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THE NIQAB AND THE SURGICAL MASK BEYOND GIVEN BINARIES: VISUAL SEMIOTICS, FIGURATIVISATION, AND DISCURSIVE INTERACTIONS OF COVERED FACES

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Abstract: The article presents a semiotic account of niqabs and surgical masks, deconstructing the various realms where a contrariety is constructed around those objects: the visual manifestation of facial coverings and the face as plastic objects; and the existence of masks and masked faces both as discourse and as the objects about which discourses are created. An analysis and theoretical reflection dedicated to the surface levels of manifestations, through an exploration of visual semiotics, the discursive level of the generative trajectory, and the discursive interactions emerging from texts about masked faces in different socio–cultural situations, the work debates the disconnection between discursive and semio–narrative levels the contrariety of niqabs and surgical masks manifests. The analysis is divided into three parts: an initial discussion of the plastic of masked faces, following Greimas (1983) Figurative Semiotics; an examination of the mechanisms of thematisations and figurativisation (Greimas & Courtés 1993); and an exploration of the Discursive Interactions (Oliveira 2013) emerging from the production of communications about the objects in relation to their cultural contexts. By exploring this false contrariety, originated in a given binary supporting a power imbalance between Western and Oriental cultures and practices, we aim at visiting the mechanisms of meaning–making — particularly the ones discussed by Barthes (1970a, 1970b, 2009), such as the bending of signifiers through myth or the construction of the Other through a collection of essentialised traits — and what those mechanisms entail both to our current cultural and media landscape, and equally for a theory of construction and apprehension of meaning. Such exploration of a crisis of meaning and its models occasions the overlapping with the Post–structuralist tradition, particularly the work of Deleuze and Guattari (1980) and their idea of rhizomatic anti–models of meaning. The work concludes with a reflection about the matter of veridiction and its construction, as well as the role of random sense in both creating the current chaos of information and crises of truth and in becoming a performative tool to restore a sense of meaning, helping subjects — meaning makers and meaning readers — to restore their sense of identity.

Keywords: niqab; surgical mask; visual semiotics; discursive level; discursive interaction.

1. Introduction

The firsts lines of *L'empire des signes* present the possibility of imagining a fictional people, giving it an invented name, so as to avoid compromising a real country in a fantasy: Barthes' analysis of Japan, he confesses, is not an attempt at a historical, philosophical, political or cultural approach to the Other (or to a reality), but a collection of "traits" from which to deliberately form a system (Barthes 1970a p. 11). That crucial distinction — a country's "reality" versus its essentialised elements — has become almost absent in 21st–century cultural logic and its systems of production and apprehension of sense. While the search for a seemingly absent meaning becomes the root cause of identity fragmentation, collections of traits from those identities are deliberately used in the construction of systems that are almost fictional — like Barthes' Japan. Those fictions of nations, built from decontextualised paradigms that are forced into becoming emblems of cultures, can be used to serve (at least) two functions: either to the ostentation of cultural difference, creating a façade of diversity and inclusion without addressing the systemic root of exclusion and cultural hegemony; or in the dysphoric construction of the Other, utilising fragments of cultural practices to invent a barbaric, uncivilised enemy.

The creation of cultural practices in a reductionist way, examining traits rather than systems, only results in discourses that are disconnected from sense, when considered in the traditional semiotic approach that understands meaning as articulated through a hierarchy of levels: a meaningless form of meaning–making that no longer seems to "obey" the structures of a Semiotic theory. The result is an understanding of a variety of questions, as well as the understanding of Others and their cultures, to be often enclosed in an incomplete trajectory of meaning which seems to amputate the semio–narrative level: the figures of expression are often confused with fundamental meaning, and the most superficial contrasts of things are accepted as if they were values forming a fundamental category. While discussing such matters may seem like a theoretical exaggeration of details and definitions, the difference between the levels is central in the recent epidemic of "semantic contradictions" becoming a dominant story.

Such settings are fertile ground for the "multiplicities" conceptualised by Deleuze & Guattari in *Mille Plateaux*: the rhizome as a principle of connection and heterogeneity, rather than a fixed point facilitating chains grounded in order and hierarchy, which the authors approximate to the image of the root or tree (Deleuze & Guattari 1980). Rather than fixing points in a way that limits the world, the rhizome is pure relation, lines that reach in all directions. In such "anti–genealogies", the hierarchy of meaning–making is disrupted, reversed, enabling visual contrasts to *become* sense instead of *manifesting* it. In a rhizomatic manner, the meaning makers and the meaning readers collage pieces of expression and pieces of content that are not homologated, perhaps resulting from a form of discursive interaction producing *random sense*, as is substantiated by Oliveira (2013): a mode of meaning construction in which the roles of enunciator and enunciatee, as well as sense itself, are not fixed or pre–determined by a code.

Random modes of constructing discourses are also closely connected to Barthes' understanding of *myth* as a semantically cumulative mode of signification that hijacks different signs, reverting them back into signifiers of new meanings. Although those myths often seem to be grounded in logical reductions, Barthes remarks the arbitrary nature of such investments (or re–investments) of significance in objects, particularly images (Barthes 2009 p. 132): rather than obeying the hierarchical logic of semiosis, homologating a predictable expression and content relation, myth permits creating sense about groups and objects, even when it contradicts one or multiple cultural contexts.

