



The dialectics of masks: the game of concealment and revelation in the work of an actor

A dialética das máscaras: o jogo de ocultação
e revelação no trabalho do ator

José Benedito Almeida Júnior¹

ABSTRACT

This study aims to discuss mask artifacts used in religious rituals and art, under the perspective of revelation and concealment dialectics. This dialectical phenomenon presents different ontological and psychological properties, because religious ritual masks have deep meanings and effects on individuals and on the community, losing their effects in other circumstances. Finally, based on this distinction, we shall present a brief analysis of the role of masks in *Commedia dell'arte* and in the work of an actor.

Keywords: Masks. Rituals. *Commedia dell'arte*.

RESUMO

*Este artigo tem por objetivo discorrer sobre os artefatos máscaras utilizados em rituais religiosos e na arte, sob a perspectiva da dialética da revelação e ocultação. Esse fenômeno da dialética apresenta diferentes características ontológicas e psicológicas, pois os rituais de máscaras nas religiões possuem profundos significados e efeitos sobre os indivíduos e sobre a comunidade, sendo superficiais nos outros casos. Apresentaremos, por fim, com base nesta distinção, uma breve análise do papel das máscaras na *Commedia dell'arte* e o trabalho do ator.*

*Palavras-chave: Máscaras. Rituals. *Commedia dell'arte*.*

1.
Professor at Universidade
Federal de Uberlândia
Institute of Philosophy
postgraduate program.
ORCID: [http://orcid.org/
0000-0001-5801-7284](http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5801-7284).
E-mail:
jbeneditoalmeida@gmail.com

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Primitive use of masks is associated with religious rituals. Its use, however, spread into other social phenomena, such as festivals and theater, as toys and heroes' masks. In all cases there is a phenomenon we call the dialectics of masks: the game of concealment and revelation. In this paper we will focus on the first three cases.

Masks are characterized, on the one hand, by the revelation of literary, folk and other similar entities; and in religions, by the revelation of beings. On the other hand, they are characterized by the concealment of the person who wears the mask. Therefore, while hiding the person, it unveils entities or divine beings. Dialectic establishes itself either way, because one cannot exist without the other; in these cases, literary or divine beings only manifest themselves by use of masks and through an actor in literature or folklore, and a shaman or sorcerer in religion. This similarity makes it look like the same phenomenon, but, as we shall see throughout this work, the religious experience of the dialectics of masks is very particular, because of its psychological and social implications. The first case makes one think of deception or representation, because the actor have not ceased being who he is, he has only impersonated an entity, whereas in the second case the person gives way to divine beings, not as a simulation or representation, but as a presence of this being.

The fundamental issue at this stage of the work is that ritual masks are symbolic artifacts, i.e., they transcend allegory or representation. We base our definition of symbols on Jungian thought: symbols have a deeper meaning than signs or signals, which indicate exactly what they describe, whereas symbols indicate different elements than what they seem to present:

A term or image is symbolic when it means more than it denotes or expresses. [...] Because there are innumerable things beyond the range of human understanding, we constantly use symbolic expressions and images when referring to them [...]. But this conscious use of symbolism is only one aspect of a psychological fact of great importance: we also produce symbols unconsciously and spontaneously in our dreams (JUNG, 1976, pp. 185-186).

The language of myths and dreams is par excellence a symbolic language: they should not be understood literally, but correctly interpreted. Why, as rituals bring life to what myths recount, all elements in a ritual are, therefore, symbolic – they are more than what they seem at first glance.

From the phenomenological viewpoint, we may say that masks are symbolic, i. e., their form, designs, paintings and even their texture do not refer us to what is apparent, but go

beyond that. Such concept of symbol is based on Carl Gustav Jung's works:

Thus a word or an image is symbolic when it implies something more than its obvious and immediate meaning. It has a wider “unconscious” aspect that is never precisely defined or fully explained. As the mind explores the symbol, it is led to ideas that lie beyond the grasp of reason (JUNG, 1988, p. 20-21).

In view of the distinction between sacred and profane (or artistic) masks, we will briefly explain these two different categories.

