

THE MASK

DIETER MERSCH

Θάνατα θνατοῖσι πρέπε

PINDAR, ISTHMIAN 5

Masks, like puppets, effigies, statues, and other artificial figures (fetishes, figurines, totems or idols) are one of the invariants of cultural history. They are found in all cultures, as the faces of animals or of the dead, as representations of hidden forces, meant to honor ancestors or give form to transcendental spirits and gods. Grimacing or serene, colorful, scary, static or almost life-like, in all cases they are a medium of an alterity, of something absent. Whatever is at their core, the mask, as a symbolic figuration, interacts with us as an “other Other.”

Their form points obviously to a “faceness” (*Gesichtiges*) (Gombrich 1977). Masks clearly belong to what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari have categorized as the body-head system. (Deleuze, Guattari 1987: 171) They point out that, on the one hand, the head can be separated from the body, yet, on the other, its “facenessness”—to not yet speak of “countenance” (*Gesicht*) or “face” (*Antlitz*)—is the clearest representation of head and body, because it provides their expression. There are of course heads without a countenance, covered

countenances *as* faces, even cavities that act *like* countenances, but the fact that we see them as such and attribute feelings to them only serves to further underline the exposed position of the countenance. Accordingly, masks of faces are found in all cultures as witnesses to a meeting with the self, as confrontations with an image of death, as representations of the strangeness of animals, as incorporations of *anima* or *animus*, as evocations of a transcendent or past world, as images of gods or as brushes with what Emmanuel Levinas has called the “enigma of the face” or its “numinousness.” (Lévinas 1979: 187ff.)

The fecundity of the mask as an entity in cultural anthropology has often been remarked upon, as well as the fact that its many facets do not all belong in the same category, and yet they do belong to a common class (Lévi-Strauss 1960). Masks are made of many different materials: feathers, fur, wood, clay, or metal, they are studded with gems and covered in fabric, they are painted and plain, carved from a single piece of wood or assembled from human or

animal skull bones, they can also be ornate and adorned with a variety of emblems. There are half-masks that cover only the eyes, and masks attached to costumes that go below the shoulder. There are masks that may only be used once and masks that are passed down from generation

to generation, with geographic variations. Finally, there are masks worn only to certain occasions or celebrations, and masks that are ubiquitous. Some display extreme expressions of sorrow or grieving, some are intricately modeled, and others are hollow forms with holes that reference eyes and mouth, as in one of the oldest archeological findings in Israel.



FIG. 1

ONE OF THE OLDEST STONE MASKS EVER FOUND,
EARLY STONE AGE NEAR ISRAEL, CA. 7000 BCE.

(MUSÉE BIBLE ET TERRE SAINTE, PARIS)

FIG. 2

AFRICAN MASKS

PHOTO: MONIKA ZEISSNIK © ETHNOLOGISCHES MUSEUM, STAATLICHE MUSEEN ZU BERLIN – PREUSSISCHER KULTURBESITZ.
SEE [HTTPS://ARTINWORDS.DE/AFRIKANISCHE-KUNST/](https://artinwords.de/afrikanische-kunst/)



FIG. 3

AZTEC MASK
OF THE SUN
GOD TONATIUH,
LONDON.

SOURCE: AP
[HTTPS://WWW.WELT.DE/KULTUR/ARTICLE4591746/ALS-MONTEZUMA-SEINE-KUENFTIGE-BRAUT-HAEUTETE.HTML](https://www.welt.de/KULTUR/ARTICLE4591746/ALS-MONTEZUMA-SEINE-KUENFTIGE-BRAUT-HAEUTETE.HTML)



The symbolic meanings of masks are just as heterogeneous, as is their function within and outside of rituals and in practices of performative abreaction of trauma and other catastrophes. They act as mediators between the beyond and here, between the ‘immortals’ and mortal humans, an echo of the past or the liminal space between presence and absence. But everywhere they stand for the intrusion of a strange force that must be placated; they push the boundaries of tradition, they question the present or negate the community while celebrating its allegorical destruction, its transgression and resurrection. As intruders from or heralds of another world, they spark a metamorphosis. They make a break in cultural life through the transformation that begins at their arrival. They renew connections that had become fragile or confirm contracts and political relationships. At the same time, they aid passages: the shamanic journey or the crossing into a new state such as initiation or death. They provide us with alien powers and cannot be controlled by us, instead they displace us to a “third” space beyond the facts of our birth, individuality, and social status.

