

Artificial Skin and Biopolitical Masks, or How to Deal with Face-Habits

Cristina Voto, *Università degli Studi di Torino, Italy*

ABSTRACT

Building on the case study of the performative practice of voguing within ballroom culture among LGBTQIA+ communities, the aim of this article is to recognize a facial agency capable of putting into tension three thresholds of meaning: visibility and invisibility; identity and otherness; nature and artifice. On the basis of these tensions, interpretive habits concerning identity are incorporated into the face as a semiotic *dispositif* that negotiate sociocultural expectations and limitations. These habits, when agentively performed through the face, give shape to a communicative project that manipulates platforms of identity into biopolitical masks. The analysis will also give an account of how “worn” biopolitical masks reproduce and perform a facial *monstrum*, or warning, and how this specification warns others of the normativity of aesthetic and biopolitical appearance while activating an intentional transformation of identity.

Yo, reivindico mi derecho a ser un monstruo
Ni varón, ni mujer ni XXY ni H2O
Yo monstruo de mi deseo, carne de cada una de mis pinceladas
Lienzo azul de mi cuerpo, pintora de mi andar
No quiero más títulos que encajar.
—Susy Shock, “Yo monstruo mío” (2011)

In chapter 3 of the first part of the dystopian novel *1984* by George Orwell, the narrator makes us aware that in Oceania there exists a peculiar crime, an act whose offending part is a specific part of the body: the face. It is identified as

Contact Cristina Voto at Department of Philosophy and Educational Sciences, Via Sant’Ottavio, 20, 10124 Turin, Italy (cristina.voto@unito.it).

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facecrime within Newspeak, the official language of the superstate in which the novel is set.¹ *Facecrime* deals with inappropriate expressions: “A nervous tic, an unconscious look of anxiety, a habit of muttering to yourself—anything that carried with it the suggestion of abnormality, of having something to hide. In any case, to wear an improper expression on your face (to look incredulous when a victory was announced, for example) was itself a punishable offence. There was even a word for it in Newspeak: facecrime, it was called” ((1948) 2000, 29). Starting with this passage from 1984 is helpful in framing this article’s main concern: the communication of identity through the face. As suggested by Orwell, the everyday experience of negotiating the normality and the abnormality of our expressions can be semiotically useful for understanding how cultural interpretations are layered within a society and valorized within the body. Social norms are sense-making, in semiotic terms, as recurrent interpretations that standardize cultural—and therefore somatic and individual—processes. These can also concern the mediation of identity and its possibility of acting out from the norm through a translation of cultural, social, and personal narrations and experiences, such as identity. How, for example, do facial expressions negotiate with what the experience of self-perceiving or being identified as a man means and communicates, and thus with what it entails and organizes social expectation? For example, as the British post-punk band The Cure suggested in their 1979 song: can boys cry? And what about the experience of self-perceiving or being identified as an African American or a transgender woman?

In these pages I argue that, on the facial surface, it is possible to identify discursive forms that allow for deeper reflection on how biopolitical normalizations act within a culture and within processes of identity-making. The intersectional dimension of identity is perhaps the most powerful discursive stratification for defining the norms of the body and determining a subject’s belonging to a given community or a social group. With the concept of “intersectionality,” we recover the proposal of US jurist and activist Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), who proposed the term for describing the overlapping of different social identities and their particular governances within every person.

Provocatively stressing the comparison between the biopolitical power that organizes Oceania and the normativity that regulates contemporary Western

1. I am extremely grateful to José Enrique Finol, founder of the Semiotic and Anthropological Research Laboratory of the University of Zulia (Venezuela), former president of the Latin American Federation of Semiotics (FELS) and former vice president of the International Association for Semiotic Studies (IASS/AIS), for his generosity and for shedding new light on this short but extremely precious passage from George Orwell’s novel, lost in the memory of youthful readings.

society, it is possible to affirm that the suggestion of an abnormality still concerns the need to “wear” an appropriate expression on one’s face. But within auspicious contextual conditions, at least, this call is not simply the result of a violent force exerted on life, but the reproduction of a performative agency out of culturally and socially accepted norms.