While for Barthes myth is an "extension" of the sign, reused as a new signifier that is not preceded by the loss of its original meaning, it is also possible to understand the phenomenon concerning the "false opposition" created around niqabs and surgical masks as a disjunction of expected expression and content, rather than a resignification or accumulation. The random significations we see today seem to relate more to a form of "self–sufficient" discursive level that needs no semio–narrative level, creating modes of signification that rely solely on surfaces, visual or verbal, as a prevalent mechanism of meaning–making. Dissecting such phenomena, widespread in a globalised Western culture and in the media it utilises to disseminate itself, could provide

some clarification on the cultural contradictions and double standards existing in our prevalent discourses today. Equally, whenever the part is taken as the totality–in this case, the discursive level becomes the complete generative trajectory–it becomes crucial to understand the mechanisms, typical of the discursive level, utilised in the construction of misrepresentations through artifices of "truth creation" that are often at the base of political discourses, both mainstream or "conspiratory".

Making truth from lies–or, at least, gross misconceptions–is an isotopic trait in Western thinking, and the analysis of objects touching upon the untouchable binary of West and Orient are necessarily intersectional with political issues, particularly the ones addressed by Post–colonial and Decolonial thinking. The logic behind the polarisation of niqabs and surgical masks is no different, in which part of its project relates to a symbolic "truce" suspending some long–standing convictions that are at the core of Western ideas of freedom and other cultural beliefs, in response to a life–changing (or life–threatening) event: the Covid–19 pandemic. However, the visual contrasts in which such oppositions are constructed don't seem to survive a hierarchical, generative analysis: beyond the marked visual differences between the niqab and the surgical mask, or the linguistic variations of what we call things, a semio–narrative level seems to unite, rather than diverge those objects. Underneath the visual contrast, similar roles and narratives, similar trajectories of acquisition, loss, and transformation, similar fundamental values that transit in equivalent operations show us not the original antithesis of West and Orient that supports widespread narratives of "I" and "Other", but that we are not so different after all (Jardim 2021a).

In such light, the niqab and the surgical mask are also two seemingly different façades, carrying socio–cultural values that we are used to perceiving as being opposed to one another but which, in the end, are deceptive outward appearances enclosing very similar narratives and values, welcoming a semiotic problem of what things *are* versus what things *appear to be* (Greimas 1983, 2002). To bring light to those questions, the work aims at analysing the superficial level of this false binary, the niqab and the surgical mask, exploring what visual and plastic relations are created in the interaction of face and mask, as well as masked

faces and the eye. Rather than merely inventorying the elements present in the objects, we follow Marsciani's argument that there is semiosis in all the levels of the generative trajectory (Marsciani 2014) and, similarly, Oliveira's (2004, 2013) work presenting the possibility that interactions also occur at the discursive level.

Hence, the analysis will explore three different aspects of the opposed pair: the plastic and visual formants and the visual relations they construct in a dynamic of face and mask, and masked faces; the sartorial discourses in which masked faces utter meaning; and the discourses about the objects, or how the differences are constructed and communicated through texts. Through this exercise, the work aims at addressing how mechanisms of masking through different apparatuses operate equivalently and, yet, are capable of constructing oppositions separating practices, ideologies, and material objects. Ultimately, it's important to reflect on how the "semanticization" of superficial contrasts appears as a tool of constructing and reinforcing differences, often weaponised to sustain power dynamics that can only thrive in uncritical polarity.

2. The plastic of masked faces

Once the opposition of niqabs and surgical masks, as well as of the traditions they allegedly represent, are grounded in the perception of visual, surface contrasts apprehended in those forms of facial dress, it seems of interest to start with a visual examination: not one separating the objects and endorsing the oppositional relation, but an analysis of the act of *masking*.

Applying a supplement or apparatus over the face is an act radically disrupting its surface in all its plastic formants: if there is a relation of opposition to be formed, it is the difference created between a "bare" human face and a face that was partially or completely covered with a different substance. It is not only the "erasure" of features which, at least in a Western cultural logic, are responsible for ensuring the recognition of an "identity": if "to see is to have from a distance" (Merleau–Ponty 1961 p. 1597), then the act of disguising the visage contains in

itself an act of dispossession, taking away something the viewer believes to own. In this Cartesian form of seeing *as* touching, the covered face adds yet another theme of loss (to the viewer): the prevention of "touching with the eye" appears as a reaffirmation of the interdiction to touch (with the hands, with the body) — an interpretation that is appropriate to the pandemic laws, but equally to the commandment of veiling and lowering the gaze in Islam.

Furthermore, a masked face is transformed altogether in its form, colour, material, and in its topological organisation — which is to say that the markers securing a "reading grid" for the face are replaced with new parameters for apprehending or decoding that disrupt the object and its ability to articulate sense (or, at least, the sense that is *expected*). It is possible to say, thus, that the visual transformation is necessarily a transformation in the functions or "expected uses" of the face, following the transformation in the ability to articulate sense.

Although the effect of facial covering is often perceived as a "veiling continuum", surgical masks and niqabs are not seamless, flat extensions of material but contain their own eidetic structures of lines and cuts that are very different from the lines of the face and, yet, responding to an effort to "accommodate" the face. The presence of pleats, seams, or draping, common both in veils and masks, are similar to the presence of the same mechanisms in clothing but not as committed to revealing the silhouette or providing a perfect fitting with it.

While, to an extent, a mask or veil must somehow follow the shapes of the face — otherwise, their function of effectively covering would be compromised — their role is not, as that of the garment, to "reveal" in the act of covering: while a good dress, with the exception of some Avant–garde designs, aims at covering the body metaphorically, while completely revealing a human form (and, for that effect, whether that form is "real" or created by the action of the garment is of little importance), the mask as a mechanism covers, manifesting itself in the process. It is not a simulacrum of the face we see when gazing at veiled or masked faces, as is the case when we look at dressed bodies: it is the mask, with its horizontal pleats or vertical seams, or the veil, with its layered drapings or loose évasé form that makes itself seen, the face underneath becoming a suggestion, a possibility. Unlike the clothed

body, that sustains a close relation with the identity the wearer aims at presenting to the world, the veiled or masked face is dispossessed of all its markers: the wearer displays a face somehow ageless and sometimes even genderless, except for that which the eyes and its surroundings can reveal–but even that can be imprecise, deceiving. While the mere presence of a face veil marks a gender identity–women in the fundamentalist, Arabised versions of Islam; or men, among the Tuareg–sufficient discussion was dedicated to the *possibility* of a *burqa* containing "the unexpected".