For these reasons, Roger Callois has insisted that “masks are the true social bond,” because they act not only as magical objects which attract other powers to themselves, they also take possession of the community to bring it together, renew it, or protect it from evil influences (Caillois 2001: 89). Yet at the same time masks reveal the fragility of social existence; they summon the finitude of human life, the loneliness of death, and the insoluble historical disruptions of the *conditio humana*. Hence the mask refers not only to the “bond” (*religio*), but also to its dissolution and disintegration. It’s duplicity is thus three-fold: in view of our selves, of the Others and of the community as a whole. Hence the mask becomes a focal point; both the site of the true *κοινωνία* (*koinonia*) as well as of the questioning thereof.



FIG. 4

ANTIQUE THEATER MASKS

[HTTPS://WWW.PINTEREST.DE/PIN/341358846746049638/](https://www.pinterest.de/PIN/341358846746049638/)

It is the appearance of an exception that has no place within the community, but nevertheless both generates and problematizes community and its forms of “participation.” Excluded, it includes the possibility of community and a break with the same.

As an artificial alterity, the mask evinces the ambiguity of the experience of the Other, of our dependency on others and their unbearableness. For communities are in no way simply there; they are permanently traversed by the rift of alterity which both allows them to be and divides them in equal measure. The mask embodies this conflict: the necessity and unavailability of the Other, their interruptions and resistance, their negation and foreignness and concurrently our unease regarding *κοινωνία* and its never-fulfilled promise. The mask is then the medium of an escape, a way of fleeing from the constraints of community while also practicing the “other gaze” that allows us to see ourselves with distanced eyes. It creates a caesura, and holds up the mirror of alterity, with all of the word’s connotations, because the “truth” of the social state is the riddle of alterity as that which is always in the way and undefinable, that cannot be coopted or controlled by naming. Consequently, the mask denotes both the shiver of difference and at the same time the fascination for that *enigma* that religious studies scholar Rudolf Otto has linked to the “holy.” (Otto 2004) And in confrontation with the enigma, one is equally confronted with the ungraspable foundation, with the question why “the *Seiende*, that which is, is, rather than is not.” (Heidegger 1984: 2, 12; 1972: 53f.; 1965: 21)

DUPLICATION

All of the above helps to account for the extraordinary metaphysical depth of the mask, its quasi-philosophical “secret.” And yet it has not yet been fully defined. Hidden, it remains the unknown per se, holding an infinite diversity of cultural possibilities. Just as humans, according to Nietzsche, are “the still undetermined animals,” so do masks, as their desires, self-portrayals, transformations and divine foundation, remain indeterminable (Nietzsche 2002: 56). No definition can capture it; the mask always proves to be more than it shows or purports to represent, more than it can symbolize, because of its many functions and practices, even more than it promises to resolve through ritual performances. For this reason, it is more than just a *medium*, which it of course also is, because it breaks through the mediation, transverses its metamorphoses and realizes its potential in a never-ending round of transformations. As Claude Lévi-Strauss clarified in his study of masks:

It would be misleading to imagine ...that a mask and more generally a sculpture or a painting may be interpreted each for itself according to what it represents or to the aesthetic or ritual use for which it is destined. ... On the contrary, A mask does not exist in isolation; it supposes other real or potential masks always by its side.
(Lévi-Strauss 1982: 144)

This means that masks are constantly “becoming.” Yet there is more, for we are looking not only at relationships of inclusion and exclusion and their movement, but at a network of artifacts, their history, and their futurity. Thus when Caillois calls the mask “the true social bond,” that is not the whole of the matter, whether we are looking at processes of identity creation, communication, the localization of social roles or the attestation of sovereignty, because experiences of destruction, death and renewal are equally important. From the beginning, the mask is therefore situated in an “other” place, a beyond, an *u-topos*, that evades every attempt at determination. Masks therefore touch simultaneously upon the possibility and the impossibility of the social bond, upon our mortality and our immortality, and upon the legitimacy and illegitimacy of our identity. In the end, they tear down the difference between being and appearance or between truth and falsehood, and always have a share in the chronic precarity of cultural meaning.