Sacred masks

Our first issue is to define what a mask is. It is often assumed that mask artifacts are objects put on the head to cover a person's face, as stated in Houaiss dictionary definition of mask: “artifact made of cardboard, cloth, wood, leather, etc. used to cover the face for disguise [...]” (2011. Our translation). Such concept of mask can be observed in imagetic representations from ancient Greek theater, in which the mask was thus used, also from popular festivals, in which we find the use of an object that covers only the revelers face. There are other concepts of mask, however, embedded in a broader scheme, e.g., the masks used in *Kápa*, *Iakuigâde* and *Apapaatai* rituals that cover the priest entire body, as we see in the works *Os filhos do Sol: histórica e cosmologia de um povo Karib: os Kurâ-Bakairi* (2003) and *Apapaatai: rituais de máscaras no Alto Xingu*. (2008). It is made up of a long skirt, a body and sleeves that cover the shaman entire face. Besides, there is the “face” of the mask, which defines more precisely which entity will be embodied there. Another similar mask is the *Obaluaiê*, from Yoruba mythology. We do not use, in this case, the word representation for this phenomenon, because this is not a figuration of the being, but – from the point of view of the sacred – the being is present, it is not *represented*.

Profane masks

When we use the term “profane” we refer to Eliade work *The sacred and the profane* (2010), in which the author distinguishes two modes of being in the world: the *homo religiosus*, who does not desacralize nothing in the world, and the Western European man, who radically desacralizes the cosmos.

Therefore, the author conceives the distinction between the sacred and the profane: “The reader will very soon realize that *sacred* and *profane* are two modes of being in the world, two existential situations assumed by man in the course of his history” (ELIADE, 1987, p. 14).

As for profane masks, we can say that they manifest themselves in two large groups: in theater and in traditional festivals. In this work, we will not tackle the phenomenon of masks in the second group. We are only interested in the use of masks in theater, for it also comes from religious rituals, but it has incorporated elements from traditional festivals. Religious rituals seem to be in a performance; however, they are mystical, numinous experiences, e.g., the liturgy of the Eucharist in the Catholic Church: it is a magical ritual, in which the entity of the priest is replaced by the being of Christ; the priest becomes in that moment *persona Christi*, not as an actor, but as a clergyman: the entity gives way to the being. The same happens in the *apapaatai* and *kápa* rituals, in the rituals of spiritism and candomblé during possessions.

Ancient Greek theater masks, at least in the Western experience, set the benchmark of masks in theater. Brandão observes that the *prósopon* mask has multiple ritualistic functions, but two groups usually synthesize these uses. In the first one, the mask protects against evil forces; in the second, it is the means by which happens the transfer to the bearer of the powers and properties of the beings they represent. In this case the author affirms that: “The *hipókhités* in ecstasy and enthusiasm is an alter-ego of Dionysus, because the mask transferred to him all magical properties of the god” (BRANDÃO, 1992, p. 57. Our translation).

Despite this religious origin, the theater and therefore the masks as well were used to stage profane performances. According to Brandão, Aeschylus was the first who painted the masks to represent the human form, introducing also hair and beard when necessary for a better characterization. Although the theater touches religious matters, they are no longer made in the same sense of the numinous. Brandão observes that there has been an abstraction in theater mask making that led theater and its masks to a path of their own:

The tragic mask seeks to translate the pathetic and the pain: deep wrinkles, contracted eyebrows, wide-open eyes that bulge, open mouth. Initially individual, the mask as time went by took a general aspect, i.e., started to represent not an individual but a type: king, tyrant, queen, messenger... (BRANDÃO, 1992, p. 57. Our translation).

The rites

There are countless rites in all cultures, however, we can highlight some key elements that are present in all rites. We highlight, then, time, because there is a periodicity or there are occasions when rites are performed; space, because rites take place where a hierophany occurred or was invoked; words are usually part of the rites, both for the ideas they convey, as for their utterance through voice; chants, including, besides words, melody and rhythm; gestures; dances; clothes; food etc. Rites are ultimately linked to a series of elements with infinite variation, but are always connected to the sacred.

There is undoubtedly a huge similarity of phenomena between theater and religious rituals. Therefore, they may apparently be similar; however, there is a big difference from the ontological viewpoint between these cultural phenomena.

RITUAL	TEATRO
Myth: the stories	Dramaturgical text: the stories
Rite: stories brought to life	Play: performance of stories
Supernatural beings	Literary entities
Priests, sorcerers, shamans and others	Actors and actresses
Specific words	Words from the text
Gestures, chants, dances, uttered words	Acting
Masks (whenever there is any)	Masks (whenever there is any)

The comparison leads us to think, at first, that this can be the same activity; however, in the light of science and philosophy of religion they are ontologically very different activities. Rituals refer to the sacred, to the *completely foreign*, whereas theater is a ludic activity that may have a moral, ethical, political sense, or even provide strong psychological experiences to the actors – its nature, however, is completely different from a religious ritual activity. In summary, religious rituals are *myths brought to life*; plays are *representations of characters and situations*. To understand better these differences, we resorted to some theorists who study the phenomenon of the sacred.

