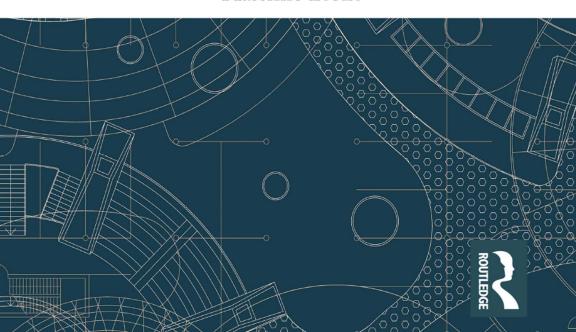# THE HYBRID FACE

PARADOXES OF THE VISAGE IN THE DIGITAL ERA

Edited by
Massimo Leone

The Hybrid Face

This original and interdisciplinary volume explores the contemporary semiotic dimensions of the face from both scientific and sociocultural perspectives, putting forward several traditions, aspects, and signs of the human utopia of creating a hybrid face.

The book semiotically delves into the multifaceted realm of the digital face, exploring its biological and social functions, the concept of masks, the impact of COVID-19, AI systems, digital portraiture, symbolic faces in films, viral communication, alien depictions, personhood in video games, online intimacy, and digital memorials. The human face is increasingly living a life that is not only that of the biological body but also that of its digital avatar, spread through a myriad of new channels and transformable through filters, post-productions, digital cosmetics, all the way to the creation of deepfakes. The digital face expresses new and largely unknown meanings, which this book explores and analyzes through an interdisciplinary but systematic approach.

The volume will interest researchers, scholars, and advanced students who are interested in digital humanities, communication studies, semiotics, visual studies, visual anthropology, cultural studies, and, broadly speaking, innovative approaches about the meaning of the face in present-day digital societies.

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Routledge/FACETS Advances in Face Studies
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Routledge/FACETS Advances in Face Studies offers a pioneering interdisciplinary collection of research. The series responds to the changing meaning of the human face: through the invention and diffusion of new visual technologies (digital photography, visual filters, as well as software for automatic face recognition); through the creation and establishment of novel genres of face representation (the selfie); and through new approaches to face perception, reading, and memorization (the 'scrolling' of faces on Tinder).

Offering an interdisciplinary but focused approach in the fields of communication studies, visual history, semiotics, phenomenology, visual anthropology, but also face perception studies and collection, analysis, and social contextualization of big data, the series will concentrate on the cultural and technological causes of these changes and their effects in terms of alterations in self-perception and communicative interaction.

The series will appeal to scholars and advanced students in the fields of communication studies, digital cultures studies, digital humanities, visual communication, linguistic anthropology, semiotic anthropology, cognitive linguistics, semiotics, ethnomethodology, cultural theory, cultural studies, visual studies, performance studies, as well as philosophy of culture, hermeneutics, and ritual studies.

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The Hybrid Face

Paradoxes of the Visage
in the Digital Era

Edited by Massimo Leone

Contents

vi *Contents*

4   Simulacral faces

A dramaturgy in digital environments[1]

Enzo D'Armenio

1. Introduction

In this chapter, we seek to analyze the construction of meaning performed by new social actors – especially the so-called influencers – on online social networks. In particular, we will attempt to characterize the role of the face in their images by the way they develop peculiar narratives through photographic posts and video productions.[2] We will then attempt to define a dramaturgy of the face and two genres of images that exploit it on social networks: in particular, the new portrait genres (selfies and identity-related images) and video performances (live streaming and You-Tube footage).

   This focus on the face has a twofold motivation. On the one hand, the role of visual identities seems to have been strengthened on social networks, allowing new personalities and new professions to emerge mainly owing to their physical personality and character. The action of influencers, who are able to build communities of followers around themselves, redefines the concept of entertainment carried out by more traditional media such as television and cinema. On the other hand, the meaning-generating action of the face departs from the canons of fiction and traditional portraiture, to the point of revealing new semiotic qualities in which social identity and personal identity are fused in peculiar mimicry performances.

   However, the role of the face must be framed in relation to the dynamics already in place on social networks. The actions of influencers show how identities are at the center of multiple social mediations. The way in which they build quantitative value through large communities of followers paves the way for other types of value transformation: financial value, through the monetization of visits and subscriptions, but also reputational value with appearances in traditional media such as television and print. Framing the context of the action of these actors is therefore fundamental to understanding their particular identity narrations and the role that the face plays in the images they produce.