What is the relevant sense of *ab-normality* in this context? The term generically describes something that deviates from normativity—as the etymology of the word suggests, *ab* is the Latin preposition that indicates a movement away from something. It refers to something unusual, to something that results from the manipulation of a category, an *ab*-erration out of the standard. This deviation—an *ab-normis* motion, that is, a movement away from the norm—can be understood as something that exceeds, or goes beyond, a norm and that, because of this excess, becomes capable of signaling a difference. Interpreted this way, the abnormality of an expression of the face can become something capable of communicating a shift and, indeed, of signaling warning about the politics of appropriateness and inappropriateness in the governability of bodies and thus of the lives they lead. An abnormal expression can become a *monstrum* whose anomaly constitutes a warning, recovering the Latin meaning of the verb *moneo* ‘to warn’. More precisely, we will consider this warning as a *monstrum* specification: the intentional design and performance of facial signs that can shed light on the biopolitical governance of identity. So intended, the *monstrum*, something that in the past communicated a divine signal, can be viewed and interpreted as a warning about biological and political life that is marked by a shift out of normativity. I use this notion of *monstrum* specification in the discussion below to discuss the process of staging facial *monstra*, the process of producing signs that warn others about specific biopolitical relations within the countercultural performative practice of voguing in ballroom culture.

For more than a century, ballrooms have gathered African American, Asian, and Latino queer corporealities—homosexuals, drag, and transgender subjectivities—from the marginalized segments of societies, thereby creating a safe space for the transgression and crossing of biopolitical boundaries and differences. In these ballroom performances, strategies of collective identification are brought into play that develop in conflict against the dominant culture and the capitalist system of production and reproduction.

Within this framework, the fundamental hypothesis that drives these pages is the idea that there is a relationship between the performativity of identity, as a layered intersubjective semiotic category, and the resemantization of interpretative habits concerning the face. Through the analysis of the practice of voguing,

and particularly the facial posing and motion within this dance, we will take into account how “identities are signaled, formed, and negotiated through bodily movement . . . how social identities are codified in performance styles and how the use of the body in dance is related to, duplicates, contests, amplifies, or exceeds norms of non-dance bodily expression within specific historical contexts” (Desmond 1993, 34).

The Face as a Semiotic *Dispositif*

As Gloria Anzaldúa wrote, “the world knows us by our faces, most naked, most vulnerable, exposed and significant topography of the body” (1990, xv). This evocative reflection is taken from the introduction of her anthology on feminist poets, *Making Face. Making Soul*, where the idea of “making faces” is proposed as the core of a postcolonial epistemology. The conception of the face as a *dispositif* that communicates and therefore interacts with the many folds that make up identity is central throughout these pages as well. But to Anzaldúa’s reflection, I add that even though “the world knows us by our face,” we never know ourselves by our own face.

Although, at first sight, the face can be thought as a given natural object, a deeper understanding reveals that it is something difficult to grasp: it is shaped by heterogeneous assemblages and is in continuous transformation.² Due to this perceptual and cognitive paradox, in the face of others and on our own, we always recognize a persistence despite this mutability, a form beyond the fickleness. Recovering the famous definition of semiotic pertinences framed by Eco in *A Theory of Semiotics* (1975, 1976), the processes that modify the face are signs in and of themselves insofar as they can also be used *in order to lie*.

First of all, in order to know our own face, we always need to resort to a mediated experience—for instance, the reflection on a translucent surface, the perception of others, or the restitution of our image by way of a machinic apparatus like the camera of a smartphone. Furthermore, our faces are always changeable beyond our own control—because of aging, pathologies, or emotions; but, at the same time, there is a series of intentional controls that can, more or less permanently, modify the face—through surgery, makeup, hairstyling, piercing, tattooing, scarifications, jewelry, and so on.

As affirmed by Massimo Leone, the Italian semiotician interested in investigating the new interdisciplinary field of face studies, the face can be analyzed as a communicative project of identity:

2. The concept of “assemblage” has been developed and furthered in the disciplinary fields of philosophy and critical theory by scholars like Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1980), Donna Haraway (1985, 1992), Bruno Latour (1996, 2005) and Manuel De Landa (2006).

