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On Mask-Ocracy

Paul O’Kane

... every word also a mask

F W Nietzsche¹

Pre-Face

In Spring 2019 I gave a lecture titled ‘The Carnival of Popularity’ to art undergraduates in London. Towards the end of the lecture I began speaking about the concept of ‘mask-ocracy’,² a neologism forged in the midst of writing the lecture. I published a version of the lecture as an article in *Third Text Online*,³ then edited and rewrote it, transforming it into the paper I gave at the November 2019 AICA International Congress on Art, Nationalism and Populism in Berlin.⁴ That paper subsequently became ‘The Carnival of

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, Oxford World’s Classics, 1998, p 173, aphorism 289

² While this neologism may appear to be a hyperbolic or rhetorical conceit, of the kind for which both Jean Baudrillard and Walter Benjamin (referenced below) are known, it is deployed here as an intellectual gambit that aims and hopes to gain traction and justification as we seek to piece together new ways of progressing as a society, and as a world, in times of accelerating change and uncertainty.

³ Paul O’Kane, *The Carnival of Popularity*, <http://thirdtext.org/OKane-carnival>

⁴ ‘The Carnival of Popularity Part II – Towards a Mask-Ocracy’ is a slightly edited version of a paper given by Paul O’Kane to the 52nd International AICA Congress, Germany, 2019 (a project by AICA Germany in cooperation with the German Federal Cultural Foundation). The congress title and theme were: *Art Criticism in a Time of Populism and Nationalism*, and Paul O’Kane gave his paper under the title: ‘The Carnival of Popularity – Wrestling the Popular from Populism’ on the

Popularity Part II: Towards a Mask-Ocracy’, also published on Third Text Online. In what follows I explore ways in which the neologism ‘mask-ocracy’ might be justified, interpreted and deployed.

Tears, Gas & Mask

The mask is one of the most ancient and pervasive artistic and ritualistic devices, something with which the arts have an ancient and strong affinity. The mask, which might equally remind us today of those ‘emojis’ that attempt to stand in for our complex twenty-first-century emotions, has also long stood in as the well-known symbol representing dramatic art.⁵ However, all of art is, we might argue, a play of masks and maskings. Consider, for example, the technical effects of an academically trained oil painter, those of a graffiti stencil artist, or just watch an interview with the sphynx-like Andy Warhol. But what do masks have to do with the concept of ‘democracy’ implicitly nestled within the neologism of our title – ‘mask-ocracy’? Since Europe’s revolutionary late eighteenth century, democracy has been modernity’s central political project. This democracy has never been a given but always an aspiration, fought for and hard won, something fragile, incomplete and in flux, subject to historical development, often under threat and always in need of protection, preservation, strengthening and renewal – something so mercurial and contingent in fact that we may even wonder whether democracy is a permanent and necessary fixture of modernity, or even – in more current parlance – if it is a ‘thing’ at all?

Modern democracy’s desirability might stem from the vulnerability we feel when confronted by modernity. Democracy aims and promises to protect us from other, less

morning of 4 October, 2019 at Berlinische Galerie Alte Jakobstraße 124–128, 10969 Berlin, as part of a panel titled *The Public and the Popular*, hosted by Alexander Koch.

⁵ Artist Jonathan Baldock made much of the play between masks, emojis and ancient cuneiform writing, in his exhibition ‘Facecrime’ at Camden Arts Centre, London, 12 April – 23 June 2019.

modern, more corrupt, more unfair and more unequal political systems, while mitigating modernity's most inhuman and exploitative tendencies. In this protective role, democracy may already begin to resemble a mask, though perhaps a shield would be a more fitting analogy. However, a mask is far more than just protective, and there are many different forms and functions of masks to consider.

