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On Niqabs and Surgical Masks: a Trajectory of Covered Faces

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Abstract: The face is pivotal in our cultural practices and language, as well as a central topic of debate in the realm of society: the early 2010s were marked by a diatribe around Islamic facial covering, both in Arabo-Persian countries and in the West and, today, the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemics all over the globe brought another facial supplement to the discussion — the surgical mask. Niqabs and surgical masks have more in common than their function of covering the face: they are united by their image of Otherness, related to Middle- and Far-Asian countries, but also to a project of transcendence of our natural condition. Saniotis (2012) analyses the matter of Transhumanism and Islam as problems of body techniques which, like the two systems, meet at their roots: our analysis adds to his investigation by examining face veiling and facial covering as transhuman praxes, both concerning the discursive and narrative levels of the Greimasian theory reaching beyond their cultural meanings, while also debating the matters of Otherness and Alterity emerging from those supplements, utilising the socio-semiotic works of Oliveira and Landowski as our framework of analysis. The article reflects on the manners in which both objects, the niqab and the surgical mask, operate through similar enunciative mechanisms and construct similar narrative utterances; nevertheless, culture invests polemic contracts in these objects, creating a 'false binary' system around them, which is largely emerging from their plastic configuration. Through our analysis, a series of 'false binaries' — such as religion and technology — are explored with the goal of reflecting on the

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assimilation and rejection of cultural customs and the manners in which the many goals of transcendence, divine or scientific, are centred around the control of the bodies and the emergence of authoritative orders that fix subjects in thematic roles.

Keywords: Niqab; Surgical Mask; Identity vs Alterity; Socio-Semiotics; Enunciation

1. Introduction

The face — or the *being able to see* it — is a central theme in the 21st-century media landscape and academia, notably the Islamic face veil, and its banning in European countries. A vivid example of the matter, Žižek's (2011) account of the *niqab* as what suspends empathy with another is grave, radically distant from Barthes' (2009) almost poetic examination of the mythical face of Greta Garbo. The range of considerations is proportional to our obsession with facial features: their visibility and *recognition* can be associated with identity and our roles in social contexts but, ultimately, with what makes us human to the eyes of Another — for Levinas (1961), the face-to-face, the original event of signification, is the primal content of expression itself: a point of openness to anOther.

When considering the matter of racialisation of face covers — the *niqab* an undisputable "face of Islam", a readily recognisable sign of Islamic faith; whereas the respiratory diseases claimed to have originated in Asia contributed to the construction of surgical masks as a "Sino-sign" (Phu 2011) which inscribes markers of race beyond the body — the dichotomy visibility of the face versus its disguising can be homologated to a binary West versus the Orient. Similarly, the divide between the alleged freedom enjoyed by women who go uncovered is often presented as a marker of "Westerness" against the Islamic practices of female veiling, but that is not the only manifestation of this contrast: the images of masked crowds in Japan, Hong Kong and China during the SARS epidemic constructed the surgical mask as a far-Asian, not Western, visage. In both cases, the customs and rituals associated with facial covering are constructed as something located elsewhere. However, despite the stories about the new coronavirus outbreak insisting on narratives of Chinese origins, the global dimensions of the pandemic forced the practice of face-covering into Europe and America, causing not only compliance with the custom but

public pressure for officialising mask-wearing that came from bottom-up, even among its fiercest opposers.

What *niqabs* and surgical masks *are*, in essence, is very similar: the central matter is the manner in which one and the other are represented. The operation of covering the face (for public health, as well as religious reasons) can be understood as originating from a place of transhuman aspirations: as a philosophy, the core claim of Transhumanism is that future humans will be radically different from ourselves, as a result of utilising technologies to prolong our livelihood. Saniotis examines the extent to which the varying notions of the body appearing in Abrahamic religions, particularly Islam, are comparable to the transhumanist utopia, especially when it comes to the themes of *transcendence* and *self-improvement* (Saniotis 2012). As such, techniques of cleansing, restricting, consuming mental enhancers and, finally, the use of *supplements* over the body are some of the areas in which religion and technology meet: facial covering is an important part of both, creating faces that are, if not "transhuman", at least something quite other than human.