Individuals use their face to communicate but they are not alone. Patterns of face signification become part of history, tradition, and culture. They are deposited in the collective memory and become common sense. That is why the human face is one in nature but multiplies in cultures. Each society, and each epoch, develops face trends. The biology of the face meets the semiology of a specific human group and becomes custom, as well as second nature. Smiling, for instance, is an adaptive human behavior. . . . Yet, each culture smiles in a different way, although these smiling habits may become spontaneous, unmediated second nature. (2019, 19)

Already from these first observations, the face ceases to be something fixed to become a complex *dispositif* that connects different thresholds of meaning.³ From a semiotics standpoint, it is the human cognitive system that sets certain thresholds of relevance below which the activity of meaning disappears. This inferential activity is then confronted with the latent dimension that interweaves meaning with life and that can be called, citing the studies of Eco, *encyclopedia* (1984). In the *encyclopedia*, the multidimensional plane of semiosis, there are infinite inferential paths. Within it, the subject is always caught in a network of enunciations, always connected to previous inferences that govern the naturalized beliefs as conditions of people's cognitive activity. Let us therefore consider which discursive naturalizations set the semiotic thresholds of the face.

The Face between Visibility and Invisibility

In the face we always attend to the negotiation of biopolitical forces that struggle for visibility. In this sense, when somatized in the face, the visibility of the invisible can inscribe different marks that regulate self-presentation and belonging within a community. Referring the visible to the invisible always implies a normative construction derived from the incorporation of certain characteristics in the body. This construction of identity is based on the correspondence between the visible somatics and the invisible incorporations, corresponding to the determination of fixity given by an order. An extremely significant example in this regard is the practice of makeup as the effect of both an internal and external normative gaze: the makeup always reveals a visual order, a visual normativity.

3. In *A Theory of Semiotics* (1975, 1976), Umberto Eco introduces the concept of "semiotic threshold" to take a position in respect to the question of the nature of semiosis. This threshold delimits the field of informational and communicative phenomena that do not enter within the field of semiosis, which is instead the field of signification. Eco proposes this definition: "since everything can be understood as a sign if and only if there exists a convention which allows it to stand for something else, and since some behavioral responses are not elicited by convention, stimuli cannot be regarded as signs" (1976: 19).

It can unify the conflicting diversities struggling on the face or blow them up. In the oscillation between attitudes of “camouflage” and of “self-proclaiming” (Magli 2013) on the made-up face, it is possible to witness the dialectic of seeing and being seen, to fathom the staging of both an indiscreet and a spectacular presentation. Furthermore, the facial struggle between the visible and the invisible also allows the acting out of a grammar of expressions and poses, which connotes an identity, even in an ideological sense. Many of the proposals that have circulated throughout history—from Aristotle to the twentieth century, and not only within Western culture—regarding a physiognomic reading of the face as the display of an invisible morality on visible facial traits, might be understood in this sense. Concerning the case discussed in these pages, the diffusion of voguing in ballroom culture can also be understood in the same way: as the acting out of the performativity of gender through the rupture of biopolitical norms and codes.

The Face between Identity and Otherness

The face installs itself on the threshold between individuality and otherness. Every process of identification within a community contains in itself an unstable nature that is the effect of varied processes mediated by the encounter, or the clash, between plural and individual contributions. The progressive sedimentation of the effect of these inscriptions (re)produces social and individual faces, because the very matter of the face is not only formed but also regulated by norms and codes on which its very signification and the intelligibility of identity depend. The result of this process is a “written face”—an expression also used by Roland Barthes in a chapter of *Empire of Signs*—that passes through multiple inscriptions of identity and that reproduce themselves on this somatic surface. These reproductions take place in an intersubjective dimension, in the in-between among social and personal inscriptions, since “to imagine, to fabricate a face, not impassive or callous (which is still a meaning), but as thought emerged from water, rinsed of meaning, is a way of answering death” ([1970] 1982, 91). In this same perspective, the practice of incorporating stereotyped facial expressions and poses from models of high fashion (i.e., “voguing”) in the ballroom scene is a way of answering the normative and exclusive effect of showbusiness and star system iconography. This exclusion is, in fact, the result of a negated recognition that can lead to the loss of identity.