On the day before I gave my own paper at the 2019 AICA congress in Berlin (see Pre-Face above), a sadly memorable moment occurred when the AICA representative from Hong-Kong began to cry while speaking. They explained, through tears, that protestors in Hong Kong had just been banned from using masks, as police tried to quell rising tides of protest. Although much of the news coming out of Hong Kong had been bad for a while *this* news was particularly upsetting to the speaker. It might be worth considering why.

Protestors might wear masks in order to physically protect face, eyes, nose, throat and lungs from gas, as well as to hide their identities from cameras augmented with facial recognition software. However, masks also have an inevitably carnivalesque function, in that they allow protestors to step beyond their usual or real identity and manifest a greater sense of possibility, change, exchange and renewal. Masks, in the context of the Hong Kong protests, demand that modern democracy live up to its implicit promise to accommodate all of the social change and complexity that modernity brings, along with its promise of wealth, health and technological progress.

In their simplification and immobilisation of a human face, masks might also imply – albeit by counter-example – the true complexity of our shifting and evolving underlying identities. In other words, masks appear to cry out for change by projecting a faceless fixity, an image of impasse that must be overcome by negotiations (of one kind or another) in order to enable and enter a new era of progress, the arrival of which will allow those masks necessary to the period of conflict to be set aside.

The wearing of a mask can be read as a gesture of revolt and therefore of disdain for an incumbent authority, but it also proclaims disregard for established ideas of identity. By alluding to the arbitrariness of any given identity, the mask also signifies that any current social structure or hierarchy is never fixed but always in play and up for grabs. Wearing a mask, we might feel we can become anyone or anything, whereas given our familiar and vulnerable face we are more likely to delimit who and what we know ourselves to ‘really’ be and therefore restrict what it is possible for us to become.

The banning of masks, though difficult for authorities to enforce, suggests the compound negation of all the potential and desired progress and possibility outlined above, and we might suspect that this compound negation was the stimulus for the tears of the speaker witnessed at the congress. Tears are generally accepted as a sign of authenticity, though some are of the notorious ‘crocodile’ variety, and yet others are artfully conjured by skilful actors. However, seeing mascara really run, in a graphic illustration of the emotional disruption to the Hong Kong speaker’s best-laid congress plans, it was clear to all present that these tears transmitted an affective political authenticity (one rooted deeper perhaps than either face or mask) to which everyone present responded with warmth, empathy and support.

Mask, Media & Mediation

Today, using the intricate trickery of mediating technology we might make ourselves appear and disappear, genie-like, in any number of remote virtual environments. We might also augment our appearance online, perhaps using our real face transformed by make-up; an image of our face reconfigured by means of an App; or an avatar to stand in for us in various virtual spaces, groups, chats and forums. Where there is media there is mediation, we might say, and where there is mediation there is – we might further suggest – some form of mask, masking, or masquerade. Modernity, mediation and masks may have a special

interrelationship. We might recall coming across writing related to this idea in two well-known potted histories of modernity, one by Walter Benjamin and the other by Jean Baudrillard. The former, in his essay ‘The Work of Art in The Age of Mechanical Reproduction’ deftly lays out, on one or two pages, a brief history of reproductive processes that gradually transformed and eventually supplanted the ancient, and perhaps original valuation of art as something grounded in a cult of authenticity.⁶ Baudrillard in turn (perhaps responding to Benjamin), in his essay ‘Simulations and Simulacra’ produced what he called a ‘procession of simulacra’.⁷

Between them these texts historicise the increasingly modern tendency for art to pursue relatively ignoble habits of mechanical reproduction and dissemblance, contingent upon and enabled by technological progress and aided by a secular culture of modernity that is motivated by ideas of individual freedom, free trade etc. In both cases we gain a sense of possibly Platonic, perhaps Christian and certainly virtuous, values of truth, goodness, reality and authenticity becoming degraded, discarded or lost (though not necessarily bewailed) in the process of modernisation.⁸ Correspondingly, the mask might be read today as a key example of a modern ascendancy of dissemblance gradually supplanting more Christian or Platonic values of virtue, goodness, reality and truth. However, any ethnographic museum will soon remind us (as the Paris Trocadero famously reminded that most modern of painters, Pablo Picasso) of the mask’s secure place at the heart and origin of *every* human society, modern or not, and thus at the heart and origin of every art.

