Faces or masks? Representations of oneself and others today

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Abstract

This article explores the conceptual and representational tensions between faces and masks in the context of contemporary visual and performative culture, and their implications for understanding presence, identity, and organization. Drawing on interdisciplinary sources—including aesthetics, anthropology, sociology, and photography theory—it examines how the face, as a site of recognition and vulnerability, is both revealed and concealed in modern practices of portraiture and image-making. The essay contrasts theatrical and photographic representation, especially in relation to authority and public image, and critiques the shift from symbolic portraiture to mediated ubiquity, as exemplified by figures like Steve Jobs. It interrogates how images, particularly photographs, construct social presence, mediate power, and contribute to the aesthetic regimes of organizational life. The paper argues for a reconsideration of visibility, resemblance, and ethical representation in contemporary visual culture, urging attention to those faces—and lives—that remain unseen or forgotten.

Keywords: Face and Mask; Representation; Visual Culture; Aesthetics and Organization; Photography; Power and Portraiture; Identity; Presence and Absence; Iconography; Organizational Imaginaries

"Masks are making a remarkable breakthrough on the dance stages of Avignon. Regularly used throughout the history of dance, and particularly in the 2000s by Boris Charmatz, Rachid Ouramdane, Christian Rizzo, and Marco Berrettini, these spectacular tools, the oldest in the world, question the face of movement by liberating the body," " writes critic Rosita Boisseau in Le Monde on July 12, 2025, a few days after the opening of the festival. It is curious that the critic does not mention the question of the face but rather the liberation of the body, even though she refers more to choreographers than to theater performances, where facial expression may be more important in terms of the actors' embodiment of the characters.

Why masks? Are faces frightening? Do we want to make people feel the presence of those who, unlike us, do not have faces? This choice of masks seems to run counter to a recent trend of introducing cameras and screens at the heart of the stage to show close-ups of faces, whose features and expressions escape us due to the distance, for example in Katie Mitchell's production of Miss Julie (2013) or several of Thomas Ostermaier's productions, who explains in an interview with Delphine Edy the meaning behind the staging of these images: "Theater ist Denken im dreidimensionalen Raum [theater is thinking in three-dimensional space] and I like to think in three dimensions. The presence of a third person in the theater creates a triangle, which means that there is indeed a third truth in our binary system. However, the third reality is completely repressed; it no longer exists in our two-dimensional world (books, television, computers, etc.). Yet the third possibility is extremely important (...)." (2021: 41).

This third possibility—the space and time of staging a person who exposes themselves to the gaze of others—exists, and yet this aesthetic question disappears from the questions we ask ourselves about modes of presence to others, and therefore about organization. Let's say that this is the question that perspective theorists (Baxandall, 1972) asked themselves about the place of man in the world. Therefore, making room for him and giving him a little moment of attention seems important to me in order to understand our situation, for several reasons that I will explain in turn.

First of all, the question of the faces we show and the faces we encounter confronts us with prohibitions or, at least, limits that we do not want to think about but which nevertheless haunt us.

Hans Belting (2017) has shown that, in the history of representation, particularly in theater, faces and masks have succeeded one another across cultures throughout history, as if the codes governing what can be shown of the actor and the character were changing. Several anthropological questions have been raised (Lévi-Strauss, 1963; Strathern, 1979) that refer to the act of exposing oneself to the gaze of others, to embodying a role or character (other than oneself), to being represented and transformed by this staging of oneself by others, all subjects relating to being and appearing that seem to be better addressed in other cultures than our own, where it takes on a form of artificial obviousness, as Goffman (2017) points out, because what do we have more precious to lose than face (Riot, 2021), that event that occurs one day in public and haunts us?

This vulnerability to public exposure explains the iconoclasm that runs from Plato to Emmanuel Lévinas. Thus Lévinas writes that, because of the importance he attaches to the face of the other, it must not be represented, as its image would then be nothing more than a simulacrum. He thus returns to the prohibition of representation contained in Deuteronomy (Nancy, 2010: 269). Since at least the Renaissance, in the West, it has

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been the role of art to resolve this difficulty by establishing a resemblance between the model and its portrait. However, it is situated in an order of reality where, according to Lévinas (2008: 107), this order of representation is a deception through which the artistic imagination "sets itself up as the knowledge of the absolute." Critics present art as an accurate and scientific description of reality that allows us to understand it, whereas, as Levinas writes: "Is not the function of art to not understand?" (Ibidem: 111).