A masked face is no longer brows, eyes, nose, cheeks, mouth and chin: when covered, partially or completely, two–thirds of the "natural" human face are in disguise, replaced by an alien material (fabric or some kind of non–woven matter) which is non–human — artificial, technological, culturalised object which serves functions that reach beyond the abilities of the human body. With a mask or a veil, although the "original" features seem to try to furtively make themselves seen as volume or relief, the face is clipped in its form, introducing harsh lines or limits to what used to be a smooth transition: the continuum of face and neck, for example, is either completely erased, or delimited by the outlines of the object applied over the face. Rather than a succession of plates without defined borders — except, perhaps, for the eyes, the nostrils, and the open mouth, which also determine hard limits between the inside and the outside of the body — masks create well–delimited boundaries of where the body meets the inside and outside, and where one part of the face becomes something else.

The theme of gradation replaced by hard boundaries is continued in the colour and matter: the application of something over the face disrupts its original colours, at times introducing a new chromatism that is, perhaps intentionally, utterly opposed to the "natural" colour of the face. Even over brown skin, the black niqab creates chromatic contrast, which is even more radical in the case of the blue veil worn by the Tuareg, once indigo is by no means a human skin colour — and yet, the French colonialists named them "the blue men". Similarly, the non–woven surgical masks, which come in light blue or green, contrast non–human, non–skin colours with the possible shades of human skin. Even when one attempts to mask oneself in colours creating

plastic rhymes with the skin, the effect can become even more uncanny: the contrast of similar colour but different quality seems to deepen rather than suppress the gap of human/non–human, inviting connotations of artificiality that can only construct dysphoria: the attempt to imitate the inimitable.

The walls of material framing the parts of the face and head that are allowed to be seen perform an operation extending the well–established privacy of the body (particularly the torso, which always goes somehow covered) to the face, including it in the inventory of bodily places that must not be displayed to the world, expanding the limits and taboos relating to the naked body to regions of the face. As much as clothes invest the body with an ambivalence uniting curiosity and repulse, desire and fear, marking the relation of solidarity of those forces — or, to evoke Freud's timeless essay about the *unheimlich*, the simultaneous desire to see and not to see (Freud 1919) — masks grant the same power to the face: the want to know what is underneath fuels the want to transgress the interdictions of seeing and touching, while also fuelling the fear of the transgression, as well as the fear of what the objects interrupt. The possibility of beauty or simply the friendly recognition of another are inseparable from the dangers behind the mask: the possibility of sin and damnation, or the viral particles associated with death — the equally timeless dichotomy of artificiality and culture that "protect" from the threat of a deadly nature.

The contrast of distinguishable features, organised in a known topology with each element flowing seamlessly to the next, versus a radical rupture of inside/outside, human/non–human, natural/artificial constructs new ways of interacting with faces (and, thus, of "reading" them). The eyes become the centre and the focal point, the only place where any human emotion or intention can be read; the same is true when it comes to the relation of the masked subject with the surrounding world: the disruption in the breathing partially filtering the smells from the outside but amplifying one's own smells which are trapped in the mask, the muffled voices which disrupt the other's ability to hear, the impossibility of tasting, and the reduction of tactile relations to the ones the mask or veil produces, the eye becomes our only organ capable of an unfiltered perception of the world. That extends the family of

complex contrarieties to the use of the senses, enlarging visual perception even though visual face–to–face interaction is partially suspended while numbing the other senses, even though sounds, smells, tastes and touch remain available (even if forbidden).

Such contradictions of what is enabled and what is interdicted create dynamics of showing and disguising — *public* and *private* — that can be homologated to visual relations that are aligned with the desire to see, the desire to show, and equally the desire to hide or not to see in the act of presenting and apprehending the body. In their turn, such relations are homologated to a series of roles invested in the clothes, which are carefully conceived as mechanisms of simultaneously showing and disguising, following the needs and wishes of subjects, the norms of society, fashion, religion, and peer groups. In that sense, the roles of body and clothes, including masks, are not unilaterally determined but interchangeable: the dynamics of what is shown and what is hidden emerges from exchanges or mutual adaptations between body and dress.

On the one hand, the act of wearing a face–disrupting object rests with the subject who, ultimately, is the one who applies the apparatus onto their body. Nonetheless, while one wears a veil or mask, the garment is simultaneously wearing them, performing the series of transformations to the face–utterance, which is reconstructed to the gaze of others. While for the "I" wearing the object, it is clear what is the body and what is the garment, for the others who gaze the veiled/masked body, the person becomes an amalgamation: a continuum of dress through which some gaps of skin and eyes are visible, but also as a "person" whose face is fabric. Rather than the human face with its multiple possibilities of expressions, the material of the mask becomes the face: a plate of colour and material with its own form that introduces a discontinuity in the presentation of the face, limiting its ability to manifest in the ways of a human face, but manifesting something else in its place: the compliance with a code of conduct, humorous statements, a desire for decoration, or even figures of protest and disobedience overlapped with the badge of obedience being displayed.