Rituals comprise gestures, repeated words both written and spoken, dances, chants, liturgical vestments, and, of course, in many cases artifacts such as masks are expressions

that break the unholy time and space, making the manifestation of the sacred possible, i.e., hierophanies. In this regard, masks have a dialectical form: they conceal the priest, sorcerer or shaman to reveal the being. It is not about, then, a disguise or a “superstition” – as supposes the Modern Man – but the presence of the sacred in the midst of the profane.

Understanding this viewpoint depends on Rudolf Otto’s work, *The sacred* (1936), in which the author sought to restore this concept original sense, associating it with religions and no longer just with the meaning philosophers have given it. For the philosophers, laws have become sacred, reason has become sacred, a profession becomes sacred etc., what reduced the ontological character of religious experiences to concepts that reason can understand and enunciate. Otto thus defines as characteristic of the sacred, firstly, the numinous: this is the power of the gods; the transcendent that manifests itself in the immanent. This is not a phenomenon restricted to reason; on the contrary, reason is not able to determine this experience depth. There are countless narratives of mystical experiences people from all cultures have gone through. The experience of the sacred occurs thus only in the religious context, according to Otto:

It will be our endeavour to suggest this unnamed Something to the reader as far as we may, so that he may himself feel it. There is no religion in which it does not live as the real inner most core, and without it no religion would be worthy of the name. It is pre-eminently a living force in the Semitic religions, and of these again in none has it such vigour as in that of the Bible. [...] For this purpose I adopt a word coined from the Latin numen. [...] I shall speak then of a unique numinous category of value and of a definitely numinous state of mind, which is always found wherever the category is applied.” (1936, p. 6).

Ritual masks do not have thus the same ontological character as artistic masks because they are numinous artifacts. The *kurá-bakairi* get rid of the masks after they use them in their rituals, and so do the *wauja* of the *apapaatai* ritual. They are the result of hierophanies, i.e., manifestations of the sacred, both in their making and use during rituals. Although an artist may consider his artifacts and knowledge sacred, they are within the field of the profane. We revisit then Otto’s concept by saying that when an artist creates a mask he might be inspired, but such activity does not have by far the same ontological character of the artisan when he makes a ritual mask. After all, he is within a religious tradition that must be strictly followed so that artifact might take the place of a hierophany. Since its making, until it is used and subsequently discarded,

a ritual mask should be considered a numinous artifact very different from a profane artistic or handcrafted mask. It is like a religious temple and a common building, a sacred food and a common food, or sacred words and profane words.

In theater, the whole *mise en scène* – as well as the costumes, the scenery and, in our case, specifically, the masks – are in the field of signs or allegories: they represent exactly what they seem. Revisiting Jung (1988), one cannot produce a symbol consciously; therefore, if the scenographer or even the actor make a hermetic interpretation, putting certain elements that refer to a different idea, it will be an allegory, not a symbol. The symbol is restricted to activities of the unconscious, in the case of dreams or mythical narratives.

In this sense, we would like to ponder about some of Caillois interpretations on the phenomenon of masks in religious rituals. Although we consider it an extensive and well-accomplished work, we may say that Caillois based it on evolutionary anthropology concepts; he thus clearly distinguishes primitive from civilized societies, only ascribing the ecstasy of religious rituals to the latter, as we may observe in the following passage:

May it be asserted that the transition to civilization as such implies the gradual elimination of the primacy of *ilinx* and *mimicry* in combination, and the substitution and predominance of the *agôn-alea* pairing of competition and chance? Whether it be cause or effect, each time that an advanced culture succeeds in emerging from the chaotic original, a palpable repression of the powers of vertigo and simulation is verified. (CAILLOIS, 2001, p. 97).

The problem with this notion, as he will state at the end of the paragraph, is that it considers the religious experiences of many peoples “madness and delirium,” indicating that there is a process of undifferentiation between the shaman and the supernatural entity equal to the process of delirium in someone from our contemporary society. He also highlights that this process is achieved through the sound of drums, intake of narcotics, physical exhaustion caused by dances and heavy garments etc. Therefore, the mystical state would be achieved through physical resources. This overview of religion in “primitive societies” renders it more difficult to understand the phenomenon of the sacred from Otto’s viewpoint, because it assumes that in our society the same does not occur or, if it occurs, it is a delirium, not a sacred experience.