Masks, on the other hand, do not offer such knowledge of reality. They mark a distance from it and, in a way, claim to be its simulacrum. Belting quotes Lévi-Strauss to explain the central role of masks in resolving these taboos in cultures other than our own, an analysis that can also be read, given the analyst's culture, in the context of our social organization: "In The Life of Masks, Claude Lévi-Strauss (writes): 'Masks play an essential role in origin myths and serve as illustrations for great narratives: 'A mask never exists for itself, but alludes to others, real or potential, that could have been substituted for it. It cannot be reduced to what it represents.' It also shares itself with that which it excludes. Like myth, the mask denies the existence of other masks by reacting to them, turning competition to its advantage or fighting it. Thus, the natives use it as a means of communication capable of forging relationships with distant relatives by transposing family ties onto symbolic and collective faces." (...) "The mask is a sign, yes. A language in the strict sense, no. The function of the mask is almost the opposite of that of the word, which serves to establish direct communication between two human beings. "The mask interrupts this communication in order to establish another one that plays out between different levels, to put it very generally, between nature and culture. The mask establishes participation or correspondence, not exchange." (Belting, 2017: 61)

The mask has the ability to be both the self and the other, and it interacts with other masks, losing its meaning without them. In any case, it introduces a dividing line between nature and culture, between the lawful and the unlawful, between day and night, and sometimes, superimposing these orders, between these different realities that intersect at the same time but in other spaces designated for this purpose. This is perhaps what gives Levinas reason to reject art as a reflection of reality, insofar as, as he pointed out as early as 1958, in our organized society, art is present everywhere and at all times without the meaning of this presence, and in particular the representation of the human face, and therefore both the self and the other, being made explicit. In some cases, such as portraits of powerful figures, this question of representation is raised.

For me, unlike Lévinas, art can help us understand what the mask only shows us in a different way: the face it represents. The face reveals our organization and our society as much as it reveals us as individuals. Photography is, like the third possibility mentioned by Ostermaier, a representation whose form is chosen, and we must be attentive to what it reveals to us. The choice of its representation also deserves critical analysis.

As Pascal notes, portraits indicate social status and importance. They establish and institute, and in this sense, they are a sign of vanity on the part of those who place themselves at the center of the world. However, this vanity is illusory, as he illustrates with the famous story of the first speech:

"A man is thrown by a storm onto an unknown island, whose inhabitants were struggling to find their king, who had gone missing; and, having a strong resemblance in body and face to this king, he is mistaken for him and recognized as such by all the people. At first he did not know what to do, but he finally decided to go along with his good fortune. He received all the respect that was shown to him, and he allowed himself to be treated as king." (First discourse).

Pascal explains in another text the constructed nature of all power, which he separates from the face and body of the person who embodies only the function:

"There are two kinds of greatness in the world: there is established greatness and natural greatness. Established greatness depends on the will of men, who have rightly believed that they should honor certain states and attach certain respects to them. Dignities and nobility are of this kind. In one country, nobles are honored, in another, commoners; in this one, the elders, in that one, the younger ones. Why is this? Because it has pleased men. The matter was indifferent before the establishment: after the establishment, it becomes just, because it is unjust to disturb it." (Pascal, 2011: 252-253)

While Pascal refers in particular to the risks associated with self-representation, portraiture, Port Royal and Philippe de Champaigne (Marin, 1970) reflect on this question of figurative portraiture in relation to earthly power. They emphasize that all powerful men imitate divine power in that they too play on absence and presence. Thus, the portrait "carries absence and presence" (Fragment 15/31, http://www.penseesdepascal.fr/Loi/Loi15-moderne.php).

The king's body is represented in his absence and embodies power. In reality, Marin notes, it is in his absence that the king's power imposes itself on people's

minds through his effigies, rituals and symbols, which manifest it in a form of ubiquity.

His figure is nothing more than that of a simple man, a fragile and fleeting shadow. What, then, is the meaning of the "portrait of the King" (Marin, 1981)? What, then, is the portrait of a great man if there is nothing to "show" and therefore nothing to see? Is it nothing more than the empty image of a mirage, or rather a "hidden presence" (Marin, 1995) that remains within us, commanding our respect or at least a form of mimicry, because we recognize ourselves in it as much as we see the other as ourselves (Riot, 2014)?