For this reason, we will proceed in three stages. Firstly, we will attempt to characterize the pressures exerted on identities within social networks, paying attention to the peculiar overlap between the experiential and algorithmic dimensions that characterize digital networks. A brief analysis of the semiotic value of the acts of liking and following, together with striking examples of influencers, will allow us to provide a semiotic background for analyzing their actions. A reinterpretation of Paul Ricoeur's theory of identity will allow us to locate the peculiar narrative structure that governs the construction of identities on social networks.

In the second part, we will focus on the role of the face, starting from Hans Belting's considerations contained in his *Face and Mask: A Double History* (2017). We will attempt to identify the qualities that make of the face not only a semiotic device but also one of the most effective ones, all the while relating its characteristics to those of another expressive medium: images. Finally, we will present two fields of analysis of social networks across which is deployed what we call a dramaturgy of the face, although, in light of Belting's hypotheses, we could rather call it a dramaturgy of face masks. On the one hand, we will compare the principles of artistic portraiture with identity images on social networks. On the other hand, we will discuss the transformation of the actor into a fictional character in order to identify the specificities of the so-called influencers. This dual comparison will be an opportunity to articulate, from a semiotic point of view, the theoretical frameworks proposed respectively by Ricoeur and Belting.

2. The economy of attention and appreciation on social networks: toward an experiential regression

The case of the so-called influencers allows us to frame the dynamics of interaction on social networks because they push their functioning to the limit, exhibiting the mechanisms of construction and transformation of value. According to a distinction recently proposed by Lev Manovich (2017) pertaining to images on Instagram, it is possible to define the action of influencers as a competitive practice, in which the shots produced and shared are aimed at gaining maximum appreciation and visibility, as opposed to casual photos, which follow the pattern of "home photos" (Chalfen 1987) and which are therefore aimed at the niches formed by family and acquaintances.[3]

According to our hypothesis, the activity of the influencers shows in an emblematic way the emergence of a new economy of values. The notion of economy to which we refer is inspired by semiotician Jean-François Bordron, according to whom economies are the social systems that regulate the emergence of all forms of valorization: "The economy refers first and

foremost to the order that underlies the possibility of values and their possible circulation" (Bordron 2010: 37, our translation). In short, an economy would be "a set of instances, presupposing an operation of sharing which institutes them in their differences and, by that, in their possible relations. . . . To each of these instances corresponds a more or less privileged origin of value" (Bordron 2010: 38, our translation). In this context, the instances governing linguistic and communicative values are part of a more articulated system, intertwining with the instances relating to other types of value.

Let us first consider the formation of monetary value while focusing on the case of MrBeast, the YouTube channel of an influencer who publishes video montages in which he makes an aggressive use of money. In one set of videos, in particular, he visits the video channels of little-known streamers and sends them donations of thousands of dollars for futile reasons.[4] He targets young gamers engaged in live gaming sessions of *Fortnite*, a competitive video game whose popularity has made it a mainstream phenomenon, and makes large donations as long as these streamers admit that they are children. The resulting video is a montage of the reactions of extreme surprise and jubilation at the thousands of dollars received.

This example clearly shows the emergence of a particular economic logic: the influencer can afford to spend his money aggressively because the resulting video attracts enough views and subscriptions to his channel to justify it. This video has garnered over 38 million views and six hundred thousand likes, while the channel has a total of over 37 million subscribers. With these numbers, YouTube commercials guarantee a significant return, not to mention the numerous sponsorships from third parties. This creates a virtuous circle – from a financial point of view – in which the influencer can donate money that will then be repaid through the monetization of the attention and appreciation of users, measured on the basis of likes, subscriptions, and views. However, this example also allows us to question the appreciation expressed by the acts of liking, following, and sharing at the center of this economy: what kind of semiotic acts are they? And how do they contribute to sustaining the particular economy of values that governs social networks?