The Face between Nature and Artifice

Because of the abovementioned semiotic stratifications, the face can be interpreted as an assembled artificial organ—or an assembled organic artifice—something to wear and through which one can act out and display identity. The face is, in

this sense, always ready to become a mask (Belting 2013) since it guarantees a social identity under the shelter of the plastic manipulation of identity's communicative project, which itself changes according to particular circumstances. The face embodies the threshold between nature and artifice because it is the performative result of personal and social writings together with biological and physiological inscriptions. It is therefore artificial because it also has the capacity of acting and making act, in the terms of an intentional agency.

Agency is acquired by the face as soon as it enters into the fabric of social relationships. In this sense, facial agency can be defined as an oriented volition that strikes the human being who gets in contact with social relationships. Furthermore, it is "the trigger of a backwards process of subjectification" (Cappelletto 2021, xvii) that layers the appearance and manifestation of identity. As we will see, during balls (i.e., the events that are part of ballroom culture), the effect of capitalistic impositions triggers new facial agencies for rewriting social facial habits.

Strike a Pose And . . . Activate a Face-Habit

As the feminist theorist and semiotician Teresa de Lauretis maintains (1984), the experience of identity is the effect of a meaning process in which the inner and outer writings intertwine. Through this perspective, de Lauretis recovers the semiotics categories first formulated by Charles Sanders Peirce:

To my apprehension, consciousness may be defined as that congeries of non-relative predicates, varying greatly in quality and in intensity, which are symptomatic of the interaction of the outer world—the world of those causes that are exceedingly compulsive upon the modes of consciousness, with general disturbance sometimes amounting to shock, and are acted upon only slightly, and only by a special kind of effort, muscular effort—and of the inner world, apparently derived from the outer, and amenable to direct effort of various kinds with feeble reactions; the interaction of these two worlds chiefly consisting of a direct action of the outer world upon the inner and an indirect action of the inner world upon the outer through the operation of habits. (*CP* 5.493)

Applying to our framework the Peircean categories of "inner world" and "outer world"—first appearing in his manuscripts for the lectures on pragmatism given in spring 1903 at Harvard University (Peirce 1997)—it is possible to recognize a deep interdependence between facial signs and the production of general beliefs within the semiotic process of identity-making. It is in the encounter between these signs (understood as sedimented inscriptions) that the space for

the production of identity is marked, experienced, and represented within a specific biopolitics. The conditions for understanding the habit that determines the identity are the result of the direct action of the outer world on the inner world and the possibility of an indirect action of the latter on the outer world. The “congeries” that result from these interactions must exert an effective agency, otherwise the actions of the internal world could not have any influence on the habits and determinations exercised by the external world (Demaria 2015).

In Peircean terms, the habit is not just the disposition of human consciousness to act, nor the disposition of any living being to react, nor any object’s disposition to behave in the world (*CP* 5.538); rather, “habit taking is a primordial principle of the universe” (*CP* 6.262). By applying Peirce’s category of habit within voguing in ballrooms contexts, we can affirm that a “muscular effort” (*CP* 5.493)—such as the acquisition of a certain facial pose typical of the fashion and cinema star system—can result in a change of habit. But no consciousness can be acquired by a facial movement alone. It is acquired also through inner semiosis, through performances of imagination and of agencies akin to those reproduced in ballroom culture.

During ballroom events, competitors perform and stage facial poses “to create an alternative discursive terrain and a kinship structure that critiques and revises dominant notions of gender, sexuality, family, and community” (Bailey 2011, 367). Through these performances, a social ritual that communicates and creates new signifiers within the community is built. Above all, the possibility of posing like models and the embodiment of certain facial iconographic elements typical of high fashion and showbiz through voguing create an alternative discursive terrain in standardized ideals of Western beauty and capitalistic social categorization.