It is in this sense that the paper written by Góis (2012), following the thought of Caillois, considers the experience of a certain contemporary theater game has the same effect of a religious mask ritual. In his paper, Góis describes the game of

the “birth of the mask” (2012, p. 83) and ends the description citing the following passage from Caillois:

He only learns that it is inoffensive, familiar, and all-too-human when he has it in his hands and in his furor uses it to frighten others. After the delirium and frenzy have subsided, the performer lapses to a state of dullness and exhaustion that leaves him only a confused, blurred memory of what has transpired. (2001, p. 88)

It happens that Caillois insists on using terms like “delirium” and “madness” to describe phenomena of the sacred experienced by the peoples he considers primitive. The modern man considers thus the experience of the sacred an experience of madness, which, however, disappears when the ritual ends. Caillois is describing a religious ritual in which the priest “[...] maddened and delirious, really believes that he is the god as whom he disguised himself, cleverly or crudely, in the beginning.” (2001, p. 88). We notice, then, that the expression “delirious, really believes that he is...” demonstrates that the author does not consider the possession or shamanic ecstasy a fact, but only a delirium, something unreal. In *Matter of Heart*, a documentary on the work and life of Jung, Marie Louise Von Franz begins saying that in her first contact with the founder of analytical psychology, he told her the story of a girl who had gone to the moon. She thought that it was a metaphor or allegory, but he insisted: no, she really went to the moon! The modern man cannot understand the shamanic experience, because in his limited psychic experience, he considers it a simulacrum, a deception that became a delirium, something thus “unreal.”

Another aspect of the aforementioned quote that deserves attention is that Góis uses a passage describing religious rituals and comparing it with the experience of theater. Caillois uses “performer” for a shaman, a sorcerer or priest who dressed and lived the experience of the sacred. Although an actor may have lived a psychologically profound experience compared to a laboratory as described, it is not by far a sacred experience: it is only at the level of the profane. In Góis’ words:

If we examine a contemporary practice of use of the expressive mask, it also reveals itself as in a mystical tradition. The game of the birth of the mask, in theater, brings to the scene epileptic actors, vocal contortions, i.e., vertigo in its pure state (2012, p. 81. Our translation).

An elucidating comparison would be this: a shaman may have a vision, a mystical experience within his religion; a person under the influence of alcohol or other narcotic may also

have something resembling a mystical experience, however, the former will be nothing but a delirium. What is the difference then? In the first case, we have a symbolic experience, associated with a mythical and ritual tradition in which the sacred manifests itself. In the second case, we have a delirium, which might have a psychological relevance for the individual, but not for the society.

Our objective in this section then was to distinguish radically any profane from sacred activities. Even if the comparison might be very interesting and might be explored in many fields of knowledge, we must distinguish the sacred from the profane. In the same sense, we cannot judge from a rational point of view mystical experiences as delirium, as “believe that it is,” but as “the shaman is the entity.” This is not a game of make-believe that reaches the limits of delirium, but rather an ontologically different experience from any profane activities.

Let us now pass on to the masks used in the *Commedia dell'arte*, whose characteristic, according to our sources, is the clear distinction between actor and character. It is, therefore, a professional activity and not a religious or similarly religious activity.

*Commedia dell'arte*²

It is in the sense of the autonomy of theater as a language apart from liturgical drama – even though it uses religious themes or provides intense psychological experiences to the actors and the public – that *Commedia dell'arte* stands out. According to papers we shall examine in the sequence of this work, the actors of the *Commedia* did not expect that their work was similar to religious rituals: there was a conscience of the artist's profession. The high degree of specialization is thus highlighted:

Comedians used to work for years to improve their body and vocal technique, usually dedicating an entire life to the representation of a single stock character. Masks were used for characterization without their own expressiveness, leaving the mouth and the lower part of the face uncovered and the actors were responsible for giving them life through their performances. Without their technical virtues and artistic sensibility, we discern only a sterile and repetitive scheme, for the strength of the *commedia delle maschere* lies in the actor using his creativity and vigor in the specialization of a stock character. It is assumed that over time there was an intense appropriation of the character by the actor, who could be elevated to the category of great performer. Besides preserving

2.