First of all, they are spontaneous, simple semiotic acts, easy to perform because they are linked to a basic aesthetic reaction, which can be identified with what in semiotics is called the thymic category, that is, the basic affective disposition articulated into euphoria (attraction), dysphoria (repulsion), and aphoria (neutrality). Secondly, they are very flexible acts because they are as appropriate for expressing appreciation toward a simple photographic shot, such as a selfie, as they are for showing support toward a discursive opinion on a sensitive issue. Finally, they are measurable acts

because they are expressed by a single person, or at least by a single profile, in a direct way.

This first framework of semiotic features configures a sort of experiential regression in the fruition of contents, precisely because they are immediate, simple reactions, ideally close to a basic aesthetic liking. On the other hand, another important factor must be taken into account, one which concerns the socialization of discursive contents: the acts of liking, following, and sharing – as well as comments – are processed automatically by algorithms, which spread the contents in various ways to wider circles of collectives, thus proving decisive in the formation of communities. This constitutes a paradoxical experiential regression, in which contents are valued on the basis of simple acts of appreciation but are also managed by an algorithmic intelligence that automatically regulates their socialization. The combination of these two factors generates an economy in which appreciation is certain and measurable and allows the video to be monetized even if viewers do not subscribe in cash or do not express an articulated adherence to the contents: it is an attention and gift-based economy (Lanham 2006; Casilli 2011). An illuminating comparison, in this sense, is the technique for measuring television audiences, in which sample polls return percentages of the share of each show, often with questionable approximations. For instance, it is not possible to measure the degree of appreciation of a show, but only whether the viewer was actually tuned in to the relevant channel. Compared to this method of measurement, appreciation on social media is more certain, precisely because it is expressed in a simple way by users as it is perfectly measurable and linked to the actual viewing of content.[5]

3. Paul Ricoeur's theory of identity applied to social networks

In light of this brief semiotic exploration of social networks and of the peculiar economy of attention and appreciation configured by acts of liking, it is possible to isolate two major trends that impact the formation and the management of identity on social networks. On the one hand, we have observed a sort of experiential regression in the interactions due to the abundance of simple images which are often adherent to lived experience, as in the case of selfies and identity-related images, as well as in the acts of liking, following, and sharing, which are the aims of the competitive practices pursued by influencers.

On the other hand, an outsourced management of identity behavior emerges, as it is increasingly delegated to algorithms. This is the way Facebook recommends circles of friends based on the ones we already have or how Netflix offers us personalized audiovisual palimpsests based on our previous viewings and preferences, and how Tinder and Grindr present us

the profiles of potential partners, modeling our aesthetic dispositions and preferences expressed by the faces we liked in the past, (Finn 2017). Our hypothesis is that images on social networks always express a negotiation strategy for dealing with these two pressures, even when it results in an ineffective solution which lets itself be pulled toward one pole or the other. In order to fully understand this dynamic pertaining to identity and to elaborate a theoretical framework capable of framing the fundamental dimensions of identity-related images on social networks, we may propose a reinterpretation of Paul Ricoeur's theory of identity, exhibited in the now classic volume *Oneself as Another* (1992). According to Ricoeur, identity is made up of two interrelated poles, which form a dynamic unity. On the one hand, we have *idem*-identity as the permanence of human traits such as dispositions, habits, and more generally what is related to the permanence of character and body. In this work, Ricoeur refers to the character as "the set of distinctive marks which permit the reidentification of a human individual as being the same" (Ricoeur 1992: 119) and as "[designating] the set of lasting dispositions by which a person is recognized" (Ricoeur 1992: 121). The habits and dispositions of one's character, for example, are described in terms of "a history in which sedimentation tends to cover over the innovation which preceded it" (*ibidem*). In short, the definition of character and *idem*-identity tends to qualify the features of identity linked to permanence, even if they are the result of changes due to habits assumed over time. Becoming static, a habit of this kind must be understood as a trait: "a character trait, a distinctive sign by which a person is recognized, reidentified as the same – character being nothing other than the set of these distinctive signs" (*ibidem*).

