Psychology and Psychopathology of the Mask

From the Greek theater to the mind: the opportunities of the mask

Paola Manfredi [1] *, Elena Massardi [2]

Abstract

From some elements of the mask in the ancient Greek theatre which are expressed in the current civilization and psychic economy, it is possible to identify positive some psychological functions that can be performed by the mask, especially the self-protection and the possibility to put into play unknown parts of the self, therefore meeting the diveristy within and outside us. It's highlighted how the ongoing simplification in the mask could on one side offer a supporting screen in a society that multiplies images and amplifies the fragmentation risk, and on the other could reduce the risk of distortions of one own's image in the other's eyes. Therefore, the problem of believable speakers on which one could put his epistemophilic trust is arised and this is linked to the theme of openness to the future, to the persistence and the necessity of sharing, of relationship. Namely, it's highlighted the possibility offered by the mask of experimenting what is not yet, but is present in the desire, as a sort of anticipating background that, instead of being closed in a mental fantasy or in a daydream, is played in the reality (virtual?). It's underlined how this function stays in a delicate balance between experimentation – the "carnival" function – and the gamble and its collocation could therefore fluctuate between the work-in-progress frame and the suicidary one, in which parts of the self can be integrated rather than reduced. Finally, highlighting the dimension of beauty and culture, recalled from the Greek theatre mask, it's adfirmed the importance of these values, translated as play and care systems, a transitional space, in the psychological and psychotherapy fields. The explained themes are lastly evoked and exemplified through the illustration of a clinical case.

[1] Department of Clinical and Experimental Sciences, University of Brescia, Italy

[2] Psychotherapist

Email corresponding author: paola.manfredi@unibs.it

1. Cues for the psychological work by the ancient Greek theatre

From history…

In our occidental and individualistic society, it's obvious to think about the "self" as if it was a "datum", a natural evidence, with some solid and relatively constant features and precise coordinates to delineate the borders between the experiencing self and the others, similarly perceived and represented. In this perspective, there's a tendency in thinking about the mask, likewise intended in its solid concreteness, as something that is overlaid on a self that, beneath,

is conserved integrally and intact from this overlap, just like an object, a screen towards the outside.

However, the Self is anything but given; it's not a well-rounded figure and perhaps, its image resembles more the one produced by a kaleidoscope. The Self is at the junction of intrapsychic, interpersonal and extra-subjective dimensions, it's the changeable result of internal forces, both conscious and unconscious, of interpersonal relationships, that are expressed and constituted in environments of different and interacting levels and sizes. It's an entity that needs relationships in order to exist, that needs to be thought as whole and differentiated in the other's look in order to be cohesive, that needs to feel told in a continuity in order to have a story. The onset of a fundamental confidence that permits the subject to consider its own borders in an identity continuity and with a sense of belonging to the world is the uncertain result of a path that isn't without risks.

Therefore, if we wonder about a composite self that changeable, polyhedral, multi-faceted, to a trick with mirrors, how can we consider the mask? If we share the thought of Publius Terentius Afro ""Homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto" (Heautontimorumenos v. 77), will we ever be in the condition of individuating fragments that don't belong to our kaleidoscope, but instead are parts of a foreign mask? Is it possible to imagine a recital in which repeated "acts" don't become the cover by which is inevitable to judge the book? Indeed, even though the motto doesn't say so, a book is often judged by its cover.

In these terms, the concept of mask points out the ingenue expectations of those who think that the man could have, know and control two distinct and organized identities, one internal and one external.