The disruption of identity or "recognisability" the mask facilitates becomes, in a Western cultural context, the perfect condition for the construction of alterity places. Rather than the recognisable face of the

neighbour — as well as the ability to recognise their emotions, their *intentions* — the mystery of a mask or veil, the distorted voice without a mouth, the partial, clipped collection of facial fragments contributes to a project of dehumanisation: no longer an individual or a subject, but a faceless body — a view that is either the origin of the association of the Islamic veil with oppression or a construction emerging with the objective of supporting that narrative. Today, those figures of expression are repeated, but in a twisted plot: oppression is replaced with "collective sacrifice" to save lives — and if altruism is not sufficient motivation, there is always a group of people ready to hoard masks with the goal of saving their own life…

2.1. Interlude: Faciality

On the one hand, it is possible to apprehend (and describe) the transformations in the formants of a covered and uncovered visage and to interpret transformations in the plane of content that might occur when we transition from one state of the face to the other. However, Deleuze and Guattari (1980) raise a crucial question about whether faces can ever be truly "naked". Beyond the obvious forms of masking applied over faces — such as makeup or surgical interventions — they reflect on the idea of "faciality", or the face that is not a given or an object, but a process that is constantly produced and communicated.

Thus, for Deleuze and Guattari, the uncovered face is not the naked human face but yet another mask: a plane of resonance, aligning the mental or felt "real" to a dominant reality. Rather than an object, the face is a screen of signifier — and more so, it is not a signifier that is chosen by the subjects, but the subjects *are chosen* by visages: not, as is theorised in Greimasian semiotics, a figure that disseminates a semantic category but, on the contrary, figures that *programme* signification. If a mask is something that hides and dissimulates even when it shows — hence fulfilling a negative function — then visages are also masks, in which they can programme our semiologic screen to manifest whatever we desire to, "real" or "simulated".

Like a literal mask, the bare face is also an interrupter, also a two–way barrier: it can choose to block certain forms of communication

without the need for an external apparatus and, through its own mechanisms, it can enable others — false signs that, as much as material masks can do, echo the function of dress in the construction of an idealised body. On the one hand, Deleuze and Guattari develop this discussion into the normativity of Western visages, stating that the so–called "outsiders" are merely the ones who should have looked like us (Deleuze & Guattari 1980). For that effect, one of the greatest revelations of the Covid–19 crisis and our need to adopt the custom of masking could lie in the discovery that, although our identity is largely constructed in opposition to the masked Other, it would take only a pandemic to reveal that we are, after all, just *like them*: a mob of faceless bodies, reduced to our statistical viral status.

Transposing their concepts to the problem of masking and veiling, however, adds on yet another layer. It is not just about the visage, another form of "mask" in itself, and the features it imprints on the human face but the addition of a culturalised object over the face, which equally inscribes markers of race beyond the body's material dimension. Against the Western ideal of "seeing the face" and the reliance on biometrical markers as the recognition of identity, showing oneself becomes a manifestation of true–saying: to show one's face, in a time of constant CCTV surveillance and ubiquitous face–recognition technology, is to have no secrets. In that sense, the *truth* manifested in a bare face is contrasted with the dubious ethics of the peoples who *mask*: the Middle–eastern, Islamic, and far–Asian Other. If for "us", the showing of the face is the ultimate act of *honesty*, the idea of disguising the face is encountered with suspicion — perhaps so, because *hiding the face* is how we act, how we manipulate by using faces that are masks, while "reading faces" is also how we secure an advantage in a variety of situations. However, if the "bare visage" as a mask plays a similar role to the "literal" mask — to preserve an advantage by "seeing without being truly seen" — then the desire to unveil the Other is, literally, a desire to restore a power imbalance disguised as "liberation": to display the Other naked to our eyes, while we remain masked in our faciality.

3. Sartorial discourses

When it comes to the mechanisms of communication, as well as the manners in which they mediate the communication act occurring between different subjects, surgical masks and niqabs operate through very similar operations, in which both are, by definition, *facial coverings* and *facial disruptors*. Covering the face, besides disrupting the facial presentation and its visual structure, also interferes by blocking certain forms of non–verbal communication while also enabling other forms of communication. These encompass both the core statement of religion or political affiliation, and also the possibility of fashion statements in the choice of colour, fabric, and decorations that can be applied to those objects or, even, the possibility of introducing written verbal communications, or the use of cloth with visible branding imprinted on it. Thus, a covered face can become the face of a religion; the face of a political belief; or even the screen where commodities can be advertised.

In the past of Western culture, veils came to be associated with a theme of secrecy and mystery, particularly when coupled with religious revelation (Ronnberg & Martin 2010). That is not exclusive to Islam, although it is understandable that the veil as a figure of mystery has its semantic potential amplified by the veil as a figure of alterity, the mark of an ostracised Other: the terrorist, the radical, the "fundamentalist" — in a nutshell, someone who wishes to confront or even destroy the Western way of life, from Christianity to Capitalism. Nonetheless, the theme of mystery may also manifest that which should not be seen, which recovers the narratives of the *Arabian Nights* and the cliché of beauty so sublime it must remain veiled, and the practice of face veiling among the upper–class women. Indeed, the plastic constitution and construction of veils and masks, with pleats, draping, and seams that disguise and even confuse the facial shape contribute as figures of mystery and uncertainty: they don't only disrupt the visibility of the visage but produce volumes and shapes that mislead the viewer to what lies underneath. The sense one can apprehend is supported almost completely by the object, the mask, and the meanings it conveys, which invite "assumptions" about the gender, status, beliefs, and even taste of the wearer.

That ambivalent mystery — simultaneously euphoric: the desire to see; and dysphoric: the impossibility to see — is beautifully explored by Paolo Sorrentino in *The Young Pope*, in the fictional Pius XIII, who creates a mixture of indignation and a cult around his persona through his refusal to show himself. In a dialogue with the Vatican's communication director, the Pope asks who were the most important author, film director, contemporary artist, and electronic music group of the last twenty years. Salinger, Kubric, Banksy, Daft Punk. "Do you know what it is, the invisible red thread that connects them all, all these most important figures in their respective fields? None of them let themselves be seen. None of them let themselves be photographed." One could add the Belgian fashion designer Martin Margiela to his list, as he partook in the ideology against the cult of faces to privilege the cult of his creation. Not a face that becomes Vatican merchandise, descending from an aircraft fully veiled in white to avoid being photographed by the crowds, Pius XIII's persona causes a mixture of admiration and disappointment: the encounter with a sacred that refuses to reveal itself to profane eyes, but the very profane, human desire to stand out by refusing to be gazed at.