Voguing is a dance composed of postures and expressions derived from haute couture magazines and show business’s celebrity culture. During voguing, people walk in performances that mix dancing, modeling, and lip-synching. They enact a commutation of values drawn from the hegemonic and heteronormative Western mediatic imaginary by linking them to the otherness embodied in themselves as members of the ballroom culture. The critical and transformative project of voguing passes through the conscious performance of those habits, social competences, and narrative patterns suitable only for certain identities and not others.

As an LGBTQIA+ phenomenon diffuse among non-White and marginalized communities, balls became popular in the United States in the 1980s. However, the roots of this phenomenon are found in the second half of the nineteenth century, when the Hamilton Lodge in Harlem staged the first drag ball, marking the

beginning of a safe social event that was carved out of, and differentiated from, the normativity imposed by New York society. It is in that period that working-class, non-White, and nonheteronormative communities began to understand urban space as a place where they could express their identity without the conditioning imposed by hegemonic biopolitical logics (Chauncey 1994). Two elements constitute the core of ballroom culture: ball “events” and “houses.” The former are performative occasions, while the latter are “familial structures that are socially rather than biologically configured” (Bailey 2011, 367). The link between the two is the competition “in categories based on the deployment of performative gender and sexual identities, vogue and theatrical performances, and the effective presentation of fashion and physical attributes” (Bailey 2011, 368). During balls, “the racial differences between black and white spectators, although hardly forgotten, were overshadowed by their common positioning as ‘normal’ bystanders who were different from the queer folk on the ballroom floor. In a city where racial boundaries were inscribed in the segregation of most public accommodations (integrated buses notwithstanding), the difference between normal spectators and abnormal dancers was inscribed in the differentiation of the balcony and other viewing areas from the dance floor” (Chauncey 1994, 391–92). This reconfiguration of the norms that govern the meaning of an identity concerns social life, artistic practice, and the legitimation of power. During the competitions, these norms are resemanticized by staging a repertoire of facial haute couture poses and movements performed by way of the surface par excellence of identity, the face. These facial habits, thanks to a performative intentional manipulation of the face, establish an oriented desire to “[demonstrate] an externalized and collectivized cognitive process” (Gell 1998, 222). This volition is the performing of an identity unrelated to the biopolitics of biological sex, class expectation, and ethnic racialization within Western capitalistic society.

This desire becomes possible by incorporating habits of the fashion and showbiz iconography, when habits become ways of being (*héxis* in Aristotelian perspective), they become beliefs that are not fully conscious but capable of conditioning the interpretative chains (Lorusso 2015). As stated by Peirce, “there are, besides perceptual judgements, original (i.e., indubitable because uncriticized) beliefs of a general and recurrent kind, as well as indubitable acritical inferences” (CP 5.442). These are the habits, those beliefs incorporated through the diachronic and synchronic repetition of actions—like, for example, the repetition that characterized the nineteenth-century “facial society” described by Thomas Macho (1996). Those beliefs are capable of transforming themselves into a consciousness and become “real agencies” (CP 5.493).

The concept of “habit” is key for Peircean semiotics and for the understanding of the processes of incorporation of biopolitical logics. Habits are, in this regard, not beliefs—however, beliefs can give rise to habits. Thanks to these habits, we tend to act in a certain way, to express and pose our face in a certain way, but also to produce discursive forms about the staging of identity on the face in a certain way. In this sense, the habit allows us to recognize experiences and strategically organize actions by adapting to, or rebelling against, the models that circulate in a determinate society. Following this viewpoint and applying the Peircean concept to the framework of these pages, we can affirm that *face-habits* are modes of deploying specific features of the face from among the infinity of possible cultural representations of identity expressible through it, making certain appearances more relevant than others.