By drawing to the historical origins of the mask in the classic Greek world, we can perhaps intend the descriptive-metaphorical employing in the psychological filed in a more effective way. In the Greek tragedies, the mask was employed with two functions. First, together with the dresses, it allowed to hide the actor's identity in favour of the character's identity in its more simplified and emblematic aspects, so that it was immediately knowable on a social and personality basis. We could say that it provided an image that wasn't exposed to the subjective interpretation of the others. For example, the government characters were identified by purple dresses, while darker colours, pale and unstitched clothes were reserved for less wealthy population like pastors, servants or messengers, while black denoted the mourning: the agrénon, a long and net-worked mantel, was used for soothsayers, the pháros, an elegant linen-made cloth was reserved for feminine divinities, etc. The mask, in addition to furnishing information about age, social condition and the character feelings, served as a megaphone. The

mask indeed, permitted to amplify the actor's voice, so that he could be heard by all the spectators. So, rather than dwelling on what the mask would hide and its censorship function (Manfredi, 2018), it would be more useful to comprehend the amplification effect, what is said out loud, which has a double effect: a horizontal and a vertical one. Thanks to the first, one can channel the message far, through the second, one can over-talk almost muting other speeches. It would seem that a hearing theme is present, we could say of visibility in relation to a public and also of selection of a message above other voices.

There's also another cue that we could draw from the ancient Greek world and that is the social function of the theatre. In the cognitive plot of what has to be done and what has to be avoided and in the emotional warp of the identification in the character, the spectator is induced in the path of catharsis, of purification from the intense feelings that are represented. Therefore, there's an improving intention, a contribution to maturation that comprehends cognitive and affective aspects.

Next to the tragedies, we can also find comedies and satirical dramas which have a more entertaining purpose: in the former some aspects of society are played and ridiculed, in the latter, usually played at the end of tragedies, the task of lighten the spirit of the spectators, a little bit sensitive about the tragedy, was assigned to satyrs, half men and half animals with very accentuated sexual traits. We can then observe an attention in accompanying the spectator, so that he won't leave the theatre only with heavy affections and thoughts.

In general, it has to be highlighted the dimension of beauty. Beauty is linked to happiness, pleasure, leisure and culture dimensions. This is connected to the perspective of relationship, groups and community: operas, tragedies, dramas are born to be played and put on stage for a wide audience that comprehended even slaves and women.

We can now reflect on the possibility that the highlighted features could be expressed in the current world trying to find out which function they could play.

… to our story.

From the mask as a caricature and exemplification, we would be inclined to seize the negative factors, the impoverishment, the simplification, the reduction, but a less showy, yet important element is that this simplification deprives the subject from the multiple interpretations of the others, offering an easy message to decrypt, a message in which the denotation widely exceeds the connotation. From a psychological point of view it's more and more evident that our identity is built from the multiplicity, from the images of the self with the other (Liotti, 2001), from the IWM, the *Internal Working Models* which include the Working Models of the self and

the caring figures, with patterns that are differentiated since the very first months of life, at least in the maternal and paternal ones. The social reality in which we re moving provides that children get close to several significative figures and that they live in more complex and composite families compared to the older generations. The utilization of the web and connected applications, like YouTube, WhatsApp, Facebook and Twitter… widely amplify the number of users or followers that have the ability to see, interpret, comment and spread aspects of us. Images on which we only have partial control, that fix a snap, a partiality that isn't anymore subjected to the evolving "real" time, but that constitute the ways in which the others, a multitude of different others, can think about us. Furthermore, in our society, the existence itself seemed to be subjected to the possibility of being seen. These images aren't therefore accessory, but they constitute somehow the identity matrix. The trick of mirrors is not only grown exponentially, but has also assumed a constitutional value. Under the pressure of all these images, the fragmentation risk is high. So, a mask can be useful! It restores a bit of control on the way the others can look at us and permits to transmit something about oneself with few distortions borne by the recipients.

The selection of the message clearly offers advantages also for the subject, freeing him from the difficult task of integrating different and layered parts. There's a further element that can make the mask very syntrophic with our society: the time. The mask, similarly to the ones of the Greek theatre, permits a rapid change. With the scene change, the actor itself can interpret different roles. Our mind, but maybe only the way we are used to represent it, would want the changes to be the result of an evolutionary path that leads to the maturation and to complex levels of integration of different instances. It's a step-by-step maturation, perhaps with décalages between an area and another, with different growing rhythms, but in a harmonic frame. The mask indeed accelerates times: what is not liked or doesn't function can be thrown away and substituted with a new mask. Could the shy, a bit awkward, introvert preteen become enterprising, desired and full of friends if placed in another environment, with another hairstyle and a new look? Is he the same person? Does he have the same insecurities? Has he found some answers? Has the fiction become true through the – real- experience of those who find the boy/his mask attractive?