Far from being exclusive to one people or tradition, the "magic of masks" and their cultural significance is present both in Western and non–Western traditions, blurring the distinction of religion and science that seems so clear today. On the one hand, Lévi–Strauss dissects the ritual role of masks and their close relationship with myth in the North–American Indigenous traditions, emphasising their role in neutralising oppositions by liberating the wearer of the contrary "virtues" associated with each mask (Lévi–Strauss 1975). Not dissimilarly, Phu (2012) recovers the costume worn by 16th and 17th–century plague doctors, analysing their distinctive beaked mask, which contained aromatics used to dispel the fumes believed to cause the disease. Beyond the possible scientific explanations for the curious uniform, he remarks that the use of masks to exorcise demons was an accepted practice, showing that not only the figure of the doctor was not so distant from that of the Healer or Shaman but, more importantly, that the medical mask is originally a scientific *and* a religious apparatus.

Beyond those themes, however, it is clear that the current Western repulse for veils — always and only when worn by the Other — is

not, as is often argued, a matter of "miscomprehension" or "cultural ignorance" to the meanings of veils. Rather, it is a confirmation that Western culture understands the power of masking all too well, which is perhaps why it is so important to suppress this practice and the form of mystery it enables: the refusal of being transformed into image to the gaze of the other — or, in semiotic terms, the refusal of being placed into utterance, becoming a "finished text". Both the fully veiled figure that is only eyes — an all–seeing being that doesn't show itself — or the faces partially covered by surgical masks make us question what is underneath while also confusing our judgement and even our desire. The displacement of the facial markers, thus, is also an impossibility of installing all the markers of enunciation, transforming covered faces into discourses that are shifting in (*embrayage*), returning to the illusion of presence and the enunciation in the act (Greimas & Courtés 1993 p. 119): no longer discourses that can be "read" by the viewer as finished products, but processes in which meaning can only be *constructed* in relation.

A second theme figurativised in both objects is *otherness*. An opposition of West and Orient is strongly aligned to the discursive contrast of "not–masked" and "masked", in the sense that in contemporary times (before the pandemic), the showing of the face is a trademark of Western peoples (and a marker of Westernisation overseas), while the practices of covering the face are associated either with the Middle–east, particularly the Arabised or Persian manifestations of Islam; or with Japan and China, and the overlapping of respiratory disease outbreaks, ubiquitous urban pollution, and nuclear disasters — which, in themselves, are also symptoms of late development and the need to "catch up" with the global West. Interestingly, "alterity" is a theme that unfolds into several others, constituting Western identity by what it is not: not superstitious, not religious, not oppressed, not "barbaric" but, equally, not a place where living conditions are "dangerous", not a place plagued by disasters and, chiefly, not a place for dangerous diseases. The naked face can become a figure of "advancement" and "cleanliness" that substantiates the "safety" of European and North American cities. However, not only that idea relies on a "false" sense of safety — as the danger of emissions, pesticides, and even pharmaceutical drugs

is no longer content of conspiracy theories — but global ways of life showed that Europe and North America are not safe from pandemics, or from brutal, totalitarian, government demonstrations.

Finally, the themes of "oppression" and "freedom" as a necessary contrast appear in the issue of control over bodies which is central to both objects. While that contrast is often attributed to the dichotomy of donning niqab versus being unveiled — and even which one means "freedom" or "oppression" can change, depending on the point of view — the controversy also permeated the debate about masks at the pandemic start. Indeed, *ambivalence* is pivotal in the discussion about covering the face because these apparatuses don't seem to create contradictions but amplify existing ones in both our practices and beliefs. As the debates around veiling and unveiling prove, both associations seem possible.

On the one hand, the thematic trajectory associated with both objects can be one of "compliance" with religious commandment or with government guidelines. The masked ones are the ones obeying and following, accepting a unilateral leadership without questioning it and, hence, can be perceived as "oppressed". Nonetheless, at the start of the pandemic, even the fiercest opposers of covering the face *wanted* to be masked, just like a number of Muslim women *want* to don niqab — particularly in nations where its use is interdicted, a symptom of a broader issue with racism and Islamophobia, which are no lesser a threat than a deadly virus. In that sense, not only freedom *of choice* is thematised in the act of covering the face, but freedom *from*: the virus, the contact with contaminants, the chaos instigated by unrestrained sexuality, the threat associated with racial and religious persecution.

Once both values are concomitantly disseminated in the discourse, in a relation of mutual presupposition, there is no answer to which value is predominant: freedom *of* (masks and veils) invite the issues those apparatuses aim at preventing, also inviting the need for control (hence oppression); but taking the oppression to its maximum, completely giving in to the control of the bodies — both through religious regimes and through technology — full–circles into maximum liberation, through the protective control of the body through agents that act by filtering something both ways. Hence, the ones completely free

to uncover are oppressed by the dangers in the environment, while the ones completely oppressed by being covered liberate themselves from the danger: masks and veils are pure control of the body and its functions, but they can also be pure freedom, pure subjectivity, marking the impossibility of completely isolating one value in a category — freedom and oppression are two sides of the same coin, and will always be co–existing in social discourses, political or religious.

