

A Kiss is Just a Kiss? (Im)Possibilities of Being Present

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Exemplified by the practices of kissing this article discusses modifications of presence due to the emergence of Sars-Cov-2 and what we can learn from observing broken routines: it touches upon the meaning of a kiss and other bodily practices; sketches that and how interactions as well as their perception change; and reflects about the role of relationships and social contexts for conducting and experiencing “being together”.

Keywords: physical/social presence; interaction; interpersonal contact; personal relationships; couples; kiss; body techniques

A kiss is just a kiss? Yes, it is. It is something natural, something ordinary or rather a constituent part of most of our lives: people routinely kiss their loved ones, children, partners, parents, friends — certainly in different ways. Thus, we can also say: No, a kiss never was and never is “just” a kiss. Instead it is a sign of affection, a constituent part of interaction orders such as welcome and farewell rituals, a fix element of rites de passage (van Gennepe, 2005), for instance, marriages, a symbol for being close (Man, 2017), and a certain, socio-historically embedded body technique (Mauss, 2010).

Currently, the significance and meaning of a kiss — and of other forms of closeness and corporeal copresence — altered, sometimes even dramatically, exposing

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the relevance of contexts and situations (Goffman, 1963, 1971; Garfinkel, 1967): kissing is no longer a cause of individual but potentially also of public arousal; “to kiss, or not to kiss” became a medically relevant issue, a moral, perhaps even a juridical question, and a politically regulated act. For several people kisses are no longer ordinary elements of daily lives. Instead, some people scrutinise public kisses, some refrain from “unnecessary” kissing, i.e., they do not greet each other with a kiss, while others cannot kiss their loved ones as they please because they are spatially distant. The latter may additionally regret that they have never kissed in front of a civil servant at the end of a wedding ceremony because without relationships’ institutionalisation they are denied “valid reasons” to travel and the legitimacy to cross national borders. That is why one could observe couples and families holding hands, hugging and kissing across recently established fences, for instance, in the border region between Germany and Switzerland, until even these forms of “separated physical copresence” were stopped by states through extending the barriers (fig.1).



Fig. 1. Kiss across the fence

Public reactions to these political measures oscillate between horror, disbelief and appreciation, for instance, because governmental interventions employed by neighbouring states for regulating producible forms of physical copresence, associated spatial changes and police interferences with public-private-kissing remind of historical instances such as building the Berlin wall. Likewise, it contradicts



the intuition in the fight against an enemy which cannot be stopped at checkpoints: the Sars-CoV-2 virus. Nonetheless, populations' and health systems' protection as well as preventing the virus' spread seem to justify — at least for some — new or renewed forms of protectionism, among others, through sense-making about national territories, and even more the modification of public territories and “territories of the self” (Goffman, 1971); i.e., boundaries are (re-)done with effects upon (im)possibilities of being and becoming present.

In public, people are requested or compelled to keep a distance of at least two arm lengths and most people seem to stick to the newly established rules voluntarily or to apprehend the restructuring of life: perceivable, sometimes even tangible modifications are probably welcome in order to be safe and protect others; sometimes even drastic measures are accepted because individuals, collectives and states fear the virus, even more though the disease and the development of (medical) emergencies so far witnessable — often from a secure distance reaching one via media reports about unfamiliar contemporaries and distant parts of one's lifeworld (Schutz, Luckmann, 1973) — initially in China, later Italy or Spain.