⁶ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, Schocken Books, New York, 1968.

⁷ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, Semiotext(e), New York, 1983.

⁸ We might also invoke Max Weber’s allusions to modern ‘disenchantment’ at this point.

Deadpan & Poker Face

Our faces are often, and are perhaps always, masks that conceal how and what we are, as a whole, leading and misleading others into thinking they grasp who or what we are or feel at any given moment. We give emphasis to the face as a kind of notice board on which signs of our current feelings might be temporarily hung, and yet, despite its privileged status as perhaps our primary signifying organ, a face can only make a partial and selective representation of all that we are and feel at any particular moment. The face too is a mask, albeit an unusually mercurial one. The face, and the infinitely nuanced eyes that often master its messages, remains inadequate and misleading not only in what it presents to be read but also in how it might be misread by any of many diverse readers.

This might make us pause and wonder about the limits and possibilities of information, communication, and understanding *per se*.⁹ After all, it may well be that our abilities to communicate and understand are over-estimated according to a certain, all-too-modern hubris. Surely, on reflection, it is not verity and accuracy that rule our social interactions but, rather, infinitely inventive forms of mask and masking that reign over every exchange.¹⁰

We might like to think of our ‘real’ face as something other than, and perhaps truer than, a mask, and yet we are all aware of moments in which we feel our face to be operating as or as akin to a mask. If we analyse these moments we might acknowledge that every face becomes a mask whenever it changes, in the blink of an eye, a rush of red to the cheek or a blanching

⁹ With regards to ‘understanding’, it is worth noting that the cover design for Simon O’Sullivan and David Burrows’ current, popular and influential book *Fictioning: The Myth-Functions of Contemporary Art and Philosophy* shows an indicative artwork/slogan that reads: ‘THR S NT & NVR HS BN NYTHING T UNDERSTND !’ (sic). See Simon O’Sullivan and David Burrows. *Fictioning: The Myth-Functions of Contemporary Art and Philosophy*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2019.

¹⁰ This comment underlines the degree to which we are assuming that the mask is primarily a visual phenomenon. However, we might equally devote our thoughts to sonic, haptic, gestural etc. masks and maskings.

of the entire face, yet, the face is a mask even *as* it changes, and whether consciously or according to some more instinctive force.

We may then like to think that the face is a face and not a mask, at least when it is expressionless, but anyone who has enjoyed a Charlie Chaplin or Buster Keaton silent movie will know that an apparently expressionless face can also ‘speak volumes’. Perhaps there is no escape for the face from its own tendency or duty to communicate information, whether true, understandable or not. There is no face that does not communicate, and no moment when a face is not communicating. The face never sleeps¹¹ and can never protect itself from being read, unless of course it wears an actual mask.

A quick search for the kind of ‘deadpan’ Chaplin or Keaton face suggested above initially proves disappointing.¹² Most of the readily available images of Chaplin and Keaton are drawn from movie scenes in which the artists is clearly acting. One or two ‘official portraits’ of these stars prove interesting in that they show them using their faces to relay what they would like their audience to see as the actor’s real offstage self or true identity: who they are and what they look like when they are *not* acting. However, one Keaton image, trawled from the film *Go West* (1925), shows him presenting something close to what we might be looking for in an expressionless face, only for us to notice that, in this particular scene he is playing poker, a game notoriously reliant upon careful control of facial expression as one of the game’s essential skills.

¹¹ We might consider here various poems, photographs, films, installations, etc that include or describe someone sleeping, e.g. Cornelia Parker’s *The Maybe* (1995), which used the snoozing actress Tilda Swinton, or perhaps reconsider Andy Warhol’s film *Sleep* (1964).

