



From Mask to Flesh and Back: A Semiotic Analysis of the Actor's Face Between Theatre and Cinema

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Abstract

We aim to focus on the mimic gestures intentionally produced to be “monstrate” to others (expressive gestures), thus attempting to propose a semiotic analysis on the actor's face. We shall attempt to outline the extent to which, (i) since the rise of cinema, the actor's face has gained a foreground role as compared to the full-figured body, and (ii) the legacy of the nineteenth-century handbooks of scenic postures was crucial in this context, especially those of Antonio Morrocchesi and Alemanno Morelli. To deal with the actor's body as an instrument, means to make it a blank page to be used to re-design the character's body, including the face. In this regard, it is worth mentioning the method of the pedagogue Jacques Lecoq—one of the greatest teachers of contemporary theatre—which consists in the use of a special mask during the training process: the so-called *neutral mask*.

Keywords Theatre semiotics · Neutral mask · Actor's face · Analogical prehension · Mediated intersubjectivity

1 Introduction

When we address the analysis of actors' gestures from a semiotic point of view, several preliminary issues spring to our attention. First among these is the degree of (communicative) intentionality related to the gestural configurations (including those at the mimic level, i.e., facial expression) engendered during the performance. Yet if we consider some of Algirdas Greimas' insights (*Du Sens*, 1970) in outlining a semiotics of gesture, on the one hand, we might interpret a gesture performed intentionally as an action establishing the subject as an enunciator, namely, as a subject of the enunciation; on the other hand, a gesture performed not in order to communicate establishes a subject of the utterance, because the gesture is offered to the interpretation of a second subject who perceives it. Therefore, this allows us to address even the gesture performed unintentionally as something which is endowed with a meaning to be interpreted as important for someone in the network of human intersubjective communication. Hence, the difference we can detect is rather between

a communicative intentionality (*subject of the enunciation*) and a narrative intentionality (*subject of the utterance*).

Semiotics has traditionally based its analysis of gestures on a supposed opposition between behavioral phenomena—conceived as pre-semiotized—and communicative, and thus semiotized, phenomena. In the Italian introduction to *Approaches to semiotics* (1964), Umberto Eco and Paolo Fabbri define kinesics as “[t]he universe of bodily positions, gestural behaviors, facial expressions, all those phenomena that lie somewhere between the behavioral and the communicative” (Sebeok et al. 1964 [1970, p. 5, our translation]). This definition is based on a conception of corporeality grounded in a basic tension between the bodily “automatisms” (non-significant) and those bodily dynamics aiming at establishing communication (significant and signified). However, as Simona Stano (2019) points out, the material constituent of the body should never be deemed unrelated to cultural dynamics. The body cannot be conceived as “natural”, unculturalized, although some ages and some cultures tend to emphasize this alleged biological assumption. When we face a body, we are deceived to be dealing with a transparent, self-evident object, totally unaware of its being the outcome of a complex cultural negotiation, instead. “Hence the increasingly imperative requirement to abandon any implicit distinction between pre-semiotized and semiotized, and to study corporeality not as a mere place but

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as the instance of translation between these regimes—an instance that, by virtue of the very act of translation that it performs, emerges as the threshold par excellence of the semiosis, since it is able to engender, interpret and both circulate the sense" (Stano 2019, p. 158, our translation).

Similarly, Gabriele Marino states that the face cannot be naively conceived as being something “natural”, pre-semiotized, since it is always the result of a culturalization (2021, p. 322). Therefore, he further argues the methodological requirement to devise a semiotics of the face as a semiotics of the mask:

If we know that nature is deeply culturalized and culture deeply naturalized (as Morin has maintained since the 1950s and the ontological turn in anthropology has been discussing since the 1990s), building our semiotic theory of the face on the basis of the common sense dichotomy between nature and culture would prevent us from truly comprehending the axiologies and ideologies of the face spread diachronically and diatopically (Marino 2021: 324).