Media's use, however, is not limited to connecting on an abstract level of information with distant parts of one's lifeworld (Schutz, Luckmann, 1973). Instead, mediated copresence is also the base for being together in times when “social distancing” is the order of the day. Most obvious, that is a category mistake: the virus can spread even among, e.g., strangers or enemies, i.e., among socially distanced people, as long as they are physically close, whereas spatial distance protects against contagious diseases; in medially based copresence one cannot get infected even in case of utmost social proximity. That is neither only recognized by partners in (long-)distance-relationships, including those with domicile in different countries, nor is it their only insight. Instead, in a much more general sense they know at least tacitly about the inequality of physical and social presence, the existence of different forms of copresence and their respective strengths or weaknesses. This means, they are accustomed with various (im)possibilities of being and becoming present (Döbler, 2020) such as being practiced in employing media for realising interactions, i.e., in creating copresence in form of (quasi) social situations through synchronisation via phone or video-call (Goffman, 1989; Döbler, 2019); they are familiar with the preconditions of focused encounters (Goffman, 1963, 1971) which are not limited to being physically present; and they are used to the temporal impossibility to kiss, hug, touch, as these bodily practices are limited to physical copresence (Döbler, 2020).

While (long-)distance-couples can take advantage of their previously acquired knowledge and skills, Corona and related measures question certainties and challenge routines: travel restrictions prevent them from realising accustomed mobility patterns, impacting, for instance, how long partners are unable to kiss. Likewise, probably all people face modified copresence-non-presence-ratios within all kinds of personal relationships, too. Thus, many people currently experience the possible harmfulness of too much copresence and of too much non-presence; they discover differences between physical and cognitive copresence; and face the necessity to redo boundaries of the self's territories (Goffman, 1971) and to (re-)

frame interactions (Goffman, 2010). Failing to establish new social orders for their everyday lives (Garfinkel, 1967) and for their personal, romantic relationships when being confronted with unexpected degrees of physical, i.e., it is a hyphen, not a dash: non-presence or copresence produced by the pandemic for an indefinite period of time most likely causes feelings of stress and distress; and either may prevent the realisation of kisses: non-presence makes it impossible, whereas too much copresence may impede the desire to kiss or the pleasure of kissing.

What is implied in the specific context of kissing and romantic (long-distance-) relationships depict far more general implications: reframing is a fix component of interactions in social situations, but in context of the Covid-19-pandemic it requires greater attention than usual; people interact with less confidence, as they have to cope with unpredictability, the failure or malfunction of recipe knowledge (Garfinkel, 1967; Schutz, 1946); interactions are or need to be conducted more consciously just as copresences are or need to be planned more carefully — something the (long-)distance-couples always have to do, depending on the spatial distance in varying extends, and, of course, for different reasons than it is done today. These couples' planning usually centre on mobility and the reestablishment of copresence with their partners, the oscillation between impossibilities and possibilities of kissing. Today, though, for many people it is the modified perception of the body and the medical emergency which shapes experiencing and observing kisses, while it is the false equation of social, cognitive, emotional and physical presence which impacts the (im)possibilities of interacting in general (Döbler, 2019, 2020).

As the virus infects bodies and materialises in bodily symptoms of a disease like fever or cough just as much as it infects social relationships and social life the current pandemic situation seems like a great “breaching experiment” for a sociologist. Among others, it illuminates the (re)creation of social order within pandemically created (im)possibilities of being and becoming copresent physically and socially through the appropriation of technologies, including medical artefacts, (specialist or specialised) knowledge and media infrastructures; it depicts the modification of socio-material assemblages (Latour, 2000; Mol, 2002); it makes functions, rules and changes to practices of everyday life and body techniques observable (Mauss, 2010); and it emphasises that a kiss is never just a kiss.

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Поцелуй — это просто поцелуй? (Не)возможности присутствия

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На примере практики поцелуев в этом эссе обсуждаются модификации (со)присутствия в связи с появлением Sars-Cov-2 и то, что мы можем узнать, наблюдая произошедшие «поломки повседневности». Эссе затрагивает значение поцелуя и других телесных практик и показывает, как меняются взаимодействия, а также их восприятие под влиянием пандемии. Автор размышляет о роли отношений и социальных контекстов для «совместности» и его переживания.

Ключевые слова: физическое/социальное присутствие; взаимодействие; межличностный контакт; личные отношения; пары; поцелуй; телесные техники

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