¹² It might be worthwhile referencing and revisiting artist Steve McQueen’s short film *Deadpan* (1997) in which he re-enacted Keaton’s famous stunt (from the 1928 film *Steamboat Bill, Jr* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FN2SKWSOdGM>) featuring a collapsing house, in which the expressionless protagonist seems to be saved from disaster by his own blithe obliviousness of the peril he is in. In light of our investigation of identity here, it is worth considering how McQueen’s image, and indeed Keaton’s original, might be interpreted, or might have been intended, in terms of cultural identity. What might the ‘deadpan’ face and gesture mean to us in terms of collective or individual cultural identity? Is ‘deadpan’ perhaps a strategic response to a kind of dangerous or violent ‘framing’ (note the window frame in the image) of one’s identity by others?

This ‘poker face’ is of course available to and used by us all, at times when we need all of our most subtle facial muscles to show, say and betray as little as possible, or nothing that we do not want to be shown, said or betrayed. However (and as above), even the least expressive of faces finds it impossible to evade imparting information of some kind, even if it is, at certain inscrutable moments, a face merely making the sign (or mask) of a face.

Here, we risk being drawn into the inherent and perhaps unavoidable, mischievous play of masks, as our enquiry presents us with a potentially labyrinthine task, one that we should only pursue if we can maintain hope of finding a way back out of the many mazes of the mask. Thankfully, Hans Belting’s book *Face & Mask, A Double History*¹³ has done some of the complex and intricate work for us, exploring many differences, similarities and relations of face and mask in some detail. We come away from this rich text noting, for example, that Belting seems to confirm that, however fluid and deceptive a face might be, however it might be transformed by make-up, surgery, photo-apps, acting or literal, traditional masks, every face is yet inextricably linked to who and what we are, and this apparently obvious given becomes, in light of the above considerations, newly and strangely perplexing.¹⁴

To illustrate this, we can turn to another Keaton deadpan image, this time from *The Goat* (1921). This ‘still’ shows the actor looking out at us as if from behind prison bars, an image that might allude to the fact that the face is something inescapable, unless, that is, we wear an actual mask to set ourselves free of the face. Our mercurial face, in which we are otherwise contained and by which we are generally defined, can be exposed, not just as the tool of an actor but as an actor itself, even a theatre, playground or play, received and read in diverse ways by diverse audiences. And yet, despite the face’s complexities, uncertainties and

¹³ Hans Belting, *Face and Mask: A Double History*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 2017

¹⁴ See also Laura Cumming’s study of the history of self-portraiture: Laura Cumming, *A Face to The World: On Self Portraits*, HarperPress, London, 2009

contingencies it is nevertheless us and ours, and inescapably so. Our face determines and defines us, at the same time as incarcerating us. The face is a, or the, primary site and sign of identity, even as the very limitations it enforces might encourage us to consider other influences upon and aspects of identity – such as our voice, body and body language, our age, nationality, culture, class, gender, sex, intersectional identity.¹⁵

Our face tends to determine identity in an especially authoritative, yet nevertheless partial, way – just as announcing our name, or answering the question ‘where are you from’ when called upon to do so, might reduce a complex internal and external interplay of identity and difference to a few rushed, inadequate and inaccurate words. The words of our name, or those of our hurried response to careless questioning, are of course rarely words of our own choosing, unless, like some artists and members of certain premodern cultures, we take the trouble to change our names at certain key points in our lives and careers; or unless, and going further, we create our own language, as some children and some novelists do (Russell Hoban and Anthony Burgess, along with James Joyce and Samuel Beckett come to mind) thereby choosing our own masks to overlay those masks our parents, our culture and our society force upon us.¹⁶ In concluding this section, it seems appropriate to note that the Romantic anti-philosopher F W Nietzsche proclaimed ‘every word also a mask’, and it is hard to think of any more playful, mischievous and disruptive use of words than that.¹⁷

¹⁵ And even our ‘our’, i.e. that rarely questioned habitual presumption of belonging and of having belongings and attributes, that might also crucially determine identity per se.