Commedia dell'arte is a form of popular theater that flourished in the 15th century in Italy. It has very peculiar characteristics, such as certain plots and characters, the use of masks, costumes and a peculiar body expression.

the tradition of types, the mask established a direct communication with the audience, because it presented more or less fixed character traits, already decoded and recognized by the audience (FREITAS, 2008, p. 67. Our translation).

Góis paper makes an important analysis of images. In the first group, on page 81, the actors are facing the masks; in the second group, pages 83 and 84, actors and masks are facing the observer. It is not just an aesthetic choice, but a clear message: I am the actor and this is the character! There is thus a clear distinction between actor and character:

When dissociating our way of seeing, we notice two figures independent of each other. Maybe the fact that actors spent many years representing the same character could be one of the reasons why in these images the painter or actor try to make clear that the mask is not the actor, try to distinguish the character from the actor. It seems the beginning of a movement to end the distinction between creator and creature. Between the vertigo of deception and the simulacrum of representation. The actor's face is serene, wise, deified and the mask is ephemeral, fragile and evanescent. In the *Commedia dell'arte*, deformed masks are paired with beautiful ladies in love, the game of seduction and repulsion is the heart of the new art. The vertigo of believing to be the character should be forgotten so that the actor would not be mistaken and punished for his character actions. The simulacrum is brought to the stage, the make believe, because he is conscious of following a profession persecuted. If previously deception should be praised in classical representation of masks, or even in buffoon masks, with *Commedia dell'Arte* simulation becomes the rule (GÓIS, 2012, p. 84. Our translation).

Góis points out that the actors of the *Commedia* highlighted its difference from the former theater by the way they portrayed themselves with their masks. As we observed, its concepts of simulation and deception are appropriate for the field of theatrical representation, but not for the field of religious experiences – especially rites in which masks are used – because these are not simulations, but real experiences of what the myths recount. In the theater, however, this idea that the actor is not the character, does not think and does not behave as himself is fundamental to the theatrical art.

This distinction, however, is not real for the audience. There is a tendency to confuse the actor with the character, even more when the actor specialized in playing a character or a character type. Photos analyzed by Góis seem to indicate the necessity to distinguish, for the audience, the character action from the actor; according to the quote cited, the author even points out that this must happen for the actor not be mistaken

and punished for his character actions. We shall make here a short remark about Brazilian soap opera actors who play characters that can be considered “bad” and are persecuted in the streets because people think the actor and his character are one and the same. This is certainly due to high acting quality, which brings deception to an extreme degree of perfection. In theater the effect is exactly the same.

We will also propose a comparison on deception. In the *Paradox of the comedian*³, Denis Diderot (1973) also upholds the distinction between actor and character; however, this separation must be dissembled in acting, so that the audience do not notice it. According to Diderot’s theory, the actor only mimics the character emotions, he does not feel it – for how could he then play the same character many times? In the real experience of passions, when we repeatedly feel the same emotions we become numb and they slowly mean nothing anymore. Actors thus mimic feelings and the audience notices it:

All these emotions he has given to you. The actor is tired, you are unhappy; he has had exertion without feeling, you feeling without exertion. Were it otherwise the player’s lot would be the most wretched on earth; but he is not the person he represents; he plays it, and plays it so well that you think he is the person; the deception is all on your side; he knows well enough that he is not the person. (DIDEROT, 1883, p. 17).

The mask in theater may have the effect of increasing this illusion that lays hold of the audience, confusing the actor with the character, however, the actors themselves should be aware that such illusion is all on the audience side: they must be aware the whole time of their actions concealing feelings, passions and intentions.

Final considerations

We may conclude that the use of masks is common in many social phenomena, such as religious rituals, theatrical performances, festivals and others, and that their meanings are different in each of these uses. We may, however, distinguish two groups: the use of masks in religious rituals, in which the dialectics of masks is established in the game of concealment of the person and revelation of the being, and the use of masks in other cases, in which the dialectics is established in the game of concealment of the person and revelation of entities. This difference between being and entity is proposed in view of the symbolic character of ritual masks and the allegorical or metaphorical character of other masks.

3. In French theater, especially in the 18th century, a comedian was equivalent to what we call today an actor.

In the case of the *Commedia dell'arte* actors assume that their art are different from ritual mystical experience. The actor is not being replaced by another being, but by a literary entity – highly associated with the folklore, there is not the slightest doubt – and this implies a art specialization mentality. This situation is favorable to better understand the artistic work itself, as well as to understand the psychic depth of mystical religious experiences – in the case studied in this work, rituals using masks, which cannot be mistaken by artistic experience or festival revelries.

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