Let us use the word habit . . . not in its narrower and more proper sense, in which it is opposed to a natural disposition (for the term *acquired habit* will perfectly express that narrower sense) but in its wider and perhaps still more usual sense, in which it denotes such a specialization, original or acquired, of the nature of a man, or an animal or a vine, or a crystallizable chemical substance, or anything else, that he or it will behave, or always tend to behave, in a way describable in general terms upon every occasion (or upon considerable proportion of the occasions) that may present itself of a generally describable character. (CP 5.538)

By this proposal, Peirce delineates a semiotic orientation: a conscious belief leads to the formation of a habit, but the fixation of the belief also moves to a state of potential unconsciousness in which the habit becomes part of the subject who is not necessarily aware of it. As for the habit: “at the same time that it is a stopping-place, it is also a new starting-place for thought” (CP 5.397). In this way the habit, even if acquired, becomes an original belief: it is naturalized (Lorusso 2015). The habit begins, therefore, to act *habitualiter*, since it affects the subject toward a disposition:

There are two ways in which a thing may be in the mind—*habitualiter* and *actualiter*. A notion is in the mind *actualiter* when it is actually conceived; it is in the mind *habitualiter* when it can directly produce a conception. It is by virtue of mental association (we moderns should say) that things are in the mind *habitualiter*. (CP 8.18)

We are dealing with a semiotics process that establishes a constitutive link between individual interpretative activity and socially shared knowledge. Thanks

to this link, beliefs begin to act in the subject *habitualiter* and out of active consciousness. These beliefs are introjected to the point of being dispositions to act; they are separated from the actual experience of the individual but they are ready to become agencies. In this sense, habits can accomplish a “mediating function between direct experience and disposition to act, between singularity and generality, between actuality of the present and continuity with one’s own past.” (Lorusso 2015, 276, my translation).

It is now clear that a semiotic reading of habits implies an inferential reconstruction with which to account for the regularity of certain beliefs naturalized in a given culture: beliefs that act as presuppositions and conditions of people’s cognitive activity. It is therefore necessary to reveal how these habits manifest themselves, what they become interpretants of, and which interpretants they generate.

In the case of the communication of identity through *face-habits* within the practice of voguing in balls, postures, movements, and expressions derived from haute couture and the show business star system iconosphere reconfigure interpretants—and interpreters—from the White, heteronormative imaginary to those of nonconforming communities. Who attends or performs within a ball participates in an uprooting of binary systems of cataloguing and separation of genders, questioning the normative and hegemonic power built on sexuality, class, and race. The practice of voguing specifically works with taking up highly culturally iconographic codes that can be traced back to the *face-habits* of what is expected in the star system and high fashion, and exaggerate them while making manifest the performativity of identity in its intersectional dimension.

During balls, the awareness that “gender reality is created through sustained social performances means that the very notions of an essential sex, a true or abiding masculinity or femininity, are also constituted as part of the strategy by which the performative aspect of gender is concealed” (Butler 1988, 528). If gender is performative, it means that it passes from potentiality to actuality only to the extent that it is performed. The practice of voguing in ballroom culture and its effects act exactly in this direction from potentiality to actuality. In its staging of identity, it condenses the grammar of *face-habits* into poses and movements that bring into dialogue these very performances with the sociocultural normativity of the facial imaginary. This grammar produces enunciations, plastic manipulations of the face as codes that predispose to an enactment of communicative and symbolic values. We will refer to these enunciations as masks that allow us to glimpse the negotiation between White, sexualized, fashionable facial habits and their resemantization through voguing.

From Face-Habit to Biopolitical Masks

In the previous section we could start to recognize an agency of the facial habit. In what follows, this tendency to action allowed by the mediation of the habit becomes intertwined with the very practice of voguing. In the ballroom competition, the assembling of poses and movements of the face performs a biopolitical standardization of identity while keeping the staged act credible. The *realness* of such performance—the aesthetic and biopolitical believability of the performed identity—is a category that also configures these competitions. Realness is linked to the credibility of the identity performance being staged, for the achievement of which the performer will manipulate and assemble facial expressions, gestures, and movements together with the designing of a proper outfit. According to Bailey, “to be ‘real’ is to minimize or eliminate any sign of deviation from gender and sexual norms that are dominant in a heteronormative society” (Bailey 2011, 378). Ballroom culture has thus developed its own categories of realness, in accordance with the aesthetic norms that regulate the looks of the subjectivities they perform in the ball, such as: “‘Realness kids,’ to refer to the members who ‘walk’ them. The most common group of realness kids includes ‘thug realness’ (also called ‘realness’), executive realness, schoolboy realness, femme queen realness, butch realness, and butch queens up in drags realness” (378).