¹⁶ The British artist Monster Chetwynd has previously been known as ‘Marvin Gaye Chetwynd’ and as ‘Spartacus Chetwynd’. Marcel Duchamp once took on an alter ego with the name Rrose Sélavy. These artists thereby perpetuate traditions in which names can or must be changed to enable certain transformations – of character, relationship or maturity – to take place. Of course, here we might also think of the patriarchal mechanism that asks wedded women to exchange their surname for that of their husband on the occasion of marriage. Interestingly, Simon O’Sullivan and David Burrows’ recent writing on fictioning foregrounds the artist Sun Ra, who not only adopted his own chosen name but created an entire fictional biography that denied he was from planet Earth. See O’Sullivan and Burrows, *Fictioning*, op cit. And see also Simon O’Sullivan et al, editors, *Futures and Fictions*, Repeater, London, 2017.

¹⁷ ‘Every philosophy also *reveals* a philosophy; every opinion is also a hiding place, every word also a mask’, Friedrich Nietzsche, op cit

Facing Change & Changing Face

Any sense of hierarchy, deception or unfairness felt by an unmasked person encountering one who is masked may derive from the advantage felt by the masked person who is able to read the face of the other while the other is unable to read the masked face in return. This alludes to an understanding of masks in terms of power play and thus might transport us back to this article's beginnings in the discussion of masks as used by protestors in Hong Kong.

However, first it should be noted that during the early stages of writing on this theme the world also saw and heard grim news from Australian cities where the populace had quickly become accustomed to the wearing of masks as a way of mitigating dramatically increased air pollution caused by raging wildfires.¹⁸ These fires created a scenario comparable with and exceeding those experienced for years or even decades now in many Asian megalopolises, where car and air transport and other sources of pollution have created conditions that constitute a daily threat to human health and life.

Since then, a now-comprehensive global pandemic has superseded in the sphere of our attention those fires, riots and protests to which we have thus far alluded (all of which are likely to return). And this pandemic presents us with the spectacle of an even greater proliferation of worldwide implementation of masks, used more or less effectively to protect humanity from a rash of self-inflicted disasters. No mask can, of course, hide humanity's embarrassment, shame or tears, nor indeed can a mask always save a human life. But the mask is everywhere we look today, and – we suspect – tomorrow too, transforming habitual perceptions of the human face and, along with it, habitual ideas of identity.¹⁹

¹⁸ This text evolved in London between Spring 2019 and Spring 2020.

¹⁹ Recently, tinted clear plastic visors have also become popular, as they perhaps appear more 'glamorous' than masks, while inadvertently converting the everyday human into something far more robotic and denying others any view at all of the humanising face.

While many of the masks we see today are primarily intended to be protective to physical health, many – as discussed above – have been deployed in protests wherein the mask represents an aspiration not just to protect our human selves but to protect and transform our democracy. Today, new and enhanced political rights and political progress might be won via a combination of virtual internet connectivity and actual street protest. Masks are required in both arenas – street and online.

The internet might enable and encourage the use of emojis, contrived profile pictures, avatars and pseudonyms, any of which might liberate us anew according to a technologically fuelled wave of democratisation that frees us from our established places, identities, voices, identities and communities – all factors on which our modern (but now aging) democracy was partially founded. New technology enables new communities, conversations and forums in which we can pursue communications and relationships as newly fluid identities, freed from the tyranny of selfhood and the confines of the face by the various masks provided by newly technologised communications networks,