Where then does their infinite perpetuation come from, their evolution and the desire for the replication of forms, the desire to create further “figures” and “faces” besides ourselves, ambiguous creatures on the line between the oppositions that constitute sociality and consciousness, as if it were important to continually shift and unsettle that border and create doubt? Do they satisfy our wish to ourselves be creators, to constantly duplicate ourselves between veiling and exposition, between disguising and discovering? Is the mask above all an ἄγγελος, an *angelos*, a messenger of the paradoxicality that swings from passivity to activity, between the given actuality (*Gegebenheit*) of the world and the contingency of the social bond, always threatened by collapse?¹ Does it herald the primary unrealizability of community and its culture, raising its demonic head wherever it is accomplished, mocking its hopes and economies? Then perhaps the dynamic creation of multitudes of artificial Others—the boundless multiplication of not only masks but also sculptures, dolls, marionettes, and images and maybe also today’s animated figures, including robots and artificial intelligence—is a panicked sublimation of our mortality and an attempt to liberate ourselves from it, to banish the death wish and in so doing separate ourselves from the Other and the intrusion of the autonomy and corporeality of others. Don’t all of these figures have something of a corpse in them, insofar as, as Slavoj Žižek provocatively stated, “the only good neighbor is a dead neighbor,” since only the dead body and ossified face is under our control and at our bidding, reconciling us with its otherness (Žižek 2005).

In that case, ownership, displacement, and power are the strongest drives behind our desire to create artificial Others that we can burden with all of the ambivalence, hate, and guilty conscience that resides within the social bond and its gaping wound. Consequently, masks transpose the negativity of affect by transforming the dialectics of social dependency and resistance into a second, abstract “face” that haunts us equally with its threat and with its laughter, putting fear into us. If so, we must also admit that the mask cannot be an object of libidinous desire, for it is neither loved nor rejected, neither recognized nor despised. Rather it transfers our feelings by, standing in for the real Other, acting as a foreigner or an intruder, submitting itself to a delusion that is in equal parts destructive and power-hungry. Put another way, this means that we need duplication in order to again and again find our way in the labyrinth of our own incomprehensibility as well as the unworkability (*desœuvrement*) of the social bond. In short, the fragile nature of our existence (Nancy 2010; 1990; 1991).

DUPLICATE AND DOPPELGÄNGER

To counter this fragility, the mask is linked to the simultaneity of covering and discovering, of veil and revelation, to the extent that that which is hidden is displayed all the more. But this dialectic is given only when the masquerade is interpreted symbolically and as part of the order of representation. Yet the play of opposites has more depth and more branches, it is more ambiguous and complicated than it seems at first glance. For the mask does not cover one face only to offer us another with which we can present ourselves on the social stage. It also does not denote the travesty of the face (*Antlitz*) under which our true countenance is revealed. Rather it exposes the concealment and then masks the exposure and vice versa, disguising while at the same time uncovering the covering, so that we are always dealing with a play of double negatives.

This negation should not however be confused with a contradiction in discourse, for it is an iconic “obliterative” negative. Obliterative discourse always obscures an Other that is not questioned in its presence but remains chronically undefined. It is a practice of negation that connects to a practice of deletion, disguise, highlighting, and striking—not for nothing did the mask as πρόσωπον (*prosopon*), the tragic actor’s cloak, and ὀθόρνος (*cothurnus*) belong

¹ Weihe (2004) also views the mask as a contradictory form, albeit from the perspective of systems theory.

together in Ancient Greek theatre—that, following Sacha Sosno and Emmanuel Levinas, can be called “obliteration.” (Lévinas 2019) The mask is the epitome of such obliteration; as a superficial, hollowed form it erases its wearer and simultaneously makes them into something incomprehensible that, through a collection of holes in place of the eyes, mouth and nose, speaks of bodily orifices and insinuates an unknown interior. It follows that it is not the mask itself that is mysterious, but the way in which it is used, which produces a secret by presenting something visible that at the same moment flips into something invisible, touch-

ing upon the mystery of life itself. Made of cavities and openings, the mask hints at a space behind it, a dimension of an Other kind, that is similar to that which we discover in all life and in every creature that shares with us an indelible bond of elementary relationship.