Human, post-human, transhuman: where those lines are drawn intersect matters of religion and technology, while centring debates around *citizenship*, both in a socio-economic way, our "place in a country", and the problem of race and alterity. As our almost unrestrained movement and large-scale immigration seem to reinforce binaries, widening gaps between cultural practices more than ever, occasions such as public health crises seem to promote a temporary suspension of the established symbolic orders, facilitating a type of "reverse assimilation", in which it is no longer the Other who naturalises the customs of the constructed "Us". Face-covering is an example of this forced union with practices we reject, the conventions we associate with Others but equally, the welcoming of transhuman implements we might otherwise repudiate—such as the diatribe around contact trackers, or the dystopia of lives lived almost entirely online. Within that framework, the article presents an initial reflection on the problem of *niqabs* and surgical masks, aiming at a comparative of the religious and the public health face cover in their existence as discursive praxes, chromatic manifestations, and the narrative utterances emerging from and through them. The address of both practices from a Greimasian perspective proposes an account of their respective rejection and acceptance today, as objects communicating predicaments stemming from transhumanist goals.

2. The discursive level

The two words forming this issue's title — *visage* and *face* — possess meanings that reach beyond the idea of the human face as an ensemble of features. Visage, in the dictionary, signifies "the manifestation, image, or aspect of something" (Stevenson 2010, p. 1984), whereas face, as a noun, equally relates to *surface*, which can be the face of anything — of a building, a solid, or the plate of a clock — possessing, in English, the use as a verb likewise: *to face* is to be positioned towards, as well as to confront or accept and, finally, *to cover a surface with a different material* (Stevenson 2010, p. 624-5, our emphasis). In that sense, the theme of improvement predicted in Transhumanism is somehow professed in the linguistic meaning of *face*, when it can mean both the human, "natural" face, or the face as a surface, covered with a different substance to change its attributes. While Barthes states that a face, more than a material object, can be an "idea" or even an "event" (Barthes 2009, p. 63), the covered visages — whether they are masked or veiled — become a manifestation which replaces the most evident markers of identity. This replacement of the face with something else is, perhaps, at the core of Western culture's repulse towards covered faces, or its perception of masking as a type of disfigurement (Phu 2011): the interruption of direct (visual) communication, *tête-à-tête*, which becomes mediated with a supplement acting over the body wearing it as much as over the bodies who gaze.

Both cases of face covering, although invested with plastic differences, produce the same (contradictory) enunciative mechanisms: at the same, covered-faces install a distance between the interacting subjects [*débrayage*], while also constructing a radical effect of presence, shifting in the markers of enunciation [*embrayage*] (Greimas & Courtés 1993, p. 79-82, 119-21). In my analysis of the Tuareg veil (Jardim 2019), the covering of the face among those men is invested with a dual function: at the same time interdict and facilitate social contact. The covered face suspends the "reading" of facial expressions which can give away one's feelings and intentions (Murphy 1964); contradictorily, that is the mechanism that facilitates one's presence in the social space — not as an individual, but as a *social role* (Jardim 2019). The installing of a role takes place through discursive interactions which, for Oliveira, can be understood as acts of *positioning* — or, to recover the dictionary, of *facing* — causing the complex

subject of enunciation, the enunciator and the enunciatee, to embody a "here" and "now" (Oliveira 2013, p. 242). Beyond cultural meanings inscribed in the objects (or their misconstructions), every facial covering can be understood in the same manner: the covering of the face is the rawest form of denying individual subjectivity and installing a (collective) *role* which, on its turn, is constructed around specific positions in the situation of communication. In the case of the *niqab*, it is a marked, feminine role that responds to one single narrative programme (Greimas 1983, p. 64) which also presupposes enunciative positions which are fixed. The surgical mask is not different: the covering of the face performs a similar enunciative operation which competentialises the surgeon with their role, also sacralising their figure; as for the masked civilian in a pandemic scenario, the mask installs the role of *cooperator* with the maintenance of social order and collective health: the masked subject no longer an individual, but part of a collective narrative programme of obedience, compliance, and partaking in the effort of containing a virus.