On the other hand, the *ipse*-identity is conceived of as the maintenance of the self in the long run, resulting from a management of behavior: "the selfhood of the self [implies] a form of permanence in time which is not reducible to the determination of a substratum" (Ricoeur 1992: 118). It is formed through the choice of heroic role models, values, and ethical principles to which one remains faithful over time: a practical and ethical orientation resulting from the evaluative choices about one's own identity. It is therefore possible to distinguish the fundamental difference, together with the necessary articulation, between the tendency toward the permanence of the *idem*-identity and the tendency toward innovation and self-preservation of the *ipse*-identity: in the choice of ethical principles, values, and heroic figures, "an element of loyalty is thus incorporated into character and makes it turn toward fidelity, hence toward maintaining the self" (Ricoeur 1992: 121). This innovative tendency of the *ipse*-identity will then be sedimented and internalized "in such a way that the person is recognized in these dispositions, which may be called evaluative" (Ricoeur 1992: 122). The *ipse*-identity, in short, is not linked to permanence of

character but to fidelity to the given word. The example of the promise allows Ricoeur to further specify this second axis of identity: "even if my desire were to change, even if I were to change my opinion or my inclination, 'I will hold firm'" (Ricoeur 1992: 124). In other words, it is the "properly ethical justification of the promise" (*ibidem*) that exemplifies the fidelity to the given word, to the figures chosen as guides, to the durable values elected for the self.

Between these two poles of identity, especially as a consequence of the intrinsically temporal character of life, there is a persistent "*interval of sense*" (*ibidem*) that must be filled to build a durable identity. In order to manage these two polarities and constitute an identity that can resist throughout a lifetime, it is necessary, according to Ricoeur, to build an identity narration capable of linking them. The narrative intelligence of a story would be able to constitute a revisable and accident-proof identity unit, harmonizing the two poles through successive revisions – the permanence and resistance of the *idem*-identity, the fidelity to the given word, and the variation of the *ipse*-identity. The meaning of the narrative unity of a life, in fact,

> must be seen as an unstable mixture of fabulation and actual experience. It is precisely because of the elusive character of real life that we need the help of fiction to organize life retrospectively, after the fact, prepared to take as provisional and open to revision any figure of emplotment borrowed from fiction.
>
> (Ricoeur 1992: 162)

According to Ricoeur, the models of literary fiction are the most suitable to provide a repertoire of solutions to manage the complex tension between the two poles of identity, as they constitute a vast reflexive laboratory for "the *application* of fiction to life" (Ricoeur 1992: 161). It is through an imaginative and narrative appropriation that the course of a life, with all its accidents and choices, can be built into a meaningful form and hold up in the long run. This complex theory, which we present here in its essential characteristics, is summarized in Table 4.1.

The structure of the narrative identity elaborated by Ricoeur's theory seems of great value for our purpose here, but a series of adaptations must be made in view of its application to the sphere of social networks. First of all, it is possible to place the experiential regression due to the diffusion of simple acts such as *like*, *follow*, and *share*, as well as images adhering to experience and to the body, in the sphere of influence of *idem*-identity. These acts are linked to our disposition, to what we consider to be our character traits as sedimented over time. On the contrary, the modeling of user behavior by algorithms and the resulting recommendations concern

Table 4.1 Jean-Marie FLOCH. A schematization of Ricoeur's theory of identity (Floch 2000: 32)

Narrative identity	
Character	Truth toward others [parole tenue] or preserving oneself [maintien de soi]
Perpetuation	Perseverance
Continuation	Consistency
Covering the ipse by sameness	Freeing the ipse in relation to sameness
Sedimentation	Innovation

Table 4.2 Our reinterpretation of Paul Ricoeur's identity theory

Identity on social media	*Idem-identity*	*Ipse-identity*
	The experiential pressure expressed by *like*, *follow*, *share* acts, as well as the diffusion of body and face-related images (selfies, subjective shots, direct feed videos)	The modeling of identity accomplished by algorithms and condensed into dynamic profiles of behavior; the delegation of the process of preserving oneself to an algorithmic "intelligence"
	Identity narration: new forms of visual narration, which adopt, deviate, betray, and serialize the canons of portraiture and other identity-related genres (*face reveals*, *reaction videos*, and so on)	

a delegation of the *ipse*-identity – the maintenance of identity over time and the fidelity to oneself – to an algorithmic "intelligence". Analyzing our behavior and preferences, the algorithms model them and program a set of parameters for future propositions on the assumption of a compatibility of preferences and of an overall continuity of practices.

