

THE DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATION SCIENCES, FACULTY OF LETTERS, UNIVERSITY OF BUCHAREST

THE MASK

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON CULTURAL
STUDIES AND COMMUNICATION SCIENCES

IDENTITY, COMMUNICATION, CONTAGION

BUCHAREST

*OCTOBER 6-7
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CALL FOR PAPERS

The sanitary mask has become an indispensable presence in public spaces. With a market share of \$ 7.8 billion in 2020, the mask is probably the most purchased accessory today. Manufactured anonymously or produced by well-known brands such as Fendi, Carolina Herrera, Ralph Lauren, Burberry or Balenciaga, with prices ranging from a few cents to \$ 1.5 million, the mask rewrites the history of contagion, the iconography of the face, but also the entire 'new normalcy' communication system.

Isolation, anxiety, social and cognitive dysfunctions are all the result of the projection of an adjusted identity reconstructed in the virtual space. A form of protection and a sign of infinite vulnerability in equal measure, the mask is the trademark of our new status, in a viral world.

What is the new role of communication? How can we generate alternative forms of normalcy through branding or CSR campaigns? What role and relevance can we still retrieve from public

relations, intercultural communication strategies or information sciences in a world where partial access to the other person's identity often triggers contradictory feelings, ethnocentric behaviours, or bizarre forms of narcissism?

How can we better manage the iconography of a faceless world as long as the faces all around us are reduced to mere glances? How does illegible physiognomy access the history of representation and how plausible are the premises of a new iconography?

All these questions will surely be answered on different disciplinary levels. Therefore, we hereby launch an invitation to investigate the communicative, cultural, and social dimensions of wearing a sanitary mask during the current epidemiological crisis, proposing an examination of both the old and profound meanings of masks and the new meanings acquired within a pandemic context.

This conference provides the framework for interdisciplinary reflections and addresses researchers in various fields: communication sciences, cultural studies, literary studies, media studies, political science, cultural anthropology, sociology, psychology, philosophy, ethics, semiotics, art history, history of religions, legal sciences, etc.

ARGUMENT

The mask is a complex and problematic subject. The plurality of meanings and the plethora of manifestation contexts render any typological generalisation impossible (Inglis, 2017).

For the man of archaic societies, the mask signifies more than covering the face. We can safely draw the conclusion that the mask has magical-religious, symbolic, and mythical meanings; it has the role of a mediator that always appears in the liminal, transitional states,

in the initiation rites, in the thaumaturgical or in the funerary ones and is part of a binary logic: discovered-hidden, visible-invisible, said-unsaid, appearance-reality, which gives it a deeply disturbing and mysterious side (Meunier & Samper, 2013).

The practices of wearing a mask are universal cultural phenomena, as we well know from the study of cultural anthropology and history of

religions. They are present in almost every human society, many of which are still preserving their ancient mask-wearing traditions during certain ceremonies, festivals, performances, and various rituals, either religious or secular (Edson, 2005).

The outlining of the first general theory of masks is attributed to ethnologists and culturologists Leo Frobenius (*Die Masken und Geheimbünde Afrikas - The Masks and Secret Societies in Africa*, 1898) and Karl Meuli (*Maske, Maskerein*, 1933). According to the two experts, the origins of the masks must be sought in beliefs about spirits, primarily of the dead (of ancestors) and are related to secret societies in Africa (Pernet, 1989, p. 2-4).

Due to the influence of Lucien Lévy-Bruhl and his theory of the 'primitive mentality' (according to which the man of archaic societies could not distinguish between reality and imaginary, confusing between presence and representation, etc.), most researchers who have dealt with the study of ritual masks have adhered to the animistic explanation (Caillois, 1994): the masked man is considered a reincarnation of a spirit, of the dead or of supernatural entities (deities). Consequently, it was presumed that the man in archaic societies believed that there was a real transformation of the mask wearer during the performance of a ritual, which guarantees its effectiveness. The mask paradox is based in the very dissociation between an apparent form and an inner identity, in the duality between a non-human exteriority and a human interiority, given

that a member of the community will always be behind the mask (Descola, 2011, p. 25-26).

Since the 1970s, we have witnessed a renewal of the methodological field of anthropological research regarding the presence of masks in human societies. The studies carried out have highlighted the multiplicity of the reference systems implied by wearing a mask, often contradictory. The mask is an 'edifice with multiple images' (Goulard & Karadimas, 2011, p. 9-25). The new interpretations no longer focus on explaining the origin of the mask, but on the language of the rituals where it occurs, on the symbolic meanings, which are not isolated, but incorporate many references to the visible and invisible world.