This manipulation of the *deviation signs* itself functions as a masking and is one of the most powerful and spatiotemporally extended experiences among human beings.⁴ We can define it as the very activity of an intentional manipulation of one’s appearance (Gramigna 2021). Since the earliest times, humans have reproduced themselves in masks in the most varied forms and in the most varied sociocultural contexts that go from rituals, to arts, and to public or private manifestations of the self. Within ballroom culture, practices of self-reproduction condense into biopolitical masks in which the plasticity of the identity being manipulated makes credible a particular governance of life.

4. In writing the entry “mask” for the 1982 edition of the *Enciclopedia Einaudi*, one of the most renowned Italian encyclopedias, Hubert Damisch recalls how in Late Latin the term *masca* was used to indicate both a “witch” and a “mask.” In this sense, continues the art historian, the parallelism between these two concepts makes it clear how the function of the mask was linked to the mechanism of collective or individual exclusion that is at the origin of all identification. While keeping in mind Damisch’s entry, it is also interesting to note that the Grimm brothers linked *masca* to *masticare* ‘chewing’: according to the German writers, the witch was so called because she ate children. Through this perspective as well, the problem of the mask returns insistently as a question linked to the biopolitical governability of the body: what is accepted and what is expelled from a community continues to monstrously warn us. Like witches or monsters, the biopolitical masks that inform the current research reproduce biopolitical expectations or experiences that are linked to forms of acceptance and exclusion within a community.

The studies of Alfred Gell published in his posthumous book *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (1998) resonate from this perspective: human beings do not merely reproduce themselves in other human beings but also in artifacts and intangible entities. As suggested by the title, the main field of analysis in Gell's inquiry is the realm of art. However, for the present author—and for the case discussed in these pages—the object of art can be considered anything that can be placed in that category by the system of relations provided within a contextual theory. Following this proposal, we will define as an artifact the *biopolitical mask* performed by the practice of voguing within ballroom culture.

In the terms of Gell, masks are *indexes*, a concept that evokes Peircean semiotics. In Gell's terms, an index is “a congealed residue of performance and agency in object-form, through which access to other persons can be attained, and via which their agency can be communicated” (1998, 68). This access happens through an abduction, a type of inference also analyzed by Eco in his studies of Peirce (1984). The Peircean abduction is for Eco “a tentative and hazardous tracing of a system of signification rules which allow the sign to acquire its meaning” (Gell 1998, 14). It has an interpretative quality that works neither deductively nor inductively. Rather, it allows the producer, the prototype, and the recipient of the artifact to be identified and interpreted, from the object itself, from the same index. So intended, the biopolitical mask identifies and interprets the intersectional discriminations that affect the ballroom community.

These masks, when performed through voguing, make visible the sociocultural expectation regarding the performance of visual codes of identity categories. Still following Gell, we can add that viewing the mask as an index allows us to detect an “isomorphy of structure between the cognitive processes we know (from inside) as ‘consciousness’ and the spatio-temporal structures of distributed objects in the artefactual realm” (1998, 222). These cognitive processes, at work in the relationship that humans have with indexes, arise from the unintelligibility of their structure. Due to that resistance, the processes are in dialogue with the intentionality embodied in the artifacts thanks to their availability “to be recognised as counterparts of our social actions” (Cappelletto 2021, xviii, my translation).

This relation between cognition, agency, and social interaction can be understood in the same direction proposed by Walter Benjamin ([1933] 1979) and also cited in *Art and Agency* through the words of the anthropologist Michael Taussig (1993). The correlation “constitutes the very secret of mimesis; that is, to perceive (to internalize) is to imitate, and thus we become (and produce) what we perceive” (1998, 31). Masks as artifacts are models for the functioning of human beings that rely on the human capability to reproduce themselves on

the face. From a semiotic perspective, the face is always a *factitive*,⁵ since it effectively combines communicative and operational functionalities in both cognitive and pragmatic terms: it is the practice of using the masked face that modifies the acquired and naturalized standardizations of the *face-habit*. As we have already seen above, a diverse proliferation of forms and appearances, which emerge from formlessness, spreads across the face. Sometimes this exuberance reveals forces acting on the face, forces that are the genesis of new forms that transfigure and contaminate identity. The result is a facial reproduction based on the proliferation of fragments from other faces that actualize biopolitical masks.

