

# MASK, FACE, COUNTENANCE

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In life, on stage, on screen, and in front of the screen, the mask, face, and countenance open differing but interrelated ethical dimensions of vision. A human being longs for recognition. Only in the Other's range of vision, in that recognition, does she become a person. In *Nudities*, Giorgio Agamben (2010: 47) proposes translating *persona* with "mask": the mask through which every human being acquires an identity and a social role; in the shift from the Latin *persona* to personality, in the light of someone's legal capacity and political dignity as a free individual. Drawing on Stoic philosophy (Epiktet), Agamben entangles ideas about legal and political personhood with reflections on the emergence of a moral person, which he likens to an actor's relationship with a mask. Actors are not in the position to select or reject the roles playwrights or screenwriters have written for them; and neither may they identify with the roles utterly. Thus, the moral person comes into being through both "an adhesion to, and a distancing from, the social mask." (Ibid: 48)

The mask contains a paradox: a human accepts it unconditionally, yet also distances himself from it almost imperceptibly and remains separate from it while wearing it. When actors wear masks, they hide their facial expressions and exaggerate their bodily gestures. Their faces are covered and reveal, by contrast, those of a character. Hence, the paradox of the mask is that it shows by hiding. The face and mask become indistinguishable as a joint unit, in a movement of the Greek *prósopon* from the artificial to the natural: the mask (*prósopon*) is the face (*prósopon*). The difference—mask versus face (*prósopon/prósopon*)—becomes interchangeable (Weihe 2004: 35-36). The face and the mask equate to the visible, then; they cannot be invisible and yet they point to something invisible that has taken form "behind" them. Taking this a step further: the face and mask are always whatever is "in front of" or "facing" the Other's eyes, to take the word *prósopon* literally.

In Christian iconography, the Latin word *persona* designates Jesus Christ, the human being who wears God's mask in humanity (Belting 2006: 47). His humanness can be seen in his visible and representable face, which at the same time points to his invisible and unrepresentable divinity whose true, bare face only appears in Paradise. From this starting point, "the way of the masks" proceeds as a long road with many branches; a mask (akin to a face or an image) never stands alone. It always requires others that, in rituals or death cults, it both affirms and negates, as Claude Lévi-Strauss (1988) puts it.

Furthermore, the mask creates relationships between the self and the Other, between life and death. It reveals Otherness, including the immaterial, the spiritual, beginning with the human face but transcending it, progressing past it in the eyes of Others. The Other's face is a carrier of an existence, just "as my own existence is carried by my body, that knowledge-acquiring apparatus"—"that expressive instrument called a face," asserts Maurice Merleau-Ponty in his *Phenomenology of Perception* (2002: 409)—because one's own sight

presents a gaze that bound to the visible world, but within its range of vision is the gaze of the Other: “that expressive instrument called a face.” Merleau-Ponty proceeds from the standpoint of his own body, from his body as a field of perception and activity; he elaborates his own perception, which passes from direct perception to the thought of perception, which happens at a particular moment in time and has always been present in one’s own body, just as the other body has always been present. Hence, I understand the Other the same way I understand my own perception: in the Other, I find “only the trace of a consciousness which evades me in its actuality and, when my gaze meets another gaze, I re-enact the alien existence in a sort of reflection.” (Ibid 410)

With Edmund Husserl’s *Cartesian Meditations* (1973) and Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception*, phenomenology wrestled from the outset with the question of deducing the Other’s consciousness, which becomes possible “only if the emotional expressions of others are compared and identified with mine, and precise correlations recognized between my physical behaviour and my ‘psychic events.’” (Merleau-Ponty 2002: 410) The perception of the Others proceeds these assessments; they are already present insofar as the Other’s face has always been there. According to this line of reasoning:

*To see a face is not to conceive the idea of a certain law of constitution to which the object invariably conforms throughout all its possible orientations, it is to take a certain hold upon it, to be able to follow on its surface a certain perceptual route with its ups and downs, and one just as unrecognizable taken in reverse as the mountain up which I was so recently toiling, and down which I am now striding my way. (Ibid: 295)*

Seeing a face also means orienting oneself to something, adhering to specific viewpoints, such as a frontal view or profile. Seeing a face, furthermore, means recognizing or mistaking a face, for only specific forms and aspects of manifestation appear at any given time, and it is therefore possible that any deviation will prevent me from recognizing the Other.

In his philosophical writings on phenomenology and social philosophy, Emmanuel Lévinas (2007: 66) goes searching for the “trace of the Other,” the human face (*le visage*): “The face speaks. The manifestation of the face is already discourse.” This axiom presumes the recognition that the Other manifests in the face; Lévinas emphasizes that the Other “breaks through his own plastic essence, like a being who opens the window on which its own visage was already taking form,” and that his presence consists “of divesting himself of the form which does already manifest him.” Ultimately, “The epiphany of a face is *visitation*.” (Lévinas 1996: 59) For Lévinas, this is about the phenomenon that constitutes the appearance of the Other, which is also a face; as such, it is a phenomenology of the human appearance, in which the face is not a pure, optical given, but a *something* that I cannot access, that I cannot grasp because it confronts me, because it was already there and has passed and, in the process, has left behind a trace. The Other, with his face, is not simply present in my field of experience, but is experienced as an Alien without being determined or influenced by me, because this Other and Alien has always preempted me, because his trace has always taken form already.