Previous democratising revolutions may have focused on freedom and equality in terms of the rights of man and of woman, including the rights of the much-vaunted modern ‘individual’, symbolically empowered by a personal vote physically cast in a particular locale (an electoral ward) and confirmed by an indexical mark made by a hand using a pencil and a ballot paper. But today’s democracy is not only expanding, it might also be being challenged and supplanted by a newly won disdain for all this modern presence, persona and particularity. Our daily lives bring us into increasingly collective contact, and with the virtual as much as the actual, with the internet as much as the street, pub or club, with other parts of the far-flung world as much as our own home and hometown. As such, the democratic idea of the rule of the people by and for the people (sometimes given as a working definition of modern democracy) might be supplanted by the rule of the mask, by and for the mask. After

all, whether we are proud of the fact or not, today we elevate the most advanced forms of media and mediation to a primary status and, given the choice to spend real or virtual time and space with ‘the people’, we tend to choose the most mediated forms of contact possible: communicating via email, text, social media and chat rather than by face-to-face meetings or phone calls. (The 2020 lockdown only seems to confirm our readiness to comply with this notion.)

Nevertheless, the physical realities of the street also demand that masks are worn, if only to enable bodies to withstand the demands of physical action and combat, in protests that, despite all our sophisticated technologies, still seem more effective than online activism alone in both resisting and influencing political change.

In a world in which we are all subject to increasingly high visibility,^{20 21} the mask, in its various guises and manifestations, rules the face and rises to new levels of influence.²² As well as what we think of as the literal mask, today we are surrounded by multiple and increasing numbers of plays and variations on the transformation of human facial features,²³ all of which makes the face inherently and increasingly unreliable as a locus of identity.^{24 25} For example, this is an age in which cosmetic surgery (which, for the sake of the squeamish, including myself, I won’t illustrate here) has become a normalised aspect of consumerism,

²⁰ Noting that the hi-vis jacket had become a pervasive ‘trope’ in early twenty-first-century life and politics, prior to the more recent ascendancy of the mask.

²¹ Noting that ‘Zoom’ video conferencing software suddenly supplanted Facebook as the trending tool for social interaction during the 2020 lockdown.

²² Baudelaire famously referred, in his *Salon of 1846*, to the black frock coat as ‘the garment of our suffering age’ (Charles Baudelaire, *The Mirror of Art*, Jonathan Mayne, trans, Phaidon Press, London, 195, p 127). Today’s equivalent might be the commonplace hi-vis gilet.

²³ Artists Orlan and Stellarc might both stake a claim here as early practitioners of cyborg-ian practices that experiment with the transformation of the human face and body, introducing non-human prostheses.

²⁴ In 2014 the then French president François Hollande was exposed as regularly meeting his mistress Julie Gayet at a hotel in Paris. Hitherto he had arrived and departed undetected on a scooter, which justified him wearing a helmet that fully hid his own features from public view.

²⁵ It is perhaps worth noting here that retinal scanning has become a more effective source of identification than any whole-face image, pointing to the fact that the face may well be losing its pole position as the primary site and signifier of human identity to more precise and reliable sources of identity (or what we might perhaps call *infra*-identity).

along with exponentially increasing sales of cosmetic products influenced by the demands of the combined Instagram + ‘selfie’ phenomena.²⁶

In the ‘face-off’ between Hong Kong’s protestors and police, the world witnessed an update on an age-old battle of mask against mask, but in fighting for cherished ‘democracy’ (what we are calling ‘the rule of the people, by and for the people’) it seems that we may be creating a ‘mask-ocracy’ – a rule of masks by and for masks. Those ‘powers that be’ who might be anxious to control crowds of ‘IRL’ protestors (as well as virtual, ‘URL’ crowds and their potentially viral internet politics) enlist video technology aided by facial recognition software only to find they might be recording and analysing crowds of demonstrators who purposefully use masks, make-up, or face-painting to confuse said software.

