Chapter 6
Ubiquitous Self:
From Self-Portrait to Selfie

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ABSTRACT

In 2013, the Oxford Dictionaries announced "selfie" as the word of the year. The dictionary defined it as "a photograph that one has taken of oneself, typically one taken with a smartphone or webcam and uploaded to a social media website." Selfies are also a complex form of social interaction, an emerging aesthetics, thus having an irrevocable impact on self-portraiture. All visual culture revolves around the body and the body par excellence is the face. The 21st century portrait represents a kind of black mirror where we project ourselves into a kind of blindness. Mask and face are confused by an omnipresent multividuality in which the shield reveals itself and reveals other possible worlds. The face-mask melts in between Real and Virtual and the self becomes augmented.

INTRODUCTION

The face is a metonymy of the body (Belting, 2017). According to psychologist Michael Argyle, the closer we get to a person, the more the face appears independent from the rest: we are not so much surrounded by bodies but by faces that are constantly changing. In fact, we have a face, but we "mill and mold" it, we manipulate it, we create it and recreate it through mimicry (Argyle, 1975). A mask can either cover a face, substitute it or be separated from it. For example, when a face is painted, modified with make-up, or decorated, it becomes a sort of mask or a picture. Metaphorically we say that a person hides behind a 'mask', Maya's veil, an illusion that doesn't show one's true personality. In everyday life individuals never show themselves for the whole of what they really are, but wear multiple masks that, according to Pirandello, turn them into characters. Nowadays, we could say that they become their multiple performative *personae*. In common sense, that is closed to Pirandello's point of view, a mask is simply a mystification, a symbol of alienation, a sign of depersonalization and blasting of the Self into multiple identities. But it can also be a form of adapting to a context or social situation.

In response to the endless metamorphosis of the face, ancient funerary masks wanted to provide one image: the real "true face" and not a corpse one. The mask - magic element par excellence - sums up an individual while also suggesting his/her end. It is the face of each one, but it is also the face among other faces, a face that becomes one when it gets in touch with other faces looking or being looked at. Belting continues his analysis highlighting how the face does not only resemble the mask, but it also produces its own masks, influencing other faces or reacting to them (*Maskengesicht* = face-mask). Belting points out that the portrait-medium is a key moment for the emancipation of the subject. In fact, modernity is enclosed in the passage from icon to portrait, from the sacred Face of Christ to many faces of individual paintings. Instead, contemporary art gathers and collects all digital and ubiquitous masks acknowledging the typical phenomenon of our facial society (Macho, 1996), where the self is expanded and extended in a plural dimension.

The definition of 'portrait' states that it is the representation of a person considered in itself but not for its attributes or attributions, nor for its acts or for the relationships it is engaged in. In other words, the aim of the portrait is to return a self in itself and for itself; it resembles me, it addresses and engages me (Nancy, 2000). Unlike the icon, the portrait allows the relationship to be equal because there is a dialogue. Nonetheless, during the Enlightenment the link between mask and lie was accentuated with the birth of physiognomy - the science of faces that claims to reveal the character that lies behind facial features and mimicry. The ritual power of masks is therefore lost. They no longer represent a synthesis of the self, but they bear the social fictions, they are worn to turn oneself into something else. Western thought will then treat masks as found evidence, hoping to exorcise their suggestion of death. It is only in the twentieth century that, according to German philosopher Thomas Macho (1996), we began to "live in" a facial society that produces faces nonstop. At every street corner, on every billboard, advertisements haunt us with faces to the point that "without a face nothing dares to invade the space reserved for billboards".

We can assume that in our contemporary age mask and face crossbreed and produce another surface, putting aside the "sacral" sense of mortuary masks: together they conquer a digital 'smooth' surface. Today, if photography – by either analog or digital cameras- produced first and foremost masks, whereas painting – by method, forms and intentions- produced portraits of faces, the mask-face adapts to this new state of hybridization and representation, from cinema to virtual reality. In this paper I will use the term 'mask' and 'visage' as synonyms; the contact between mask and visage is a face-to-face that has transferred into a digital, open and ubiquitous territory. New technologies and their possibilities take the mask off the face and vice versa…

BACKGROUND (ETYMOLOGIES)

At this point, it seems important to clarify a few recurrent terms: person, face, visage and derivatives.

The term 'person' has its Latin etymology in the word "persona", that is the mask worn by theatre actors to intensify their voices in order to be heard even by far away audience members. making it person. Hence, the term in Stoic philosophy is used to refer to all persons, considered as actors-in-life due to playing the role given to them by God, destiny, and society. Therefore the term "person" identifies the one who's the subject of an action, the cause of his/her actions.

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