In accordance with Ricoeur's theory, we think that, in order to manage the tension between these two pressures – experiential and algorithmic – it is necessary to build an identity narration capable of mediating and harmonizing them in a suitable and durable form. However, the models of this narrative mediation are necessarily different from those described by Ricoeur. They are no longer literary models because the proliferation of photos and videos on social media requires us to take into account the specificities of the language of images, their figurative and plastic devices, and their narrative structures, which replace the imaginative laboratory of literature. According to this framework, identity narrations are often expressed through simple images or performances in the case of videos, in which the *idem*-identity

is exhibited according to solutions that can structure it temporally. In short, it is only by fully understanding the plastic, figurative, and generic characteristics of the identity-related images that we may understand the narrative pressure to which identity is subjected on social networks.

The mediation between *idem*-identity and *ipse*-identity is often skewed toward one of the two poles, sometimes through a reduction of identity to a simple serial exhibition of one's own face and body or sometimes even to a partial and stereotyped version of one's own character, that is, a limited part of the *idem*-identity.

4. The way images and faces compose

It is clear that identity narration on social networks exploits the body, and in particular the face, in a privileged manner. This is why, in order to understand productions such as *selfies*, *face reveals*, and live streaming, we need to address a fundamental question head-on, one which concerns the relationship between the semiotic qualities of the face and the semiotic qualities of images.[6] In his book *Face and mask: a double history* (2017), Belting proposes a series of enlightening considerations that allow us to describe the face as a semiotic device. To summarize, we may say that Belting gives a central role to the dynamism of facial mimicry, to the plastic appearance of the face animated over time. On the one hand, the face is something that exhibits moods and emotions and that connects "internal" feelings by exhibiting them externally. On the other hand, mimicry can be controlled to hide these same emotions and internal states, thus building a device capable of lying, as in one of the most famous and provocative definitions of semiotics proposed by Umberto Eco.[7]

> The same face expresses truth and falsehood: at times someone can vividly reveal his "inner self" to us; at other times he conceals himself with an impassive face as though from behind a lifeless mask.
>
> (Belting 2017: 17)

What interests us, however, is the relationship between the dynamism of mimicry and the production of particular expressions, which Belting frames by means of two metaphors: on the one hand, the face produces masks, for example to conceal and protect emotions and not let them transpire outward. On the other hand, and more profoundly, Belting argues that the face is a plastic device that *composes images*. "In life, expressions change the face we *have* into the face we *make*" (*ibidem*). And more in detail: "When the face is animated by expression, gaze, or language, it becomes the locus of many images. It follows that the face is not merely an image but also *produces images*" (Belting 2017: 21).

We would like to point out a strong correspondence with the expressive system of images. Authors such as Jean-François Bordron (2011) have rightly pointed out that the meaning system of images cannot be traced back to verbal predication, precisely because images signify in a completely different way: like faces, images do not predicate but rather compose. Certainly, we can immediately identify a similar syntax in the construction of meaning by faces and images: for example, the fact that they do not stimulate linear but rather "tabular" readings in which centrifugal and centripetal tensions, progressive transformations, and opposing force flows contribute to the production of meaning.

Another interesting aspect of this relationship concerns the centrality of perceptual mechanisms in the semiotization of images and faces. It is a matter of relying on a perceptual semiosis, one based on Eco's primary iconism (Eco 2000), for example, rather than on an articulated meaning that relies on linguistic categories. In both images and faces, "recognition" is a fundamental semiotic mechanism, whether it is a matter of recognizing a face or of recognizing an emotion as expressed by a particular configuration. In both images and faces, it is the recognition of such or such specific trait, for instance, a particular configuration of fear or a particular shade of yellow that counts, and not the categorical generality of the concept of "yellow" or "fear". We can describe a face verbally, even in minute detail, but what we lose is precisely the fundamental identity core that allows us to know and recognize it for its compositional qualities, and the same applies to images. Without going into details pertaining to perceptual mechanisms, what this parallelism allows us to do is to identify the way in which image configurations and face configurations are stabilizing on social media compared to past representations of the face.

5. The face in still images: portraits, selfies, and identity-related images

First of all, as far as still images are concerned, we need to recall how the classical genre of the portrait resolves the tension between the compositional qualities of the face and the compositional qualities of images. Belting rightly tells us that the portrait stands in relation to the face as an externalized and objectified mask on a support, which makes it a durable, transportable object but which inevitably erases the mobile, temporal, and dynamic character of mimicry. Art history and semiotics have formalized the conventions of the portrait by identifying those compositional tensions that operate between visual and facial configurations, tensions such as in the relationship between the figure and the background, which must allow the face to stand out, the tensions in the gaze directed at the spectator, who

configures a form of dialogue and presence, and the compactness of the figure represented.