The veil, the mask, and other forms of face-coverage possess the same objective: to protect a surface (the face) from something, while simultaneously protecting something from that surface. More than a *mediator*, it is a kind of two-way barrier: a *disruptor* or *interrupter* that affects the (at least) two subjects involved in a visual communication situation. Although the debate around covered faces emphasises what is "kept away from the gaze", every form of covering suspends both ends of the communication: while who is on the outside is not able to receive what is inside, the one who remains inside is also not able to "emit" that which must remain guarded. The "agent" that needs to be kept in/out varies, as well as the motivations invested in the act of blocking the face: if surgical masks aim at containing invisible particles or secretions that can carry contaminants, in the *niqab* the visual attributes of the face, both its beauty and its expressions, must be shielded so that it can both be guarded and guard others against its sight. Both projects share a common premise: Nature appears as the enemy of man, with its varied delegates portrayed as acting against the goals of transcendence. The use of supplements, *culturalised objects* — sacred or technological — permits the human body to attain transcendence from its natural condition, either through techniques that teach us to control our urges, becoming more like our Heavenly Father (Saniotis 2012) or through techniques that prolong our livelihood by repelling agents that can kill us.

Nonetheless, even the manners in which masks and veils are installed as enunciative praxis seem to possess ambiguous motivations which blur the lines between Technology and Religion. Burgess and Hori (2012) for example, remark that, although a "scientific" object, the surgical mask presence in Japan and other far-Asian countries possesses a marked ritual function in channelling the anxiety of disease, while Ahmed will emphasise the strategic revelation of the Surah about veiling, enabling the Prophet to accomplish personal interests (Ahmed 1986). The impossibility of absolute verifiability in both areas — the sacred and science — invests both supplements with dual functions: to channel, simultaneously, the repetition of "tested and approved" methods, and to respond to miasmatic understandings that stem from faith, in religion or in science.

3. The chromatic formant

Transhumanism, as a field of study or a praxis, merges together three aspects of human life: philosophy, technology, and religion. However, the recent debate relating to technological enhancements seems to return to the matter of social problems emerging from such technologies coming true and invading the mainstream, namely the widening of the gap between the rich and the poor. Equally, the problem with the supplements we already have exists in correspondence with ideas of national identity and race, which are necessarily attached to the problem of religion and technology surrounding our object. Beyond the problem of efficacy of veils and masks, supported by divine or scientific sources, the matters of identity and subjectivity are pivotal to a discussion about covered faces. When discussing the 16th-century veil worn by Venetian and Paduan women, Riedmatten debates the possibility of a unilateral subjectivity: to see without being seen as a form of "total subjectivity", in which one is unable to become an object for the other's gaze (Riedmatten 2016). Although the statement considers only the facial features, and not the plastic ensemble of a veiled figure which can, as a totality, be seen and turned into an object, the notion is interesting to the contradictions of two manifestations of covered-faces and the double standards they produce: it is more than the binary Religion versus Science that supports the use of surgical masks and rejects the use of the niqab, but a problem of to *whom* do we grant such privilege — to echo Levinas (1961):

it is only God who sees the invisible, and does so without being seen.

Accepting that covering the face possesses similar (and contradictory) effects, the simple decision about which type of face covering is acceptable— in a social setting in which seeing the face is the ideal — marks which types of *transcendence* we welcome. In the prevalent discourses about face-covering, to transcend our biological constraints (one of the key objectives of transhumanists) through medical knowledge appears as a preferable practice when compared to the transcendence through altered states of consciousness and rigorous regimes of ablutions and prayer. Within this context, the most emblematic chromatism of facial supplements invites the discussion of an important distinction: *black* and *white*.

Greimas' proposition of Figurative Semiotics as a "semiology of images" considers colour, a formant producing "undistinguished plates", as one of the significant dimensions of flat images (Greimas 1984). In the operation of covering the face partially or completely, the chromatism of the face is radically transformed, replacing the distinguishable eidetic features of the physiognomy with a continuum that dis-figures the original figurativity of the visage, disrupting its original reading orientation. Hence, the colour applied over the face becomes largely determinant to the resulting interactions with (or reactions to) it.

The semantic binary Black/White as a motivated, hyperbolic reading of skin colours is central to Dyer's (1997) work: by widening the gap between the two "races", binary values associated with both words as linguistic signs are invested in skins and their subjects. Black is the colour of darkness, terror, dirt, difficulty, tragedy and despair; whereas White, its opposite, is the colour of light, transparency, and refinement (Stevenson 2010, p. 172-3, 2023). Not by chance, the *black* veil of Muslim women is more resisted than the *white* surgical masks — or light blue and green, natural colours equally bonded to the idea of cleanliness and purity, hence echoing the semantism of *white*. The opposition also contrasts the dark ages of religion, and the enlightenment of science: while the dark veil covers the face of "superstition", the light covering of the face comes from "reason"; the dichotomy of niqabs and surgical masks returns to the problem of who are the subjects allowed to transcend but, likewise, what vehicles of transcendence a given culture privileges. It is tempting to draw an opposition of "divine" versus "man-made" transcendence — ignoring that religion too is a human construct — or "faith" versus "fact" — leaving

out the important issue of imagination and quasi-fictional character of innovation in science, particularly the highly speculative field of Futurology, the main face of an "applied Transhumanism."