In this sense, the mask can be a beneficial ally in the development, since it permits to play some competences and abilities in progress. It can make the possibility visible and believable.

The mask, in this perspective, teaches something, it improves the subject just like the spectator of the Greek tragedies. The mask could become a way of experimenting what is not yet, but is present in the desire; it's a sort of anticipating background that, instead of being closed in a

mental fantasy or in a daydream, is played in the reality. It's maybe a particular expression of learning "from experience", an accelerated expression, in which you first do and then you become.

However, this operation isn't risk-free. One is linked to the failed learning of those competences experimented thanks to the occasion offered by the mask. The mask functions under the "work in progress" sign. It doesn't function or has dysfunctional limits when it makes an alliance with a "suicidal" or "surgical" perspective, in which what is not ok is eliminated and wholly substituted to other components, silencing every other voice.

We can think to our evolution, to our life as a boat that can sail only if it can find a distance with the inevitable fluctuations and route's calibrations, between Scylla and Charybdis, between the experimentation and the gamble. In this voyage, the compasses need to be searched or, maybe better, chosen. Compasses can be as many as the spectators, but the one that finds the better path has to be searched, in the present moment and possibly for few days of navigation. Even in the therapeutic relationship, we can find the importance of maintaining the two cited issues open and alive. The pressure to experimentation that the mask represents has been valued in the concept of carnival that, together with the dialogic and the setting of engagement, represents the key concepts of the del Intergroup Dialogue of Mikhail Bakhtin (Emerson, 2006, pp. 25-41). Swartz writes: "There is a powerful convergence between the rich subversive and playful energy of unconscious communication and Bakhtin's notion of carnival. For Bakhtin, carnivals throw together 'the profane and the sacred, the lower and the higher, the spiritual and the material' (1984, pp. 285–6). They colourfully enact the grotesque and the taboo, the revered and the feared in an embodied, often parodic display that escapes the repressive effects of dominant discourse. Carnivals are quintessentially celebrations of otherness, and this is why they may provide a paradigm within which to explore the possibility of giving voice to otherness in the analytic space. Drawing on Bakhtin's notion of carnival, it can be argued that paradoxically, in foregrounding otherness and celebrating alterity, dominant hegemonic discourses are temporarily opened to the new and strange – the mad, the culturally exotic, the sexually experimental, […] the craziness of the carnival space, sometimes overwhelming, sometimes even frightening, with its visual and vocal contradictions and multiple narrative threads reconstitutes the world briefly as one in which difference does not divide." (2007, 186-187)

On the other hand, it's important to police and support the work that can be done under the protection of a mask. The therapist, or another significative, can become a "delicate memory" of those parts that risk to be reduced, to be silenced.

To turn to the topic proposed by the mask, we can recognize that also in the plays there are different audiences; in the modern theatres we have a gallery audience, the various audience of the premiers, critics, young, traditional, etc. The evaluations, the expectations, the criticisms are different; we, as a piece of art, should decide which is the audience that is relevant to us. In this delicate work of dynamic equilibrium and of balancing it is important to identify "the significant spectators". Especially if we stand in an evolutional perspective, it's essential to think about ourselves in a comparison that is more similar to a significative relationship than to a mediatic exposure. One can multiply images, followers, "friends" made on Facebook, but loneliness can still remain, the relationship as a space for an authentic recognition and learning may lack. Namely, we need others that we can epistemophilically trust.

Trust is a key element. We have clear confirmation and particular expression of this even in our consumerist society, where the web people for each and every product, may it be a restaurant, a holiday, a book, a vacuum cleaner, a statement, an idea, are free to expresses their own evaluations with comments, values, likes. It's a quantitative answer, a fundamental theme that accompanies the man's story.