The mask may be thus interpreted as a 'total social fact', with multiple functions. These tendencies are visible in the functionalist and structuralist interpretations, which do not dissociate between the rituals with masks and the other components of culture (Napier, 1987). In *La voie des masques* (1975), Claude Lévi-Strauss reveals the complex relationship between mask and myth, pointing out that wearing masks during a ritual enables not only the connection of everyday realities to the supernatural world, but also to the world of myths and stories of origins, the evocation of cosmological events. In the same vein, Mircea Eliade (1964) observed that performances with masks make visible the fundamental myths, which must always be repeated, thus strengthening the collective memory.

In archaic societies, the mask is not an instrument of dissimulation, nor of disguise. The mask highlights a hidden reality (gods, demons, spirits of the dead, etc.), so it has a double role: of revealing and hiding. The mask has the potential to dissimulate and simulate, frighten or amuse, as a symbol of celebration and carnival; it can be a source of worship and fear, but also of joy and mirth. Due to its ambivalence and ambiguousness the imaginary of the mask radiates anxiety, insecurity; it is reminiscent of death, of transgression being a symbolic operator of otherness.

Aside from studying the masks present on other continents (as is the case with the masks of the Dogon population in Africa, described by Geneviève Calame-Griaule, 1938), the European ethnologists and folklorists have also investigated masks in their countries. Karl Meuli (1933) was the first ethnologist to compare the masks of the 'primitives' and the customs with masks with those existing in European traditions that still survived in many western regions in the early twentieth century: Austrian Tyrol, Switzerland, Bavaria, etc. This is also the case with games involving masks practiced during the winter holidays in Romania (with animal masks: goat, bear; anthropomorphic: ancestors; demonic: devils). (Vulcănescu, 1970; Pop, 1998; Nistor, 1973; Dăncuș, 2008).

In Europe, masks are attested in Antiquity, not only in ritual and sacred contexts, but also in worldly, profane, secular, and ludic forms. In ancient Greece and Rome, processions with

masks are attested during the festivals dedicated to Dionysus, Lupercalia, and Saturnalia. The mask also played an important role in theatrical performances (Frontisi-Ducroux, 1995). Significantly, in Greek, prosopon meant both 'face' and 'mask', and in Latin, persona was the theatrical mask (from per-sonare, the actor's voice resonating behind the mask). There is still no consensus among linguists on the etymology of the word 'mask' (It. mascara, Fr. masque, Spa. mascara). It is believed that it comes from late Latin (probably borrowed from Germanic), where masca meant 'evil spirit', 'demon', 'warlock' (Schmitt 2001, p. 140). It is not a coincidence that the Church has been fighting carnival masquerades since its inception and has condemned the act of wearing a mask, associated with evil manifestations.

If in non-European archaic societies people used masks to identify with spirits, and the mask meant a great responsibility, honour, and prestige for its wearer, in Europe the mask signified a form of liberation, of catharsis, favouring uninhibited and licentious behaviours. Mikhail Bakhtin mentioned that the mask is the most complex and meaningful among the motifs of medieval popular culture, which reveals 'the very essence of the grotesque' (Bakhtin, 1974, p. 48). Wearing a mask during the Carnival signified a liberation from everyday life contingencies, the transgression of social codes with utter impunity. (Testa, 2021).

During the Renaissance, due to the influences of the Italian Commedia dell'arte, the profane mask

became a fashionable object in the European court society of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and the masquerade ball became a place of anonymity, love intrigues and gallant adventures (Walking, 2017).

Today, the mask has become an object of contemporary popular culture (the Halloween mask) and is part of the props of street manifestations, receiving a political dimension: the mask of Guy Fawkes, a mark of the protesters and a symbol of the Anonymous online community, inspired by the 2006 British film, V for Vendetta (Galimberti, 2021).

Once a prerogative of surgeons or laboratory assistants, beginning with March 2020, the sanitary mask has received a non-professional use, becoming an everyday object and even the symbol of the pandemic we are going through. The use of the mask joins the 'barrier gestures', the new codes of proxemic distances and the positioning of the body in space (Hall, 1959).

The large-scale use of sanitary masks in public spaces has had a significant impact on social and interpersonal relationships. Even if the sanitary mask is necessary and justified for the prevention of spreading the virus, its use has disrupted our interaction rites and it has become an obstacle to the normal flow of communication. Basically, by covering the lower half of our face a good part of the favourite area that makes visible and communicates the emotional state was eliminated from social interaction (Izard, 1977, p. 67-97). The face does not solely support the gaze,

with which we see the world, but it is also that privileged part of our body that is seen, above all, by others. The face is 'the place and time where communication is crystallised' (Le Breton, 2003, p. 106).