This question still arises today with regard to portraits of the great figures of our time (Riot and Deslandes, 2025, forthcoming), even though they no longer obey the same codes, or more precisely, even though they strive to subvert them by imposing a form of naturalness and normality on their public image. These portraits look back at us, as Jean-Luc Nancy writes: "It is not only the character (or person) represented who looks at us, but the portrait itself, the gaze in the portrait, is like a presence, a revisited legacy of the icon." (2000: 182-183) because "in seeing, I see, for optical reasons," writes Nancy; "in the gaze, I am brought into play. I cannot look without being looked at" (Ibidem: 75).

This reflection in the mirror, this identification with the portrait, raises questions about the attributes of power, posture, expression, and symbolic codes that today determine the legitimacy of the portrait and of the person depicted and presented to the public. They seem explicit, but this is only an appearance. Their functioning is not at all obvious from an aesthetic point of view (Taylor, 2002). These codes of presentation, defined by painting and sculpture since antiquity in the West, seem to be ignored or rather denied by social actors such as Steve Jobs. In the portraits of him that have been published, he seems to want to challenge the pose and codes of self-presentation in public (Goffman, 1977: 238). He rejects all symbols and signs of power, as if he derived it solely from himself. He stares the viewer in the eye, captured on the fly by the photographer in front of whom he did not want to pose (Studio Harcourt, 2010), like a moment snatched from those Hollywood films of artificial realism that Stanley Cavell said were "the moving image of skepticism" (Cavell, 1996: 242), the encounter between photorealism and the imagination of movie heroes, precisely what today, as yesterday, documentary realism in photography (Azoulay, 2012a/b: Lugon, 2001) questions by establishing a kind of civil contract between the one who is seen and the one who sees, which is presented to the audience (Agee and Evans, 2006). Photography has democratized portraiture, leaving an image of those whose lives were erased from society even during their lifetime (Riot, 2023). It is now commonplace to have your picture taken while posing.

Steve Jobs tears up this contract, like many others. Instead, he imposes one on his own terms, without explanation, relying solely on his personal charisma and the power that comes with personal success. In his portrait, he does not present himself, or rather, he is present only as an embodiment of the Apple brand, just like the icon and memes that circulate from screen to screen without depth, on the same level, without perspective and as if without staging. Everything seems to indicate that this image was taken without preparation, without intention, without background or ulterior motive, which makes its ubiquity even more impressive. The photographer, Albert Watson, later testified that he took this so-called "iconic" image on the fly, in an instant, as if this stolen moment were capable of revealing Steve Jobs' deep personality, in perfect transparency from self to other. He reinforces this thesis even further by pointing out that when Steve Jobs died, it was this photograph that was chosen by his family (and undoubtedly the company) to communicate about him, to evoke him after his passing. This lack of posing is also a pose, in my opinion, and it is the very device of the lack of posing and the erasure of the device specific to photography (Flusser, 2013), fragmented by digital screens (Pasternak, 2020; Rubinstein, 2020) that deserves study, because isn't this also how we share our images today, both our own and those of others? Can't we identify with this unposed figure?

This echoes Marin's observation: "The identification of the Self or the King ('I am the King; I am the State') occurs only through a series of glances and speeches governed by the system of representation. " (Marin, 1995: 188-189) and a new phenomenon that replaces the previous codes of representation with clothing and insignia, that of the age of mediagraphy evoked by Georges Didi-Huberman (2003), where they circulate everywhere and their dissemination seems to erase their significance.

They are now clues which, through their ubiquity, seem to want to escape the precariousness of the trace evoked by Schaeffer:

"The photographic art of the trace […] is essentially defined as a kind of play with the indexical sign, a set of subtle variations around the quasi-perceptual field. This art gives us an image that is nothing but a photographic image and shows itself as such, that is to say, it does not disappear "body and soul" into some communicational introjection, nor does it abolish itself in some fetishism of the pure icon: an impure and precarious image" (Ibidem: 204-205).

This choice of images without perspective and infinitely reproducible encourages us to reflect on the gap between image and photography and to ask ourselves, following Mitchell (2005) and Poivert (1996), what images want (Mitchell, Boidy, Cilins, and Roth, 2014) at a time when they have multiplied infinitely and are circulating. For there is indeed a will in images that escapes us.