Having banned the use of facemasks in order to attempt to quell protests, authorities in Hong Kong, and elsewhere in Asia soon found themselves battling a global pandemic that motivated millions of people previously unfamiliar with the habit to don masks in public places. We seem therefore to be entering a realm of twenty-first-century identity chaos in which the mask (with all its implicit playfulness, deceptiveness and ambiguity), rather than the value of ‘true identity’ associated with the face, might reign as a paradigmatic principle.

Conclusion

Amid a confusing cascade of cultural change, a newly ‘woke’ generation aims to double-down on the aspirations and achievements of previous radical, left-leaning generations by insisting on new and expanded rights for an ever-expanding notion of minorities, incorporating greater rights for greater numbers and categories of marginalised minorities and

²⁶ Simon Osborne, ‘How Much Is the Selfie Economy Worth?’ *The Guardian*, 27 July 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/shortcuts/2016/jul/27/how-much-is-the-selfie-economy-worth>, accessed 31 August 2021

the underprivileged. This includes expanding or awarding the rights of the intersectional, the gender-fluid, as well as animals, birds, insects, plants, indeed the entire environment and planet.

In a society that thus aims more uncompromisingly than ever before for a more truly universal and more equal universal equality – and for a universal equality that aspires to equalise a far more complex and heterogeneous vision of society – each of us might today choose to speak, think, write and fight for what we think we wholly ‘are’, as well as what or who we would like ourselves and our world to be, while supporting the similar and concurrent fights and rights of others. As such, we are freer than ever before to challenge even the individuation imposed upon our greater complexity by modern democracy, and to fight for increasingly complex identities and differences, identities and differences that might combine several identities and differences,²⁷ and which fuse numerous political issues previously considered relatively heterogeneous to, and distinct from each other.²⁸

Given these new and compound complexities, just what might constitute an accurate, adequate or appropriate ‘face’ for such increasingly plural and complex intersectional twenty-first-century identities? Could any single face, or any single mask for that matter, ever suffice to ‘represent’ us (as democracy purports to do) today? The representation we need now may not after all be representation of anything simple, singular, essential, innate, true or unchanging. Indeed, we may not even require modern, democratic ‘representation’ after all, but rather invite a ‘mask’ paradigm,²⁹ with all its inherent unreliability, duplicity, multiplicity, complexity and (amoral) play, to supersede and supplant a mode of

²⁷ Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s affirmative use of ‘schizophrenia’ and ‘schizoanalysis’ might come into play here. See Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *1,000 Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Continuum, London, 2004; Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Continuum, London, 2004

²⁸ Considering ‘intersectionality’, a term coined by activist Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989.

²⁹ As well as the ‘carnavalesque’ episteme with which I have associated it in my previous articles on this theme.

representation premised on a, perhaps now redundant, modern model of the actual, singular, real, good and virtuous.

Today we might fight for the rights of all that we are, and for all that others are and want to be (noting here that Nietzsche also thought of each of each of us as a community of souls rather than as ‘a’ or one singular soul).³⁰ If so, it may be that we can choose which and how many selves, rights and protests we are or are involved with at any one time. Consequently, the mask, and even layers or collections of masks, might be a more appropriate way to represent our newfound complexity, rather than asserting or accepting a ‘true face’, or the truth of ‘my’ face, as a fixed and inescapable site of individuated identity, and one that might mislead myself and others into thinking that I am something more singular and more simple than I can ever possibly be or ever want to be.

The Hong Kong police tried to ban masks as part of a strategy for ending civil disturbance, but this strategy was always perhaps largely symbolic and likely to fail. In fact, it might seem that at the point in time that this seemingly misguided edict was made, it was not the police, nor the protestors who were running things in the streets of Hong Kong, it was the masks themselves, granting both sides license to do what they did and be what they were. The masks were wearing the people, students, police and the administrators alike. Thus, democracy becomes *mask-ocracy*.