Salvatore Natoli has explored the concept being guided by the epistemologies of the term in different languages and has identified a density of meanings that contemplate the dimension of conviction, of being rooted in one's own confidence, "trust as an act", trust as a "feeling" (2014, pp. 23) and trust as "anticipation", as risk and promise.

Namely, there's an aspect that is of close interest and that has to do with subjectivity. Natoli leads it back to the strong Latin expression "se in fidem et potestatem alicuius trader", "moving in the other's faith and power", placing in someone else's hands that we consider trustworthy, someone that gives consolation, support. This is the key element of relationships; not always we are in conditions of missing, of need, but a good relationship is the one in which we feel that we could entrust. And all of us in life experiment the need of a reciprocal help.

Trust, for its intrinsic openness towards the future, is intertwined with hope towards the expectation and "the loyalty is the only that, transforming what is believed in a task, gives to trust the concrete fullness of action […]. Loyalty is the pledge for what is believed, for its happening. At this stage, the right word, the real synonym of loyalty is perseverance, that is the real lab of hope" (ib. pp. 35-35).

In order to reach a goal, the personal perseverance has to meet the others, needs to become a "collective effort".

This is the path: to individuate trustworthy people, to delineate a goal, to engage actively together in order to reach it. For this last phase, we can identify some indicators.

In the theatre, an indicator can be the realization of a piece of art, something beautiful, something we like to see or hear, even if it requires a certain effort. Probably, the same criterion is adoptable for our life, even if we could call it with different names. Winnicott considers the space of psychotherapy as an overlapping of two game boards, one belonging to the patient and one to the therapist (Winnicott, 1971). It's a transitional area, between me and not-me, between reality and fantasy, it's the space of experimentation.

In accordance to Panksepp's conceptualization (Panksepp & Biven, 2012), we can say that a balancing signal, a main thrust that marks the functioning relationships, can be found in the activation of the seeking and play's systems. Keeping these two systems alive can help the patient and each of us in finding a dimension of lightness and pledge, of joyful research, that lead to a fair navigation.

2. The case of Mr. C

The case of C is an example of the use of masks as a shell to protect a true and fragile Self but also to give voice, from time to time, to the different aspects of his personality. Masks' variation is a way for C. to perform a series of unintegrated aspects of his identity, and the different masks manifest itself during different stages of therapy depending on the emotional state C is going through. The expression, and sometimes the amplification, of a single state becomes a mask, a shell, that gives the patient some compactness while communicating to the therapist a sense of disharmony.

C. is a young man, who after a significant breakdown initiates his third psychotherapeutic treatment. He arrives at the first therapy session in a state of despair. He says he lost hope of overcoming the state of deep depression he has been in for a long time. He explains that during the last three years he began and interrupted two previous psychological treatments. He has been referred me by a colleague. He trusts the colleague and his judgment. For this reason he undertakes the new therapeutic project with a messianic expectation, which, in reality, covers the terror of facing a new failure.

During the first months of therapy, the narration of C has allowed me to witness a series of representations where he has given voice and body to some of his unintegrated aspects. The stream of different personality aspects unfolded themselves during the therapy as the script of a theatrical performance. During this process, several parts of the Self took the form of characters, almost caricatures, sometimes contradictory, and with very different functions and features.

For this reason it is possible to describe C's therapy as a succession of different scenes.

2.1 First scene: the narrator

During the first months of therapy C drags in the room a clumsy body and an inexpressive face. C. looks like a robot, with no joy of living, prisoner of his negative thoughts, stuck in his memories that he continues to relive and dream. For a long period, he reports the detailed description of his personal history. He fills the sessions with his flat voice, preventing the building of a space for reflection or for associations. In this phase of the therapy I am forced to be in a passive position of the spectator who listens to the chronicle of events, meaningful but static as images in a photo album. The main issues are the injustices, neglects and denigrations of which he has been a victim during his childhood and adolescence.