Nonetheless, beyond the symbolic matters of purity and pollution at the core of both sacred and secular societies which can manifest as the terms Black and White, our perception of the different facial supplements, *niqabs* and surgical masks, are often read as a binary "(religious) backwardness versus (transhuman) progress", since the forms of transcendence intended with the covering of the face are distinct and, in a Western cultural logic, opposed. As emblems of Others, each type of facial covering is culturally anchored, but also attempting at transcending through different means: by repelling the environment through the use of technology, or by controlling the body through ritual. If the (black) religious transcendence of Islam is feared, associated both with repelling conditions of life in third world countries, and with the power of oil Princes and their harems — both, to recover Žižek (2011), producing barbaric treatments of their women — the (white) technological transcendence of the surgical mask is admired, associated with technologies, industries and economies stronger than our own, but also plagued by super populations, "excentric" cultural practices… and pandemics.

4. The narrative level

While our perception of facial coverings is often associated with the superficial level of objects as visual communication, the ways we react to masks or veils are grounded in the apprehension of narrative programmes and utterances which are manifested through those plastic-visual objects, and the discursive mechanisms they champion. For the analysis of the narrative level of facial covering, the matters of *citizenship* and *integration* within social practices are pivotal, particularly in Europe, where assimilation is prevalent to the predominant discourse about immigration. It is not news that Western media consistently tried to portray Islamic practices, particularly face veiling, as "anti-social" whereas, today, the using of face masks — whether by health professionals or by the complying public — became an act of heroic proportions: to collaborate with government guidelines, to save lives, to be a patriotic citizen.

Hence, as much as the superficial level of facial supplements can expose their approximation as discursive praxis or create plastic divisions, the semio-narrative structures can equally unmask convergences and divergences, linked to the problem of function versus constructed binarisms. Cultural rivalries on the side, both supplements appear connected to the construction of thematic roles linked to projects of transcendence, stemming from the imposition, by an addresser or operator, of a certain discipline which authorises the realisation of a single figurative trajectory by the presupposed competent agent (Greimas 1983, p. 63-4). On the one hand, a citizen complying with their duty of stopping the spread is not only utilising an enhancing object to preserve their own health and livelihood: the narrative utterance constructed to and through that object promotes the preservation of the totality, the collective social organism of a Nation. The face-covering utilised in religion responds to an identical programme: the preservation of a social organism — however, it is not a Nation, but the Ummah one wishes to protect. In both cases, the realisation of the programme depends on the compliance of subjects which are interdicted of responding to any other figurative trajectory.

When the objects are regarded as isolated manifestations, both supplements are linked to the construction of equivalent thematic roles. However, the examination of the objects in relation to one another and in their relations with the West exposes the construction of a *polemic contract*: an utterance formed by the confrontation of a subject and an anti-subject which, in popular literature (and in media stories undoubtedly) is often dressed with a binary of "good and evil" (Greimas 1983, p. 52). Although both forms of face covering belong to a narrative of Otherness (Middle-eastern or far-Asian) against the Western ideal of "showing the face," the appropriation of those body techniques (and the forms of transcendence they champion) can be split into the "identification" with different social roles — of "cooperators" or "opposers" of the established cultural norms — both of which are, nevertheless, thematic roles which are not chosen but imposed by an operator, addresser of the corresponding social orders. In the present case, where the contemporary West constructs itself as the norm, the scientific form of transcendence appears as preferred, closer to the Whiteness Dyer discusses, which extends the subject/anti-subject dynamic to the other binaries presented previously: White and Black, but equally Reason and Superstition, Science and Religion, and

thus forth, all of which are connected to the binary West versus Orient.