Protestors do not want to be poisoned by gas, nor recognised by cameras and turned into facial recognition data, but their masks give them the cover and the courage to go into a battle devoid of their more obedient, civil and timid everyday identity. Similarly, police personnel – who, beneath their mask and uniform, are also vulnerable individuals – are psychologically transformed by dressing-up in riot gear and being rendered all but anonymous by their mask,

³⁰ E.g. “... for our body is only a social structure composed of many souls...” F W Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, op cit, p 49, aphorism 20

their helmet, and the abstraction of their police number. As a masked face, we may immediately become a member of a community – this group or that, this side or that side – but we also become a member of *no* community, that is to say no community other than the community of all mask-wearers – a new idea perhaps of the universal human, and one that might incorporate: an ancient shaman, Goethe’s eighteenth-century Roman carnival-goer, Picasso’s *mademoiselles*, along with a choking Sydney commuter, a Hong Kong protestor and Hong Kong cop, and someone protecting themselves from a viral pandemic.³¹

The playfulness and unavoidably ‘up-front’ ambiguity of the mask might help us today to move our future politics beyond the modern party politics, national politics and identity politics that have got us this far, and made us this modern, perhaps taking us further and beyond, in the direction of a holistic reconciliation of our newfound post-individual complexity, intersectionality and multiplicity, with the totality of peoples, creatures, flora, fauna, and all of their mutual and respective needs (attending to what I have elsewhere called ‘the whole in one’³²).

The model of the mask, with its inherent sense of play, its refusal of both identity and form, its relativist insistence that another face and thus another world is always possible and even close to hand (if only as the flip-side and antithesis of the system we currently know too well), might afford us an enlarged imaginary space today in which to hope and dream, and to there and then make those hopes and dreams into actualities. As we saw above, today many of those who fight for democracy might, for various and compound reasons, be wearing masks, but the mask might just come to supplant a fight for a democracy that might have

³¹ I intend to explore the concept of community in some depth in a subsequent related article, including reference to mask-wearers as a ‘community of lovers’ and as a ‘community of those who have no community’. Both concepts are derived from Maurice Blanchot’s reflections on May 1968 in Maurice Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community*, Station Hill, Barrytown, 1984.

³² See the chapter titled ‘The Whole in One’ in Paul O’Kane, *Technologies of Romance – Part II*, eeodo, London, 2018

been rendered exhausted and redundant by new social, political, economic and technological factors.

So while it is true that the mask, in and of itself, provides only an occasional or temporary sense of equality; and while it is also true that the mask can equally be used and claimed by oppressive and reactionary right-wing forces (accounting for the effective carnivalesque crudity and buffoonery of Alt-Right and figures like Trump, Johnson, Grillo and others), it can and does enhance and ease the fight for, and trajectory towards, our ultimate aspiration: a dynamic, appropriate, up-to-date form of political participation that might require a name – and thus a mask – of its own. I posit ‘mask-ocracy’.³³

³³ Recalling here Jacques Rancière’s inspiring proclamations that we don’t strive for equality, rather we start from equality. A good discussion of this point can be found in Jean-Philippe Deranty, ed, *Jacques Rancière – Key Concepts*, Acumen, Durham, UK, 2010, pp72–77; also Deranty, op cit, p 144, where we find the statement: ‘the axiom of equality is the necessary presupposition of modern politics’. See also Andrew Schaap, ‘Enacting the right to have rights: Jacques Rancière’s critique of Hannah Arendt’, *European Journal of Political Theory*, vol 10, no 1, 2011, pp 22–45, where he states: ‘what gives rise to politics is the assumption of an equality of anyone with anyone’. Finally, see ‘equality is not a goal to be reached. It is not a common level, an equivalent amount of riches or an identity of living conditions that must be reached as the consequence of historic evolution and strategic action. Instead it is a point of departure’, from Jules Gavroche, ‘Jacques Rancière: Reflections on Equality and Emancipation’, *Autonomies*, 5 August 2017, <https://autonomies.org/2017/08/jacques-ranciere-reflections-on-equality-and-emancipation>, accessed 19 September 2019.