This links the mask—in contrast to machines and their mathematical simulations such as avatars, which are nothing more than black boxes—with another deeply-rooted cultural figure, the doppelgänger. The doppelgänger, too, confronts us with the instability of our identity and hence also with the countenance as an expression of supposed authenticity and as the form of its attributes. The duplicate separates us from ourselves, it is both the same and foreign; at the center of the face is creates a rift, a difference.

The mask has the same effect, except that it puts one countenance upon the other, dispelling its certainty and allowing a glimpse of an infinite space “behind” it, just as the doppelgänger transforms the unequivocalness of identity into a ghost.

Over the course of the Middle Ages, the phantasm of the doppelgänger became a spectral object that not only portends something beyond appearances that lasts after death, but more importantly suggests that we—simultaneously “divine” and “bestial” or “dividual” and “individual”—can not be one with ourselves. For if we believe that life is saturated with a transcendence and a divine “gift,” then, just as the individual means the *ιδιώτης*, the *idiotis* who does not have a part of the whole and shuts himself out of the community, an insoluble contradiction is constitutive for our existence. Woven into a world of superstition, deception, and confusion, doppelgängers appear as messengers of fate, as a sign of or in anticipation of future events that tear open the gap, the rift, and make the contradiction manifest.

The mask is cut from the same cloth, like the mask, the doppelgänger obeys the genuine duplicity of *συμβάλλειν*, *symbállein*, to throw together, and *διαβάλλειν*, *diaballein*, to throw apart, or of connecting and separating, as well as of the circle of life caught between order and chaos. That is why its appearance makes us uneasy. The mask can therefore be seen as a preeminent object of ambivalence, as a magical point, at which the phenomenon of the doppelgänger also crystallizes, which is why Hans Belting (2017: 32ff.) situates its origin in the death cult, in the effigy as the simultaneity of decay and preservation. The frozen expression, the

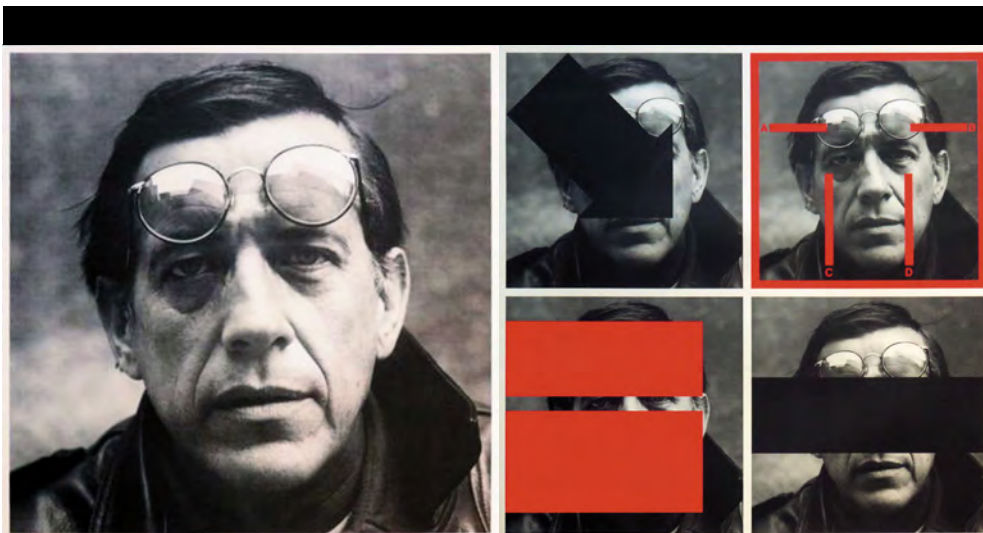


FIG. 5
SACHA SOSNO, *AUTOPORTRAIT* 1997,
GRAPHIC PRINT, SILKSCREEN.
SEE [HTTPS://WWW.PICASSOMIO.COM/SACHA-SOSNO/43559.HTML](https://www.picassomio.com/sacha-sosno/43559.html)