Beyond *Art and Agency*, within Gell's anthropological research, the problem of the mask also appears in another study he made among the Umeda society in Papua New Guinea and published in 1975 with the title *Metamorphosis of the Cassowaries: Umeda Society, Language and Ritual*. One of the key points of this publication, and a real novelty in the field of anthropology, is his comparative analysis of the paradigmatic effect of masks and that of other social objects. This study, in fact, makes Gell the first scholar in "focusing on the dialectics between the face and the mask, and in considering the latter as a device that transforms the meaning of identity conveyed by the face itself" (Leone 2020, 43). Recovering Gell's former field study (1975) and entangling it with his theoretical proposition on agency posthumously published (1998), masks can be considered as indexes that perform an abductive inference on identity. In this sense, they are *congealed residues* of performances that enable the agency of *face-habits* to grant access to oneself to another person, who will abductively connect the masks to the staging of the experience of an identity. According to this definition, masks can be considered as indexes in Peircean terms too, but not only due to the "causal inference" (1998, 13) of which Gell also speaks. For Peirce, indexes are signs that put in relation to the object through a dynamic connection as well, insofar as they: "represent their objects by virtue of being connected with them in fact, although this fact be but the actual occurrence of a thought" (CP 8). Following this idea, the type of masks performed in balls can be considered more as the tentative and hazardous performance of a *face-habit* than an objectual artifact itself. They can abductively imply biopolitical *monstra*, or warnings about the normativity of identity in the shadow of the capitalist dream—or rather, its nightmare.

5. The face is an artifact that *does things* even in its very etymology: *facit*, the third person singular of the infinitive *facere* 'to do'.

Conclusion and Vanishing Lines

I opened this text with a quote from Orwell's *1984*, well aware of the distance between the dystopian horizon depicted in Oceania and the relative and contextual empowerment that can be experienced through the performative languages of arts and dance. That relationship was useful for showing how the manipulation and the assembling of facial expressions that we still experience today in the "great dance" of social roles, can tend to yield facial agencies. We always have the possibility of wearing a biopolitical mask and reproducing *facial-habits* that activate a potential transformation. But it will not have escaped the attentive reader that there is another important quotation in the title: that of Frantz Fanon's fundamental work in biopolitical and postcolonial studies *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952). The essay was writing during a historical period in which the biopolitical yoke on certain lives was still shrouded in indifference and legitimacy. Fanon showed how considering the structure of colonial exploitation on the plane of abstraction masks the problem of weakening and subjugating human beings. The Black human being, therefore, becomes a masquerade, a Black wearing a white mask, and the tragedy is that this mask is an inevitable danger.

From 1952 to the present day, through the civil and social rights battles that have inflamed the last seventy years at all latitudes, we have shed many masks to take on others in the ongoing process of embodying inner and outer worlds that configures personal and social facets. Of all possible incorporated writings, these pages have addressed one in particular, one that concerns the reproduction of identity in the face when negotiating biopolitical impositions. Through the case analysis of the practice of voguing in ballroom culture, we traced the layered intersubjective semiotic process that configures identity through the performance, manipulation, and, therefore, translation of interpretative *face-habits*. From the definition of the face as an assembled artificial organon on the threshold between the visible and the invisible, and between identity and otherness, we moved to the recognition of the intentional condensing of *face-habits* in the process of identity-making that results from biopolitical masking. By doing so, it was possible to identify the turn of the interpretative habit that from the mask it enacts the face as a factitive artifice, which has its own proper agency: one capable of both showing a shift and of becoming a sign whose interpretant is a warning, a *monstrum* specified by the face itself. This turn has to be understood as a process of an insurrection of identity that occurs when a body is forced into a normativity that does not belong to the subject. The process is both cognitive and social and is *condensed* on the face, formulating it as a mask for the somatizations of an identity that can be abductively inferred by an Other, who can in turn reproduce it.

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