The narration is very detailed, and this allows C to keep the logical wire between sessions. But this linkage, unlike Arianna's thread, does not allow him to get out of the maze of his self-blaming thoughts. Rather C seems to build a thin net around us which paralyzes the therapeutic relationship, and prevents the development of the capacity to think (Bion, 1970).

2.2 Second scene: victim or persecutor?

A tragic event brings reality into sessions, permeates the next stage of therapy and allows C to leave past in the background of his narrative, and return to the present. C must leave the mask of the chronicler reporting facts and events. Now he can bring into the sessions the pain of an old times friend loss who was bullied by his schoolmates. The face expressions become more mobile, the eyes express the greatest sadness, and they are filled with tears. The sessions become more alive, but this is an illusion because the tragic event actually leads us back again to a distant past full of regrets and recriminations. At the same time, this phase allows me to look over the victim's mask and also to meet C the 'persecutor'.

The comparison with the peer group put great pressure on his fragile identity and C found it very useful to wear a mask. In this way he could keep control over how others could judge him. C tells me how, in order to be accepted by the peer group and deny his suffering, he learned to play the part of a cheerful boy, full of life and enthusiasm. He worked hard to build an alliance with the most popular boys at school. In reality this peer's group was very destructive and he became an alley oh their destructiveness.

The memories of the relationship with the missing friend allows us to go a little below the surface and to be in contact with the destructive aspects of C. This destructive attitude consists of arrogant and insensitive attitudes but also of opposition and insubordination. I will be able to see these destructive aspects acting in therapy only when C will loose his following mask.

2.3 Third scene: being socially acceptable

As a result of the breakdown C lost his job. The lack of a professional identity makes he feel even more fragile and inadequate. After few months from the starting period of the therapy, C expresses the desire to seek employment. Suddenly he moves to action without leaving room for reflection and for a respectful planning of his needs. His destructive trends take over and, against all therapeutic advices, he decides to seek work, exposing himself to demanding and stressful situations to which he is not yet ready. In this way, C shows his destructive tendencies towards himself. He is unable to listen and take care of his fragility and to consider himself as still a 'suffering' person who needs protection.

C. deals with the first job interviews and he gets a trial period for a possible recruitment. C's appearance changes and, thanks to this event, he can bring into the therapy room one of his favorite masks: the capable and mature person who solves everything by himself. The tiny illusion to feel to be placed in a productive role, and be socially more acceptable, changes his way to present himself. C has a better appearance, his face is more expressive, the body moves more fluidly. I find it difficult to recognize in this C (new for me, but old for him) the person I'd known in the previous months. C, like an imitator who totally identifies with the caricature he decides to impersonate, is totally identified with this pseudo-identity. He deludes himself of having completely recovered his well-being.

2.4 Forth scene: the fall

C fails the trial period, once again he collapses. He brings in the sessions an emotional experience (the breakdown) he has already experienced but now I can be the witness who can mirror his feelings, and build a trustworthy relationship that can be the starting point to help him processing what happened during the first psychic collapse. The fall of the 'socially acceptable' mask allows me to be in contact with the deep despair of C, with his anger and with the devastating envy he has for what he lost and which, in his judgment, the others, much more fortunate than him, have. But this time I don't find in front of me a face that is immobile and petrified in pain, but a face in tears, scared eyes and a shivery body.

C has definitively lost the mask that allowed him to cover his vulnerability but also to keep together parts of self that are now fragmenting in front of my eyes.

Although this is an extremely painful phase of the therapy, only now C can begin to tackle the slow path of reconstruction and integration of parts of the self. Thanks to the presence of the therapist who with his participation can become the "delicate memory" of those parts that otherwise risk being reduced or silenced, C can start to observe his different masks and reflect

on their protective aspects but also on their distancing function. Slowly masks start to overlap, and C begins to think about them as a possible filter that allows him to be in touch with the other but also protect his more delicate inner aspects. From this perspective it is possible to see how C can start to use masks with the more useful psychological function of self protection, as a way of experimenting what is not yet (the filter) but starts to be present in desire.

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