FIG. 6
GIORGIO DE CHIRICO.
THE TWO MASKS, 1926

petrification of its features receives a second covering as a memento, so that the mask becomes a continuation and an outliving, confronting the ἐφήμερος (*ephēmeros*). We are, as Pindar wrote, “creatures of a day,” doomed to die and σκιᾶς ὄναρ ἄνθρωπος (*skias onar anthropos*), only the “dream of a shadow” that needs to give form to memory to transcend its own painful dissolution.²

Seen in this way, the mask also promises continuity of the dead in life, their resituation at the site of the duplicate *persona*, caught in constant transformation and participating in both kingdoms: the living, social world and the *persona* as the actual image of the dead person. While this primary meaning as a statuary sign of those whose “faces had been lost” is mostly temporal, a second, derivative meaning is suggested that must be understood spatially, namely the presentation of an absent power (Belting 2017: 34). The mask thus becomes a figure of power, an emblem of the presence of the absent ruler, while also belonging to the order of ephemerality and its concurrent precarity. For just as human fragility demands permanent symbolic restitution for more than a day, so does power. Hence a symbol of power is inscribed in the mask that reconstitutes political power at the site of its *absentia*. Its appearance is then like a memorial that has no *real* power, but all the more *imaginary* power, whereby the imaginary is more powerful than the manifest, for it has already internalized power as an idea.

THE PUBLIC COUNTENANCE AND THE *ABSENTIA* OF THE FACE

In both cases, however, the mask is linked to duplication and so associated with the figure of repetition, of which images of death and power are merely the two most distant poles. Belting also reminds us that face and mask intersect, and that we pay great attention to shaping our social faces as the surface of expression and proof of our personality. For that reason, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari have suspended all representational logic and melded mask and face: “The mask does not hide the face, it is the face. ... everything that is public is so by virtue of the face.” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 115) That means we must read the expressive face not only—as in physiognomy—as a “signifying system,” but also attribute theatrical passion to it through the pose that is part of theater’s exquisite repertoire. Theater also becomes an exemplary medium for the description of sociality (*ibid.*). Masks, whether of the everyday or the sublime, are always theatrical, just as in theater the face is subject to the tireless economies of adaptation, where it throws itself into the public eye and tries to draw all eyes to itself.

Rainer Maria Rilke drew a caricature of their sometimes dismal efforts in his novel, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*:

There are many people, but even more faces, since everyone has several. There are people who wear a face for years, and of course it wears away, gets dirty, wears in the creases, stretching like gloves ... Those are thrifty, simple people, they don't change their face, they don't even have it cleaned. ... Other people change their faces over uncannily quickly, and wear them out. At first they think they have enough of them to last them forever, but hardly have they reached forty, they're on the last one. ... They aren't used to looking after faces; their last wears through in a week, has holes in it, and in many places it's as thin as paper; and then gradually the base layer starts to show through, the non-face, and they go around wearing that.
(Rilke 2016: 4–5)

² Pindar: “Creatures of a day. What is someone? What is no one? Man is the dream of a shadow.” (Pythian 8: 95). See Fränkel (1946): 132–133. Ἐφήμερος, in early Greek literature, does not mean “creature of one day, short-lived” but “subject to the (changing) day, variable,” and the term implied that along with the shifts and changes of a man’s life, his outlook and character fluctuate; thus man is unsubstantial and a mere “shadow in a dream.”

The public face wears out, but there is no final ground “behind” it, no authentic face to counter the faces that are put on, as is said of the death mask. Instead, there can be nothing under the mask but more masks.

That is why there are only masks and no faces, as the mask behind the mask behind the mask behind the mask etc. exposes an abyss and finally ends at the cast of the dead person, whose expression is as distorted as the first mask. We are confronted with the concept of ‘nothing’ as found in Jacques Derrida, for example in the inconspicuous “a” in *différance*, assuming the mask does not signify something extant but only itself and its never-ending proliferation. (Derrida 1982) Masks are not pulled over the face in order to hide it, rather they reproduce the face as a supplement. Yet the question remains whether the chain of supplements exposes a trace of that which does not allow itself to be masked. For Deleuze, the answer is clear:

Repetition is truly that which disguises itself in constituting itself, that which constitutes itself only by disguising itself. It is not underneath the mask, but is formed from one mask to another as though from one distinctive point to another, from one privileged instant to another with and within the variations. The masks do not hide anything except other masks. (Deleuze 2001: 17)



FIG. 7

TONI SAULNIER (1926–1968) *A PARIS, RUE JACOB, LE DÎNER DES COLLECTIONNEURS DE TÊTES*, 1966
PHOTOMECHANICAL REPRODUCTION FROM
“L’ART NÈGRE” *PARIS MATCH*, 21 MAY 1966

This however implies that all masks are related and only function when they are constantly repeated, shifted, and transformed, and also, as Deleuze continues, that repetition can only be “that which disguises itself.” Correspondingly—expanding on Nietzsche’s ideas in “On Truth and Lies in a Non-moral Sense”—the differentiation between truth and

falsehood or between authenticity and fraud is obsolete (Nietzsche 1993). Nothing can be repeated before the repetition that it refers to or that could be referenced from it, because “the mask is the true subject of repetition.” (Deleuze 2001: 17) Having said that, the key difference is not between genuineness (*Eigentlichkeit*) and masquerade, but between mask/countenance

on the one hand and ‘face’, in Levinas’s sense, on the other, for the “face” is not the true countenance, but the invisibility of alterity in the countenance—that moment that makes a face human and forces a truly ethical turn. We *see* countenances and observe them, identify expressions, mood, and mimicry, but we *meet* faces, albeit only when we allow ourselves to be touched by them, so that the mode of experience is not αἰσθησις, *aisthēsis*, but response and responsibility.

The distinction that thus comes to light is homologous to the differentiation between the two types of relating, namely through identification and so through perception and interpretation, including the origin in naming and the circulation of the sign, and on the other hand through passivity in the form of accepting and acknowledging, within which is always immanent both the fear and the respect for that which we are *not*. Beneath the mask is no αὐθεντης (*authentēs*) that must be discovered, but the “trace” of the *alter*, both behind the masks of others and in our own mask-likeness. Put another way, there is a categorical difference between the mask and alterity that is subsumed neither in the differentiation between truth and falsehood nor in that between authenticity and pretense, but which oscillates between identity and non-identity, for alterity is neither true nor false, just as the mask can not be primary or derivative.

SIMILARITY AND DISSIMILARITY

Importantly, masks are not iconic; they are not primarily images, but plastic objects whose most conspicuous characteristic is perhaps their negativity in the form of those cavities that we have delineated as oblitative. They not only gape open in lieu of eyes and mouth—the places through which voice and gaze and thus the “trace of the Other” escape—but they also form cavities that allow us to animate them with magical possession. Even if every mask does not necessarily need a wearer, still they are not moved by *αὐτόματον* (*automaton*), but by something that, while ecstatic, communicates with us and appears to share with us of the same mystery. For that reason, all masks incorporate something Other into themselves, indicating the relationship of all creatures, the inability to grasp existence, and the power of drives that resist control, as well as the unruly longing of life and its unavoidable relationship to death.

That means, however, in complete opposition to technical artifacts, whose vectors aim at hypermimesis and consequently at a similarity that is almost sameness, for the mask, it is dissimilarity that is important. It is *ἀνόμοιος* (*anómoios*), for if one compares mask and face, the former is like a distortion or grimace of the latter, in which a faceness begins to appear and is rejected in the same breath. That which is dissimilar is however constitutive for every similarity, and not the other way around, its difference also makes reflexive access possible. Mathematical models in contrast aim at the technological simulation of identity: their *τέλος* (*telos*) is homomorphism, whose main principle is structural sameness. They aim at mimicry, at being deceptively real, the perfect imitation. Here we see one of the characteristic misunderstandings of a technological era that has more than its share of misunderstandings, for its proliferation of artificial figures stems from a misguided supposition about people and their *humanum*, which has no use for copies or for the radiance of illusionism, but always only for what is heterogeneous and finite, and for the resulting self-restraint. This does not, finally, denote a lack, but *potentia*, for only “mortal aims befit mortals.”



FIG. 8

EMIL NOLDE, *MASKEN II*, 1920, OIL PAINT ON CANVAS, 74 x 88,8 CM.

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