Beyond the physical discomfort generated by wearing it, the mask imposed by the health requirements was associated with the renunciation of individuality, and with uniformity (Shapiro & Bouder, 2021). Then, the wearing of the sanitary mask was blamed for diluting the quality of social interactions, for reducing people's ability to communicate and exchange emotional expressions (the potential negative effects were noted by the semiotician Massimo Leone: The Semiotics of the Medical Face Mask: East and West, 2020, by the anthropologist Pascal Lardellier: « Codivisation » des rites et « désordre » de l'interaction. Engagement et pare-engagement à l'ère de la distanciation, 2021 or by the neuroscientist Manfred Spitzer: Masked Education? The Benefits and Burdens of Wearing Face Masks in Schools during the Current Corona Pandemic, 2020).

By contrast, wearing a sanitary mask has highlighted the importance of facial expressions in human communication (Ekman & Rosenberg, 1998; Ekman, 2003). Disputes over the negative effects of masked social interaction have brought back to attention the analyses of the interactionist sociologist Erving Goffman (The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life, 1959) concerning the 'social face' – how individuals

stage their presence in public spaces, to make a good impression. The 'social face' is a kind of virtual mask, a symbolic device needed for playing different roles on the stage of social life, just like the masks of actors in ancient Greek and Roman theatres (Strauss, 1992). Facial movements are part of a 'dialectic of involvement' (Goffman, 1963, p. 34); facial expressions, gestures, and postures signal to the other the openness and intention to enter a communication relationship. In the context of the sanitary crisis, the mask is part of the 'para-involvement' rituals of avoidance and distancing (Lardellier, 2021, p. 107).

The half-mask represented by this sanitary protection device makes it impossible to read a large part of the human face. Attention must be focused on the upper part of the face, on the eyes, forehead, and eyebrows. The direction and intensity of the gaze or eye movements have become important means of nonverbal communication in public spaces, as a result of covering the lower part of the face (Chelcea, 2004). The Japanese have long been accustomed to wearing a sanitary mask in public spaces because the practice is inserted in a pre-existing cultural configuration and can be explained by a 'different ideology of the face' in interaction rituals (Leone, 2020, p. 49). In analysing the phenomenon of mask and masking, we must take into account the fact that the face, in turn, is a cultural, social and historical construct.

Studies of historical anthropology and cultural history of the face (Bakhtin, 1974; Courtine &

Haroche, 1988; Belting, 2017) have highlighted a progressive mutation of body representation, from the predominance of the 'lower body' in the Middle Ages to the 'appearance of the face' during the seventeenth century and new social behaviours where the individual's face holds the central place. From now on, the face has become the place of individuality and identity.

From this special importance of the face in Western culture derives a certain aversion to the mask and the negative social consequences of covering the face. In France in 2019, wearing a mask was banned as a result of violence during the 'yellow vest' demonstrations.

Divergent reactions to the obligation of wearing a sanitary mask as a means of combatting the virus may have their origin not only in the cultural representations of the face and in the rituals of interaction, but also in Western democratic traditions. Democracy in the time of coronavirus plainly revealed all its paradoxes and internal conflicts: on the one hand, wearing a mask is seen as a form of civic responsibility, and on the other hand, refusal to wear it is argued by the inviolability of civil rights and freedoms, personal autonomy, and the right to dispose of one's body. Once again, the practices associated with mask-wearing are tension-filled and massively ambiguous at all levels - from local to global, from communication to action, anthropology to politics, from symbolism to personal expression, from PR practice to social practice. The thematic tracks which we propose try to cover all these challenges. The conference papers will be opened by plenary interventions.

INAUGURAL LECTURES



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THEMATIC DIRECTIONS AND CONTACT ADDRESSES

Track 1. THE MASK. OBJECT AND SYMBOL

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Track 2. THE MASK. COMMUNICATION AND CONTAGION

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Track 3. HISTORIES OF DISSIMULATION, DISGUISE AND EXPOSURE

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Track 4. THE MASK. PSYCHOLOGICAL, SOCIAL AND POLITICAL EFFECTS

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Track 5. THE MASK. METAPHOR AND PRESENCE WITHIN THE INFORMATION UNIVERSE

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ABSTRACT FORMAT

The abstract should be limited at 500 words, and will be accompanied by 3-5 keywords, in Times New Roman format, size 12 points, 1.5 line spacing, and 5 bibliographic references. The document will include the name and surname of the author, the institutional affiliation, and track specification for which the abstract is submitted.

The conference papers will be presented in the following languages: English, French, Romanian. The papers will be presented offline, online or in a hybrid mode, depending on the epidemiological situation.

PARTICIPATION FEE

50 EUR - for the offline sections

TIMELINE

Deadline for abstract submission: **July 15, 2022**

Notification of abstract acceptance: **August 1, 2022**

Deadline for full paper submission: **November 1, 2023**

The abstracts and full papers will be peer reviewed. **The selected texts** will be published in volume at *Editura Universității din București / Bucharest University Press* and in the *Annals of the University of Bucharest Series Communication*. Note that for the special number of *Annals selection* - the full paper has to be send by 5th September 2022.

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