Beyond the narratives stemming from 21st-century political tensions, or the matters of race, culture, religion, and different degrees of citizenship, masks and veils return to the syntax of junction from the standard theory — the virus's role as a "negative object of value" (Landowski 2004, p. 115), a notion that could be extended to the Islamic theme of female beauty, an equally negative object of value, when shared at the wrong time and place, instigator of *fitna* (Shirazi 2003), a word that can mean any form of chaos, from unrestrained sinful urges to civil war, which can equally have an epidemic character. Facial coverings, religious or technological, are part of disjunctive utterances (Greimas 1983) in which a positive subject renounces a negative object of value, a disjunction appearing as euphoric to the subject, since the conjunction with negative values — a lethal virus or sinful urges — would reverberate a disjunction with the positive value aspired by the subjects: their path towards transcendence, divine or technological. From that perspective, even when subjects step out of a programme in search of "free will", the value invested in the objects motivating the use of supplements is sufficient to return the subjects to their roles, facilitating "obedience" as an almost involuntary trajectory.

5. Conclusions

The layering of three aspects examined — two of them belonging to the discursive level, the enunciative mechanisms of face-covering and the emblematic chromatism of each supplement; and one belonging to the narrative level, the construction of thematic programmes and their articulation in polemic contracts, paired with the disjunction with negative values promoted by facial coverings — permit us to draw a series of fundamental categories: White vs Black (as semantic values, not as colours); Science vs Religion; Citizens vs Dissidents, all of which seem to fit the eternal "West versus Orient" binary that followed my recent work (Jardim 2019, 2020). The present article continues a recurrent theme in my research, the problem of oppositions constructed around practices that are, in essence, stemming from similar operations producing similar discursive and narrative mechanisms, which I would name "false binaries".

The recent euphorisation of facial covering — with surgical masks,

not *niqabs* — seems to widen a cultural gap that ostracises religious facial supplements (and the ritual practices they communicate), presenting surgical masks as a type of accepted exception. The analysis showed, however, that both supplements operate from similar enunciative and narrative mechanisms, producing similar thematic roles — the "complying citizen" or the "believer" — which respond to equivalent goals of preservation of social order. The only difference seems to be the addresser one fears: the Government or God.

Yet, the assimilation of surgical masks raises another crucial question: the problem of a return to authoritative States in the West, and the (perhaps Foucaultian) theme of control over the bodies. The matter is central to the goal of transcendence, in which both futurologist supplements and sacred rituals of cultivating the body entangle their roots and practices, as observed by Saniotis: to transcend our natural condition is necessarily done through discipline, control and authority. Religion and Technology as practices repeat the problem of response to one unique "possible" narrative programme, which is unilaterally communicated by an addresser-operator. In Socio-semiotic terms, such fixity of roles doesn't provide the space for interactions to take place, trapping the actants into co-incidences that are operated (Landowski 2005) or into closed situations in which things don't "make" but "have sense" (Oliveira 2013).

While the use of surgical masks in far-Asia imparts ritual and etiquette over science, constructing emblems of discipline and compliance (Burgess & Horii 2012; Phu 2011; Tomes 2010), veils can also shift from pure Sacred to reinforcers of a social order (Ahmed 1986; Murphy 1964; Shirazi 2003), exposing the problem of reducing such practices to one realm — science *or* religion. The possibility of hybrid motivations of facial supplements echoes the hybrid root of Transhumanism as a philosophy, practice, and field of study: a point of dissolution of the binary reason versus faith, Transhuman studies and practices respond to a historical moment in which religion and science seem to be moving from a dogmatic, scripture-based system, to exercises grounded on experience and intuition (Pinchbeck and Rokhlin 2019). The insights from the present investigation substantiate a regard of cultural, scientific, and religious practices that dissolves oppositions standing in the way of the progress and transcendence we seem to universally pursue, even if through different means.

As reality becomes more unreal than fiction, the adoption of practices

belonging to the Other grows to be an expected outcome of the *zeitgeist*. While the hope is spread worldwide that 2020 will occasion the emergence of a utopian world order, a more urgent question is presented by this article. Amidst the oppositions we construct between cultural practices and the body techniques they produce, the differences we create often don't stand the test of semiotic analysis, dissolving whenever we look below the surface. As the constant exposés of our social constructions continue at multiple fronts, reflecting on the double standards practised (by traditional media and the public likewise) when it comes to facial covering is another step on a long road: a trajectory leading from irreconcilable binaries to intersubjective practices.

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