Such interchangeability of values is independent of the visual and discursive contrasts of figures at the surface level, extending the disjunction of expected homologations to the fundamental level. In their turn, such possibilities intersect with the problem of interchangeability of enunciator and enunciatee and the idea of masks and veils as another *actor* in discourse, investing those instances with subjectal roles in the interactions with bodies and others. On the one hand, masks and veils are able to confer actors with a "total subjectivity" emerging from a "refusal of reciprocated regards" (Riedmatten 2016 p. 166), a recurrent issue in writings about the Islamic veil and the practice of "screening" a woman when she meets a suitor for the first time, reiterating the existence of a power imbalance emerging in relations where one can see but interrupts the others' gaze. As such, both facial supplements link to one's increased subjectivity or agency, at least when it comes to scopic relations: indeed, a powerful statement is found in Na'ima B. Robert's (2005) decision to adopt the niqab versus the normalisation of showing the face to everyone all the time. There is agency in *deciding* when not to show one's face, making the act of sharing the visage's nudity when and to whom one sees fit intentional — from that point of view, masking elevates the face to the same investment of intimacy our culture confers to the torso while reiterating the disempowerment or naked bodies (and faces).

The relations created by masked individuals disturb a series of expected actions and phenomena linked to visual communications relying on facial exchanges: by disrupting the programmed interactions occurring between faces, "facial interrupters" seem to blur the oppositions we are accustomed to, despite our incessant efforts to polarise those manifestations according to our constructed cultural codes. On the one hand, such disruptions make the masked individual emerge as a pure

presence, particularly when the mask of choice is one that doesn't coincide with the "given lines": the sight of a niqab in a sea of bare faces can have the effect Greimas (2002) describes in his *Fractures*, suspending time and space for the one who cannot not look, and is flooded with the emotions or *esthesis*, positive or negative. However, the suspension of the markers resulting from this encounter is a simultaneous installing of other markers, particularly when it comes to social roles. In fact, Fiorin (2016) describes the mechanism of *embrayage* as a "treachery" artifice, one that can give one person in the place of another: no longer the individual, but an uttered/installed social role — in our case: the believer, the complying citizen but, equally, the rebel, the dissident. Such reinstalls the persons in the discourse, creating specific locations that also create distance: the suspension of facial recognition is the suspension of the possibility of proximity.

4. Discourses about dress

Throughout the examination of a plastic and figurative semiotics presented so far, it is possible to see that niqabs and surgical masks share a function as facial covering objects, which causes them to be united in the transformations of the face they promote, as well as in the themes and figures they make surface in their existence as sartorial utterances. Nonetheless, beyond the "correct" or "programmed" articulation of meaning extracted from the standard analysis — in which the production and apprehension of meaning follow the expected direction of semiosis and the transitions from one level to the next — the mechanisms of meaning–making and cultural tools used to conceive, disseminate, and apprehend significance relating to masked faces don't always seem to "obey" the perfect harmony of the generative trajectory. Indeed, Barthes (2009) remarks that a Semiology grounded in "ideal equivalences" is limited to the operation of "reading" or "deciphering" articulations of expression and content, which are close to the discursive interaction Oliveira (2013) coupled with the production of "coded sense": a mode of sense construction in which both the meaning and the roles of the enunciation subject are fixed. In such a mode of

signification, the plastic, as well as the themes and figures faces disseminate, would be homologated to their equivalent semio–narrative level, which, as previously argued, wouldn't sustain their contrast beyond the superficial structures of discourse. In other words, beyond the surface, different masks don't seem to form a "true" semantic category: from that perspective, both objects are not separate disseminations of two contrasting values but two actors disseminating equivalent actantial roles and values (Jardim 2021a).

Nonetheless, while it is possible that meaning is produced and apprehended through coded sense grounded in a closed relation of sender and receiver in which the message is defined and disseminated unilaterally, the interaction between (at least) two instances in the communication act permits situations in which meaning is *constructed*, rather than *transmitted*. In the production of discourses about dress and sartorial practices, other discursive regimes seem to be at play, permitting modes of sense–making in which both enunciatee and enunciator are capable of "fabricating" sense as well, instead of merely decoding (or discovering) it. While the dissemination of given contrasts permits the construction of a collectively agreed substructure permitting the construction of meaning as well as its decoding, it is important to question to what extent the given meaning emerges from homologations of expressions and contents, or is somehow decided "at random". Coded meaning relies on the enunciator "mapping" the construction of sense for the enunciatee to decode (Oliveira 2013), emphasising the importance of given contrasts, such as the West versus the Orient, as a reading grid for discourses, locating such manifestations in a shared semantic framework — a function similar to the one played by the topological formant in visual texts.

As such, the dissemination of given contrasts is central in the maintenance of West and Orient as opposed, in which it creates associations that are unquestioned and unchallenged, permitting both that discourses are read by their intended enunciatees and the continuation of the substructure of meaning that is reproduced through the reading of messages, as well as the production of new discourses. Without the reliance on such codes, the polarisation of different forms of masking — and, consequently, their existence as "cultural practices" — would be impossible, once it

relies on *certainty* about differences and oppositions, and can only thrive in contexts in which sense is given. Coded meaning has no room for critical thinking: it is the space of binaries *par excellence*.

Contrastingly, beyond the reign of programmed semiosis, Barthes' idea of myth as a second–order semiological system creates the conditions to a certain semantic "anarchy" where any significant object can be reduced to the status of language, accumulating new meanings that have no commitment to the original signified of the signs it appropriates. Instead of following the prescribed homologations of coded sense, whether the meaning assigned to an object is "true" or "false", discourses emerging from myth permit logic–defying constructions of "sense", in which not only the meaning is open — and flowing with the logic of hazard or randomness — but the hierarchy in its utterance is no longer unilateral, from enunciator to enunciatee. If coded meaning responds to the hierarchical reproduction of a code, random sense is rhizomatic, in the sense Deleuze and Guattari (1980) utilise the term, in which its ability to reach in all directions creates significant conditions that flip the models and undo dualisms, producing relations beyond the rules of the linguistic sign that cannot be tried by generative or structural models.