However, as Bernhard Waldenfels (2000: 298) demonstrates in his lectures on the phenomenology of the body, this trace does not mean that “everything is out in the open; yet neither does it mean that something is there but hidden, which I would only find out about through analogy or other intellectual considerations. Rather, it means: there are clues of something there in its absence.” Waldenfels demonstrates that we do not get acquainted with a face “by registering individual empirical data points so as to assemble a something, an x, a face,” but instead the details of the face “are preceded by a physiognomy in which specific aspects such as expressions, liveliness, and ways of looking abruptly come to the fore.” (Ibid: 243) The face distinguishes itself, sets itself apart, asserts itself, becomes an entity in whose line of sight I move; I am entering someone’s gaze. Therefore, in a *broader* sense, the face is

in a special way unapproachable and inviolable, whereas in a *narrower* sense it is grasped as “something visible in the world, a form with specific attributes that lead to that face being recognized and thus identified.” (Ibid: 391)

In an *even broader* sense of the face’s unapproachability and inviolability, according to Lévinas (2007: 216), the face of the Other also says: “You shall not commit murder.” Hence, the face or “countenance” of the Other—to emphasize its original numinosity—issues an ethical resistance; it penetrates my capabilities and is an addition to the inevitable stagnation of appearance, and thus it reaches the edges of my capabilities. My own possibilities are called into question by the Other. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987: 167–91, 170–71) distance themselves from ethical imperatives such as these—in inter-bodily lived worlds from face to face—and, in their rhizomatic thinking, declare the face in the narrower and broader sense to be a “bunker-face” (*visage-bunker*), a surface, map, long, rectangular, triangular, with lines and wrinkles, a strange system, “horrible and magnificent,” amidst the abstract mechanical *assemblages of power* (*pouvoir*).

Within their semiotics, the face is a *white wall*—significance—and a *black hole*—subjectification—vacant as a *projection surface*, filling up as a *locus of resonance* by way of an individual unconscious. “The face is Christ.” Year Zero, the creation of the face. “The face is the typical European.” (Ibid: 176) The face is also hand, chest, stomach, penis and vagina, thigh, leg, and foot. Between capitalism and schizophrenia, the face cannot be separated from fetishism or erotomania, it is re-coded: as the inhuman in the human, as the close-up, as the lunar landscape, with its uninhabited white surface and gleaming black holes, in vacancy and barrenness, towards the disciplining of bodies, from organic layers to layers of significance structures and subjectification procedures, on a surface riddled with holes, in despotic and authoritarian assemblages of imperialism: *a face, what horror* (Ibid: 190). To mix semiotics, the face because a mask that hides nothing but elevates everything, is no longer bound to a body, an available subject, a prior signifier—because the face *is* the mask itself.

Moreover, the face is politics. According to Deleuze and Guattari, the face must be escaped: through *becoming-clandestine* (Ibid: 186) in realms of A-significance and A-subjectivity, in deterritorialization in real life and in art, as a person slips into a face even before possessing one, in bi-univocal relationships with the face of the Other, in elementary units, as “a man *or* a woman, a rich person or a poor one, an adult or a child, a leader or a subject, “an *x or* a y.” (Ibid: 177) Beyond ontology or existence, the human body *gains face* in *becoming*, within the immanent plane, which also includes the image: a close-up is a face and “the affection-image is the close-up,” as Deleuze (1986: 87) explains in *Cinema 1*. After all, the close-up can be treated like a face (*visage*), it is viewed in the face (*envisagée*), and it obtains a face (*dévisage*). As a reflective surface and an intensive micro-movement, it is a face in and of itself. It is situated between perception and action, contains the inherent power to separate the image from space and time in order to demonstrate pure affect in expression, in acts of de-framing (*décadrage*), from process to passion, as with the actor Maria Falconetti playing Joan of Arc in Carl Theodor Dreyer’s 1928 silent film.

The film isolates the facial expressions and the physiognomy of the visible human being (Bálasz 2001: 48–49) without placing them in context, without a counterpart; they function as the “white wall” and “black hole,” empty projection surface and locus of resonance to be filled, *carrier of affect*. The film actor’s face is also a face-object, as Roland Barthes (1972: 56) writes about the face of Greta Garbo, which is worthy of admiration; and with its makeup, with its “snowy thickness,” it equates, in turn, to a mask: not painted, but plaster-like, closed-off, ephemeral, compact. Garbo’s face is a temptation to a *total* mask, as the archetype of a human face, out of which only the eyes tremble, vulnerable and wounded, “black like strange soft flesh, but not in the least expressive.” (Ibid.) Yet specifically, in the film Barthes is speaking of, *Queen Christina*,<sup>1</sup> the face does receive a counterpart, in the interplay with antagonists, in the shot/counter-shot technique, in conversation, conflict (*Auseinander-Setzung*, literally “taking apart”), it becomes the *carrier of the gaze*, which is

1 Rouben Mamoulian, dir. *Queen Christina*. USA: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1933.

more than a written face, a vacant surface, than white paper and black inscription (Barthes 1981: 122): Garbo as an actor (in the social theory sense) risks her exterior, she becomes, paraphrasing Susanne Valerie, the vivid venue of the fragile exposure of a human being who seeks a mask in her appearance—in front of the eyes and ears of Others: observation, reflection and control *as well as* nature, sensibility and passion allow the voice to rise, the words to pause, the sounds to vary, and the limbs to move. Thinking and experience construct and structure the “laboratory of existence” whose existence has always been a human one, in which the actor can become a “study *subject*,” in part via her *faciality* and *corporeality*, as a carrier of existence, affect, and gaze, as an *eccentric* face-subject (Granzer 2011: 96).

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