with mistrust in communication.” Even if Allert would sometimes like his fellow human beings to display a little more humility towards what cannot be changed, he assumes that normality will return: He is looking forward to lively social interaction, to the “return of nonchalance in our communication.”

The (in)ability to learn in Zoom conferences

The chit-chat at the cheese counter might be an unreasonable demand when “masked”. But how do things look in digital communication, which at least for many in the world of work and education has become the new normal? At least there, we can put our masks aside without having to forego communication with lots of other people. Christian Stegbauer, professor of sociology, has conducted a qualitative survey among his students on studying under coronavirus conditions. “They’re having a hard time,” he says, summarising the overall result. The university has lost its significance as a social space. Stegbauer is part of the network research community, which looks less at the individual person and their behaviour and rather at the “sociality in the space between”. He considers the concept of “cognitive social structure” to be elementary in explaining the special social situation in a seminar held via Zoom. “The question is: What do I know about the relationships of the people surrounding me so that I can then establish my own position? In the seminar room, I can see who is sitting next to whom, who is whispering to whom now and again or who is leaving the room together. In a Zoom conference, by contrast, I see each person in a tile without being able to gauge the connections among them.” Stegbauer also sees this as a loss of social learning and orientation: “In a seminar with personal attendance, you can quickly ask your neighbour how to write an essay; in a video chat, that possibility is practically eliminated because you don’t want to embarrass yourself by asking a ‘dumb’ question.”



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“You can put it in a nutshell quite simply: Trivial communication is missing,” says microsociologist Tilman Allert – referring, for example, to chit-chat at the cheese counter.

missing or can only be conducted in “masked” form to a limited extent, people are increasingly focusing on politics and journalism. “This fuels the constant discussion about the crisis and the view that politics are failing miserably.” As a microsociologist, Allert is interested in everyday interpersonal situations, which have by no means disappeared even in times of the pandemic. He describes why, despite all efforts to



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Chance encounters disappear

Casual friendships or acquaintances from university therefore currently play almost no role at all in students' social life, although these contacts would be important, since through them new students, for example, can access aspects of studying previously unknown to them. In contrast to these "weak" relationships, as network research would say, relationships to family members and just a few close friends, where you are sure that the risk of contagion is minimal, are the "strong" ones that currently dominate. These are, however, less helpful – at least as far as accessing the information required by students is concerned.

Research is equally focusing on what are referred to as "super-weak relationships". This is what connections between people are called who did not know each other beforehand and meet rather by chance, for example at large festivals, but also at concerts and in clubs. Such encounters were no longer possible from the beginning of the pandemic onwards, and at present it is not foreseeable when there will be such mass encounters again. "Because such large events are real hotspots for spreading the virus: Different spheres mix, certain everyday norms are partially set aside, for example under the influence of alcohol," says Stegbauer. That is why many a conservative observer is not at all in favour of such mass events, preferring instead to socialise in a small, manageable and "cultivated" setting. However, as Stegbauer points

out: "Close contact with people you wouldn't meet under other circumstances can be very enriching because here too you learn things that aren't otherwise on your radar."

Real and virtual audiences in the cultural sector

Sociologist Tilman Allert illustrates the loss of social interaction with a vivid image: "As a result of the coronavirus pandemic, we no longer have a stage at our disposal. Who wants to get dressed up?" But how do things look with the "real" stages? Theatre, opera, concerts, but also museums and cinemas thrive on an audience that experiences art together in close physical proximity. The economic losses caused by the pandemic are in any case enormous: In Europe, a downturn of 31.2 per cent is expected for 2020, in the performing arts even 90 per cent (SZ, 26.1.2021). Professor Nikolaus Müller-Schöll, theatre scholar at Goethe University, fears long-term damage especially for freelance artists, whom the lockdown is hitting particularly hard. As a rule, even very successful independent theatre groups are unable to build up reserves, he says. Despite all the state support, the lockdown is tearing a big hole. But even publicly funded theatres are also likely to suffer long-term damage, according to Müller-Schöll: "It will presumably take a long time before normal operations are possible again. This also means that people who were accustomed to going to the theatre regularly might not come back at all. And the situation is particularly threatening for the new

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Photo: Werner Leroy/shutterstock

“Chilling out is a way to escape from everyday life, reduce stress levels and exchange experiences with peers,” says educational scientist Johanna Wilmes. One place to chill out is at Brockhaus Fountain on the Zeil, Frankfurt’s main shopping street – a very popular spot before the pandemic, especially on hot summer days.

generation because it’s foreseeable that after the lockdown first of all those performances stock-piled during the pandemic will run, funding cuts will follow everywhere, and it will be much more difficult for new actors to get started.” In Müller-Schöll’s opinion, the artistic value of recordings available on the internet is still very limited: “What is not transposed into film or digital versions is the interaction between the actors and the audience.” But how might such a transposition look? “On *Nachtkritik.de*, recordings of *Theatertreffen* performances and selected classics were accompanied by a live chat, where people could discuss what they were watching. This fulfils, to some degree, the wish expressed by Brecht: That the audience in the theatre should be like that in the football stadium, where everyone is an expert – and everyone knows better than the man on the coach’s bench what ought to happen next.” In 2020, students of theatre, film and media studies created a digital festival where you were sent a box beforehand containing all kinds of utensils, which then had to be opened and used in the course of the pre-produced “viewings”, from bars of chocolate to lipstick (<https://www.vvipfestival.com>). Müller-Schöll draws a cautiously optimistic conclusion: “We find ourselves here at the transition to another, in many dimensions so far scarcely developed medium. And after the lockdown new forms will evolve out of experiences gathered during this time which will certainly stay with us.”

One of the topics explored by his colleague Vinzenz Hediger, professor of film studies at Goethe University, is the development of cinema culture in the age of digitalisation. In Hediger’s view, the coronavirus pandemic could accelerate the success story of streaming services. Netflix & Co are convenient alternatives because cinemas are closed – but also for want of other things to do in the evening. And they are already more popular among young people



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IN A NUTSHELL

- The pandemic has greatly changed the public space. To avoid infection, keeping a distance and wearing masks are the order of the day.
- The loss of open spaces is especially hard to bear for young people: They lack important opportunities to escape from everyday life. This particularly affects young people from less affluent backgrounds.
- The mask also changes human coexistence: It conceals facial expressions, the look in our counterpart’s eyes becomes ambivalent, mistrust sets in.
- With the shifting of learning situations into virtual space, communication among learners is curtailed, social learning and orientation are lost.
- “Super-weak relationships” – for example contacts between strangers at a festival – are also lost because this kind of event is no longer possible under pandemic conditions. The entire culture and entertainment industry hangs on this because shifting events to an online format is only possible to a very limited degree.

than regular TV. Is the coronavirus pandemic the nail in the coffin for cinema culture? “Cinemas will presumably prove to be more resilient than it would appear at the moment. You could write a whole history of cinema consisting solely of premature eulogies,” says Hediger, who nonetheless sees cinema culture in danger. That is why he would like to see a debate on more support for arthouse and rural cinemas modelled on film funding in France. ●