When it comes to Fashion, Culture, Media, and Politics — important pillars sustaining a neoliberal logic today — myth as a sense–making mechanism destroys the meaning of objects, as well as the consensus about it, due to the multiple perspectives involved but, equally, because of a number of mythical appropriations taking place almost simultaneously. Such operations permit an endless cycle of "rebranding" objects or ideas, making them compatible with the established ideologies or with the needs of each era: the transformation of meaning enabling its alignment with dominant ideologies, as well as the possibility of turning an idea into its complete opposite whenever an "enemy" must be constructed. As a result, not only meaning becomes random, but it is also fragmented, with each fragment growing its own relations in multiple directions: the microfascisms that need only to be crystalised (Deleuze & Guattari 1980 p. 16)?

Both masks and veils possess chaotic semantic trajectories marked by multilayered mythical accumulations linked to the fragmentation of

identities and groups, as well as their various semantic needs. The face veil, for example, was an emblem of liberation from the Western cultural and political dominance both for Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood and for the revolutionaries in Iran (Cf. Ahmed 2011; Shirazi 2003); but for the West, it became a metonymy of the barbaric treatment of Middle–eastern women (Cf. Ahmed 2011; El Guindi 1999) justifying, among other things, the US occupation of Afghanistan. It was recently (re)highjacked as a symbol of ISIS and the possibility of a "Muslim invasion" that populates the imagination of philosophers and authors, such as Žižek and Houellebecq, while it is also presented among social media figures and Muslim activists, such as the journalist Na'ima B. Roberts, as the ultimate liberation from the terrors of Western beauty standards. The surgical mask? A symbol of social standing consolidated in the image of the surgeon, but a radical figure of rebellion when utilised by tattoo artists or alternative music groups. During COVID, simultaneously a desired article of security and liberation from the pandemic dangers; while its imposition recovered the association with crowds of masked Asian urban dwellers (Cf. Burgess & Horii 2012; Phu 2012) and the image of oppression, totalitarianism, and destruction of individual liberties (Cf. Baer 2008; Phu 2012).

Both objects seem to not only possess the ability to represent everything to everyone as required, but their meanings seem to be determined by cycles of appropriation that dance between mainstream and counter–cultural practices. Masked faces, thus, are able to manifest narratives and values that not only merge the opposites — completely surrendered, practised bodies, and the transcendence of surrounding oppressions of objectification — but function as emblems of an entire set of social practices and behaviours, even if their meaning is constantly transforming. When objects are hijacked by myth, not only their meanings can be full–circled into their opposite, but, as predicted by Barthes, even the struggle against myth can become myth (Barthes 2009). But, more importantly, there is also a certain arbitrariness in the investments of value uniting the objects, contributing to a chaos of sense confusion that, ironically, emerges in response to the desire for preservation of discourses. In other words, although coded sense is governed by a regime of regularity — secured by unilateral communication

and fixed roles and meanings — the codes in which such messages are grounded emerge from random investments of value that are equally subjected to re–investments that are unpredictable.

In the confines of such an (anti) logic, it becomes possible to fragment our discomfort with covered faces by recategorising different forms of masking into types that respond to created, random codes that, contradictorily, resort to a set of given codes about groups and practices to substantiate themselves. That includes a set of knowns about peoples and cultures, but equally socio–political practices and even modes of rationality. To separate oppression exercised by a religious code as irrational, because it is not scientific; but to accept fragile and forever–changing scientific evidence as truth, embracing (and even desiring) oppression exercised in its name becomes nothing more than the result of "dressing" figures so as to make them similar to "reality", producing effects of veridiction (Greimas 1983; Greimas & Courtés 1993) that depend on a set of shared agreements on what is real and not, or what is right or wrong. The same mechanisms are what permits society to construct the strive of one group to sustain their way of life and beliefs as an effort to destroy Western ways of life, while the destruction of livelihoods can be reframed as an effort to save lives. Once mythical constructions rely on reductionist practices, it is not only the lack of depth in the discussions in social media rants, tabloids and fake news that facilitates the bending of codes to construct "false realities": the trademark of our systems of knowledge, relying on the isolation of variables is also a fertile ground for partial and decontextualised fragments to become essentialised traits that can be bent to construct "real realities". In our inability to look at systems and totalities, the absence of a reasonable rationale goes unnoticed: our relationship with discourses, "official" or "fake", is mostly supported by shared myths.

Sartorial practices — particularly the images produced about them — can be a powerful force in this game, once they are potent signs of group affiliations (and opposition). Hence, constructing and disseminating discourses around dress in mass channels is an important tool to "force" the surfacing of oppositions that are often not verifiable at the fundamental level of objects. The construction of opposition separating niqabs and surgical masks is emblematic of that phenomenon, in which it begins at

the production and dissemination of verbal and image discourses about the objects that aim at supporting, rather than reporting, the original antithesis of irreconcilable difference, recovering Deleuze & Guattari's idea of a signifier that programmes meaning, and not the other way around — an inversion of roles, like the others explored in this analysis, that not only destabilises our social structures in its attempt of preserving them but fulfils Merleau–Ponty's cataclysmic prophecy of what "cybernetic ideology" would bring us: «[...] a cultural regime where there is neither true nor false [...] in a sleep or nightmare from which no one will know how to wake up» (Merleau–Ponty 1961 p. 1592, our translation).