However, two aspects are of particular interest to us: the first concerns the way in which the visual mask relates to the identity of the person represented. Anne Beyaert-Geslin (2017) and Maria Giulia Dondero (2020), who have carried out some of the most important semiotic studies on the subject, insist on the *iconization* of the character of the individual, which is summed up, condensed, and best presented in the portrait. It is therefore the production of a unique and significant image, built upon the intensity of the centripetal relationship that draws the viewer's gaze toward the portrayed subject. For this reason, the portrait is characterized by the absence of movement and by a neutral, posed expression. The portrait must be capable of condensing the subject's past, present, and future, capturing his or her identity and destiny in a single image. For this reason, in classical pictorial portraits, the objects and the background often build a narration capable of harmonizing the visual aspects of the character, which are the traits of the *idem*-identity expressed by the face with visual elements pertaining to the subject's conduct and thematic role, that is, the *ipse*-identity as may be expressed by effigies, professional or rank objects. In short, a classical portrait is a unique image, turned toward the future, in accordance with a memorial temporality, capable of iconizing a narration identity within a fixed image. If we compare this model to the *selfie*, and more generally to identity-related images that circulate on social networks, some macroscopic similarities, but also major differences emerge. First of all, with regard to the *selfie*, it should be noted that it is a kind of image that could be defined as belonging to the subgenre of the self-portrait.

The first difference between classical portraits and social network images relates to the technical expertise required to produce them: the classical portrait requires expert skill and a refined work of inter-semiotic translation; on the contrary, *selfies* exploit the automatisms of the photographic medium and can be taken repeatedly on any occasion. Compared to portraits, however, the major differences are linked to the temporal dimension and to the various identity dynamics. Social network shots are images that do not aim at iconizing and condensing a character within a single shot but rather build a repeated series of shots that pluralize identity, fragment it, and re-enact it in different contexts.

The temporality of production and reception constitutes a pellicular temporality, which develops itself in close proximity to the acts of visualization and sharing. In other words, it is not a question of building a visual narrative that can summarize the life of an individual but of a theatricalization of the face in accordance with a management of the presence of the self, which is a presence to be reaffirmed, multiplied, and pluralized over time in the public sphere. With respect to Ricoeur's considerations, we could say

that while the portrait aims to build a narrative elaboration of the overall identity (*idem* and *ipse*), social network portraits are often a simple exhibition and multiplication of the *idem*-identity. The example of the Instagram profile of Rupi Kaur – a Canadian poet and influencer of Indian origin – helps us to clarify this point. Let us briefly consider her production from the beginning of her activities until today.

It is possible to identify a change in style from a casual use of identity-related images to a competitive, planned, and effective exploitation of her images. In other words, we could describe the process of transformation from a casual user to an influencer. Her profile is characterized by a wide variety of deformations of the portrait genre, some of which may be seen in contemporary pictorial and photographic art, including turning one's back to the camera, the use of veils, and atmospheric occlusions, but also fragmented portraits, which are typical of social networks, as noted by Lev Manovich (2017).

Moreover, the image that made her famous, although not a portrait, makes sense precisely in relation to the abundance of portraits published previously. It is an image dedicated to the theme of menstruation, in which Kaur hides her face and shows her back in order to represent herself as a generic female individual.[8] A process of depersonalization but also of generalization and universalization is built in order to ideally embody every woman around an underrepresented theme and moment. The censorship carried out by Instagram and Kaur's protest earned her the support of online communities and the attention of mainstream media. We cannot go into the details of this case here (D'Armenio 2022), but it is emblematic of the ability of still images on social networks to build a critical identity narration, negotiating experiential and algorithmic pressure around a visual storytelling capable of mixing a visual character (linked to *idem*-identity) and ethical conducts (linked to *ipse*-identity) in a critical manner.