This reflection on images, which is transdisciplinary from the outset, combining aesthetics, social sciences, and technology, already took place when photography first appeared, replacing painted portraits and making it possible to preserve traces that had previously been erased, such as family albums and the faces of people who have changed over time, and who disappeared in eras when infinite efforts were made to keep track of and preserve the imprint of the living and pass it on to those who were not yet born (De Font Réaulx, 2012; De Font Réaulx and Poivert, 2015).

This leads us to ask ourselves in what cases, under what circumstances, can the image of faces be seen even though photography and its ubiquity are (at least in appearance) free from the frameworks of representation present in the Western tradition of portraiture?

We need to think about this framework of experience, like others, because it situates our present between the past and the present, that of collective memory and the future. It is as if we do not take the time to do so, overwhelmed as we are by the omnipresence of images and the ease of their presence, as long as we do not seek to choose either their content or their context.

However, photographic images in particular bear the traces, the imprint of the living after their death. As such, they have something sacred about them. Jean-Christophe Bailly writes about the portrait of words in L'Apostrophe muette (1997: 113), which confronts us with "a gaze that is neither question nor answer but silence and stillness, witness to what was. " It is another story of the face after death, without a mask.

Belting evokes death masks as the origin of facial portraits, the ritual portrait of death, facing disappearance and preserving traces: "The history of the face has always been that of the image of man. The best known and most emblematic lineage of prehistoric death masks is the cult of the dead as it developed in Egypt, the cradle of the first great civilizations. From the third millennium BC onwards, a rich palette of iconic practices unfolded before our eyes. From portraits to full-length statues, all forms originated in the mummy buried in the tomb, hidden from view, while images of the dead

represented it on the outside. While the corpse was wrapped in bandages that concealed it rather than representing it, the position of the face was indicated by a mask fitted to the skull that seemed to look out through the eyes of the deceased. (2017: 159)

Our present has invented a different device, which has replaced the previous ones by erasing the body in favor of the image, where it is light that traces the imprint. Nevertheless, it has also inherited the previous devices, whose materiality we should not forget.

This is what Jean-Marie Schaeffer reminds us of when he emphasizes that photography is not the result of a direct imprint but requires "the intervention of an intermediate physical element: the photonic flux": "Photography is a remote imprint; it is situated from the outset in a spatial tension that implies the absence of any direct contact between the imprinting agent and the imprint. In other words, before it is possibly a matter of mirrors, the photographic image is always a matter of distance." (1987: 17)

This is why the question of intention and the forms it takes in the mind of the image's creator (Baxandall, 1985) takes center stage, as it establishes a form of responsibility: that of choosing the perspective. Let us remember that images bring to the present and make present those whom others have sought to erase (Didi-Huberman, 2003).

Let us consider that representations of faces should also represent the figures of those we do not see (Mann, 2024; Meiselas, 1998) and those who do not yet exist (Broome, 2012) because they matter. As strikingly illustrated by the work of Denis Roche, who "writes on the image" (Calle-Gruber, 2009), photographic portraits place us at the crossroads of several worlds, as conduits, witnesses to this passage from a book that plays on autobiography and family portraiture, in which he evokes a witness commenting on an image:

"In the foreground: Eugène and Roger, Estelle's brothers. Estelle, who gave me this photo in 1978, commented: "You see, this photo is exactly my age, it's 80 years old: everyone in it is dead, and yet I'm in it: I'm in the womb of my mother, Victorine, who's about to give birth to me. Estelle died three months ago." (1981 : 8).

This witness, who was in her mother's womb at the time the photograph was taken, has since passed away and commented on the image for the author, making him the repository of an invisible presence. Such was the vision of Lewis Hine and the pioneers of so-called social photography (Lugon, 2001). They made it a document of

Humanity. The same is true for those we don't know, or who don't yet exist. They're not indifferent to us, and as soon as we can see them, their face, present before our eyes, becomes essential to materialize the political choices we make today for tomorrow. Let's not forget that the face is the reflection of our world, which also includes our imaginary worlds.

As an exergue to Olivier Rolin's *Extérieur Monde* (2021), a book in which he retraces the peregrinations of a lifetime, we find this sentence by another writer: "A man takes on the task of drawing the world. Over the years, he fills space with images of provinces, kingdoms, mountains, gulfs, ships, houses, instruments, stars, horses and people. Shortly before he dies, he discovers that this patient labyrinth of lines traces the image of his face." Borges, El Acedor.

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