When transposed from the fundamental level, as a contrast of values, to the discursive level, as a contrast of figures, the verbal and visual tropes through which niqabs and masks are communicated reverberate the West and the Orient as antithesis. For Barthes, an antithesis is a transgression: a figure of a given, eternal, eternally recurrent opposition whose union appears as a «last attempt of the code to bend the unforgivable» (Barthes 1970b p. 30–1, our translation). If two instances are *given* as the radical opposition of one another in a discourse, as is the case of the West and the Orient and the multiple figures disseminating the category in the discursive level, then any other possibility beyond the opposition becomes absurd, and the contact of the two opposed substances which are mutually exclusive can only produce catastrophe.

Rather than the literal catastrophe — one might say a war (or a pandemic…) — we might debate the matter as one invested with the catastrophic role Landowski (2005) postulates both in the coincidence of two parallel narrative programmes, or the *actant joker* which is more and more recurrent in the "alternative media" communications, but equally present in mainstream discourses that seem to flip their opinions backwards, as well as entire realities, *at random.* In communications governed by the regime of accident at their narrative level, or in discursive interactions reversing the hierarchy of roles and levels in the construction of sense, the enunciatee utters the sense instead of merely "reading" it (Oliveira 2013). If it is possible for the enunciation subject to swap places, that discursive regime also makes it possible for the given binaries to randomly interchange, reversing our notions of "good and bad" and "right and wrong", equally occasioning discourses that no

longer respond to the hierarchical articulation of the generative trajectory: when the emergence of sense and interaction is open, the meaning we make can be anything, even if it "doesn't make sense", and irrespective of whether the information channel is "reliable" or not.

Throughout the cases discussed in this article, it is possible to see the passage from a system of coded sense, in which meaning is hierarchically apprehended from a "source code" determining how objects are read or decoded by the enunciatee, to a mode of meaning–making in which the enunciatee takes charge, uttering sense instead of "apprehending" it. That inversion of roles is not only occurring at the level of information consumers, but by the "sense–makers" utilising the chaos of information (and its fragmentary meanings) to spin the wheel of resignification, in the impossible attempt of controlling the unpredictable. However, because random sense is a weapon available to all, the creation of difference and the loose use of concepts (from theory and sciences, but also from cultures and religions) can be performative, in the sense Judith Butler (1990, 1993) uses the term, as it permits the enunciatee to transform the meaning by bending it: it is a pure transgression of hierarchy, pure model–defying multiplicity. The clinging to a narrative in which surgical masks and niqabs are *not* the same is closely linked to that procedure, as are many other narratives of "cultural difference", in which the enunciatee (and the enunciator likewise, for that effect) must somehow "make peace" with their own beliefs and substructures of cultural and social meaning whenever new events call those beliefs into question. Ironically, coded sense and random sense can only exist in mutual presupposition, not only in which random sense is the "origin" of the arbitrary investments that make our code: random meaning can equally become a tool through which the predictability of coded sense can be restored.

5. Conclusion

The trial of a double–standard created around niqabs and surgical masks continues from our previous analysis of the pair (Jardim 2021a), aiming to deepen into this "false contrariety". However, rather than following the vertical course of the generative theory, our analysis is

horizontal, exploring the different tools available in the semiotic theory to the study of the most superficial levels of manifestations — the plastic analysis; the mechanisms of thematisation and figurativisation; and, finally, the reoperation of the same mechanisms in the construction of discourses about the objects, as well as the masked and naked face.

To study the implications of this triumph of the surface is an attempt at understanding the *zeitgeist*, once the turn towards superficial depth is a phenomenon comprising much more than the constructed contrariety of niqabs and surgical masks, inviting the hypothesis that the analysis presented is pertinent beyond the limits of our object of study. While theoretical "depth" is nothing more than another European invention, as remarked by Foucalt (1966) — and, I must add, a response to the movements of "epistemological fashions" during the 18th century — its creation has shaped the advancement of our construction of knowledge since, while also contributing to the chaos of an overproduction of knowledge and information that is at the same time the cause and the consequence of the disjunction of manifestation and meaning discussed in this article.

Similarly to the constraints of the fictional text as an effort to preserve the discourse (Barthes 1970b), it is possible to see how the same constructed restrictions invade the realm of "real" life through media texts — an operation that, not surprisingly, draws from the same set of categories Greimas identifies in the works of Dumézil and Lévi–Strauss about Myth: good versus evil and honesty versus dishonesty, aligned with the idea of a "better world" versus a "worse world" (Greimas 1970). Such meaning–making strategy moves away from the "dissemination of information", constructing a fictionalised discursive reality in which "truth" is equally an object of fiction: created discourses about objects and practices that stand the veridiction test, even when they are not aligned with a "true" semio–narrative level, consolidating constructed codes as given structures of meaning that become a new foundation to a way of seeing the world.

On the other hand, the phenomenon studied in this piece also opens the possibility of questioning our mechanisms of meaning–making and knowledge production. While the double standard applied to the niqab and the surgical mask is the surfacing of an issue that is grounded in, or what grounds our general practices of communication and management of socio–cultural issues around the myths that confuse difference of

customs with *cultural difference*, the regimes of meaning–making emerging from our socio–cultural milieu makes us question if we have reached the limits of classification and separation of human groups and practices. From that perspective, the return to the surface and the modes of random sense are not pure anarchy or nihilism, but a twisted form of "degrowth" or, as argued by van den Akker & Vermeulen (2017), a "metamodern" overcoming of Post–modern structures by reaching with, among, between and after Modernity — going backwards so as to go forward?

Thus, a central theme emerging from the analysis is the matter of *inversion*: of roles, of meaning, of binaries. On the one hand, such transformations can be an engine of social change, challenging the hierarchies of who gets to make meaning, and the hierarchy of the theoretical mechanisms of construction and apprehension of sense. Anyhow, those inversions also birth a crisis of meaning and of veridiction, flipping the mechanisms of meaning construction and apprehension backwards, pointing to the cracks in the hierarchical, structural, generative models.

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