6. Mobile masks: actors, characters, and influencers in video productions

The second comparison we would like to present concerns video productions and, more generally, those images capable of exhibiting the dynamic mimicry of the face. In particular, as far as the genres preceding social networks are concerned, it is the actor-character nucleus, in film but also in theatre, that constitutes the most emblematic case. As pointed out by Belting, the theatrical actor builds images, and more specifically masks, through his or her face, and builds a character thanks to mimicry skills:

> The mask is the role, but it is played with the real face. It is precisely in the face that the human being's dissociation from himself shows most

clearly. That is to say, he can represent himself as someone else using his own face and, as a result, behave eccentrically.

(Belting 2017: 49)

In semiotic terms, we could say that it is a peculiar process of *débrayage*: starting from the overall articulation capabilities belonging to his or her own face and body, the actor projects a selection of emotional and mimicry features that constitute the identity of the fictional character. This transformation has always fascinated us because it demands that we take into account aspects that cannot be reduced to abstract narrative functions, as the body and face of an actor cannot be replaced with that of another actor without distorting the meaning of experience. Authors such as Edward Branigan (2006) speak of fictional supervenience: the way in which we see both the actor, for instance, Sean Connery, and the character, James Bond. Two aspects of this transformation strike us as important: firstly, the centrality of a peculiar competence of the actor, which we could define as a competence at mimicry. An actor with a calm temperament (*idem*-identity) may be able, through this competence, to build an anxious character.

Secondly, it is necessary to stress the filtering role of the script because it allows us to find a peculiar articulation of the identity poles defined by Ricoeur: the actor certainly projects some of the character traits belonging to his or her identity, but these remain embedded in his or her person. The actor therefore lends part of his or her *idem*-identity dispositions to the fictional character. The fictional character, on the contrary, is a narrative identity, one already endowed with a closed path of transformation with values of departure and arrival. In short, the fictional character in the script is already a virtual mediation between the *idem* and *ipse* and is capable of building a unitary identity. The mimetic projection of the actor, together with the narrative mediation of the script, allows to build this transformation, in which the face and the body of a person build a rich, dynamical, and narrative identity. We could qualify this process as the donning of a fictional mask by the actor, worn on the face (and body).

We can relate the actor-character to the most representative and emblematic figure on social networks, one which is struggling to find a stable definition, that is, the *influencer*. What these two figures have in common is that they owe their success to their public image and, if we take streamers into account, to their mimicry identity, to their dynamically exhibited personality, and especially, to their face. We will develop the comparison using an example chosen for its clarity, that of video game streamers.

Usually, these live broadcasts are organized as follows: the video game performance is displayed full screen with the virtual avatar moving in the digital environment according to a text – in this case, the video game text,

which is already organized narratively and syntactically but certainly in a less strict manner than a movie script might be, since it allows the expression of various styles of gameplay. On the right of the screen, we usually find the chat through which the audience can interact with the streamer. Most often, it is very short messages which are sent, mainly emoticons and peculiar forms of "slang". Finally, a smaller window shows the face of the steamer who reacts live to the game performance and to the chat messages.

Compared with the actor, the streamer does not project a character on the basis of his or her capabilities and skills in terms of mimicry. On the contrary, he or she attempts to extract his or her identity character without prior programming and preparation. The filter is not that of a closed narration condensed into a script but a playful script, which organizes in a partly open way the mimic responses of fright, tension, exaltation, and so on. In other words, the narrative mediation provided by video game texts does not serve to build a narrative identity but to extract a live character identity. It is no coincidence that this filter belongs to the macro-genre of the game, a practice by definition situated somewhere between lived experience and cultural construction. The character which emerges from this interaction does not use a narrative mask but a playful socialized mask, whose purpose is precisely to embody its own *idem-identity*, making it emerge dynamically within a partially structured experiential interaction. Compared to the case of the actor, the temporal dimension should again be emphasized: while the actor builds a sophisticated performance, subjected among other things to the articulations of the theatrical or cinematographic language, in the case of the influencer, the performance of mimicry is strongly linked to the present moment, to the personality expressed "naturally", with a visual direction that is limited to a fixed shot of his or her face.

Reaction videos, *face reveals* and children's game channels replicate this formula and show us the peculiar way in which the link between images and faces increasingly tends to adhere to an identity close to genuine, instinctive, and contagious reactions. It is a matter of taking a song, a trailer, or the execution of a cooking recipe as the basis for exhibiting, through facial mimicry, the visible expression of one's reactions during a first encounter with a widely known cultural product.[9]

7. Conclusions

In this article, we have proposed an analytical framework for understanding the images and performances of the face produced on social networks. We have first of all characterized the semiotic context of social networks by detecting an economy of attention and appreciation. At the heart of this economy are the acts of liking, following, and sharing: simple semiotic acts, close to experience and not very articulate from a discursive point of view,

but which are automatically socialized by algorithms. We have therefore proposed to consider the fundamental dynamics of interaction on social networks as an experiential regression because quantitative appreciation becomes the basis for the value transformations carried out by influencers: from a quantitative value to a monetary and reputational value. We therefore focused on identities and in particular on identities expressed and negotiated through images. Through a rereading of Paul Ricoeur's theory of identity, we identified the forms of narration through which identity images negotiate algorithmic and experiential pressure. We found visual narration on social networks to deform and betray the genres of portraiture and audiovisual fiction.

This contextualization has allowed us to analyze the semiotic qualities of the face in relation to the semiotic qualities of images, following with the theoretical elaboration proposed by Hans Belting. Both of these expressive systems rely on a different mode of meaning than the verbal one: visual composition. In particular, according to Belting, faces, by blocking the intrinsic mobility of mimicry, produce images and masks. Similarly, facial images propose more or less dynamic versions of facial masks, capturing salient expressions or enduring performances. Finally, we proposed a comparison between two kinds of artistic images and two genres that have become established on social networks. On the one hand, we compared the selfie and identity-related images on social networks with artistic self-portraits, and on the other, we contrasted the transformation of the actor into a fictional character with the performances of streamers on Twitch. The first comparison showed that portraits on social media are not characterized by their salience, by the meaningful presentation of a character in a single shot, capable of summarizing *idem-* and *ipse*-identity in a single image. On the contrary, they express a management of the presence of identity over time, resulting from a potentially daily multiplication and fragmentation of the self. This opposition can be summarized in the opposition between the iconizing mask produced by portraits and the multiple experiential masks produced by social network images.

In the case of video performances, we opposed the projection of a fictional character from the mimicry skills of an actor, capable of building a narrative mediation between *idem* and *ipse* with the performances of video streamers. Streamers set up an open and dynamic situation in order to stage their own personal and mimicry character in a manner that is as close as possible to actual experience (*idem*-identity). The fictional mask of the actor is in such case opposed to the socialized playful mask of the streamer. Overall, as we have seen with the example of Rupi Kaur, there are rarer cases of visual construction of an identity that can harmonize the *idem* and the *ipse*. This analysis allows us to identify a further trend: a narrowing of the strategies built on the peculiarities of the languages of images, of their

compositional possibilities, in favor of the compositional qualities of the face which multiplies the masks of presence thanks to the growing number of digital channels.

As regards future lines of research, it would be necessary to deepen the understanding of the relationship between the expressive qualities of the face and images – in particular, to identify other kinds of masks produced by faces within images, in addition to the iconizing mask of portraits, the multiple experiential masks of selfies, the fictional mask of the filmic or theatrical character, and the socialized playful mask of influencers we have tried to describe.

Notes

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2 This chapter results from a project that has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program (Grant Agreement No 819649-FACETS; PI: Massimo LEONE). The text is a re-elaboration of a talk presented during the international conference "Semiosis in Communication Culture, Communication and Social Change" held in Bucharest on May 25–29, 2021. The intervention was part of the panel "The Meaning of Artificial Faces" organized by Massimo Leone in the context of the ERC Consolidator project FACETS.
3 We would like to refer to D'Armenio and Dondero (2020) for a semiotic analysis of casual, professional, and design photography practices on social networks.
4 www.youtube.com/watch?v=qAW6CE7_bFM&t=1s
5 We would like to refer to D'Armenio (2021 "L'économie") for a more in-depth analysis of the experiential regression managed by algorithms on social networks and of the resulting economy of values.
6 On visual semiotics, see Dondero (2020) and Basso Fossali and Dondero (2011).
7 According to Eco (1975) a semiotic system is anything that can be used to lie.
8 www.instagram.com/p/0ovWwJHA6f/
9 For an analysis of the new genres that are emerging on social networks, and their relation to the forms of identity narratives, we would like to refer to D'Armenio (2021 "La gestione").