In this paper we aim to focus exclusively on the mimic gestures intentionally produced to be “monstrated¹” to others (*expressive gestures*), thus attempting to propose a semiotic analysis on the actor’s face to illustrate how the reading modalities of the faces themselves evolved, between the 19th and the 20th century, mostly in theatre and then in the encounter with the early cinema. Examining this semiotically compels us to disregard more typically psychological issues involved in face reading and, on the other hand, to pay significant attention to the anatomy of shapes, in terms of plastic formants articulating the expressive configurations of the face, activating sensory-motor resonances in the spectator, thus allowing the recognition of certain “clues” capable of *convoking* certain emotions in the spectators themselves. In this respect, the face might be read as a mask and the mask as a face. As a result, to address this we shall first necessarily consider the role of the mask in the various performance practices throughout history, and then the theatrical forms wherein the face assumes the function of mask. Moreover, we shall attempt to outline the extent to which, (i) since the rise of cinema, the actor’s face has gained a foreground role as compared to the full-figured body, and (ii) the legacy of the nineteenth-century handbooks of scenic postures was crucial in this context, especially those of Antonio Morrocchesi and Alemanno Morelli.

¹ We refer to the term *monstration* meant as an act of *showing-forth*. “Whereas the textual narrator *makes visible*, the monstrator in incapable of doing this. It can only make *itself* visible (or audible). And it itself is seen (or heard) on the same phenomenological level (that is, with the same grade of ‘reality’)” (Gaudreault 2009, p. 75). Regarding monstration in theatre discourse cf. Beato 2020.

1.1 A Mask to Reach the Inner Self and the Soul

As Luigi Allegrì (2005) points out, the concept of “theatricality²” which is registered in our encyclopedia (to quote Umberto Eco) is deeply tied to the idea of “artificiality”, of “surplus”, of “non-ordinary”, especially in the European context. At the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries, the bourgeois drama genre began representing the daily life by advocating the semblance of reality in dramatic theatre. Consequently, verisimilitude became opposed to theatricality thus leading the latter to undergo a semantic change that tends to polarize negatively its nuclear content still today.³

No masks, then, which are the most characteristic element of the “diversity” of the actor on stage. And no make-up, which serves expressionistically to mark this same fact of non-daily life, instead, in favour of make-up useful to make communicativeness work better (black around the eyes to bring out the expressions, for example) or to imitate conditions or ages one does not possess (Allegrì 2005: 197–199, our translation).

However, according to Fernando de Toro (1995), “[t]he theatre iconization is mainly a sematic function. It never exists in a cultural vacuum, but, rather icons work according to a social code, a certain way of representing reality. Icons, and the manner in which iconization occurs is culturally coded” (de Toro 1995: 76). In the theatrical performance process of perception, the more the signs used are opaque, the more the spectator will struggle to grasp them as such and therefore to interpret them. As a matter of fact, the spectators accustomed to the so-called Western forms of theater are unable to decode the great amount of iconization processes embedded in the masks and costumes of Japanese Nô Theater. Iconization could be further conceived as the aftermath of a “writing process” on the actor’s body, as well as the face. Yet, as Stano observes, any writing process involves a “reading” process:

all bodies are exhibited to the world as a (individual and, inevitably, socio-cultural) project, but its interpretation does not necessarily match that project. As occurs with any other text, the reading of the body inevitably presupposes a hermeneutic gamble, along with all the misunderstandings and conflicts that can arise (2019, p. 156, our translation).

² “[T]he theatrical effect reminds spectators that they are spectators, that they are witnessing fictional actions, that something is being played out in front of them” (Pavis 2016, p. 261).

³ As a matter of fact, one considers the meaning that many contemporary dictionaries attribute to the term “theatrical”, including, “often *disapproving* (of behaviour) deliberately attracting attention or creating a particular effect in a way that seems false” (<https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/theatrical>).

In other words, a process of “recognition” is always triggered in the perception of the spectator. To quote Umberto Eco (1976):

Recognition occurs when a given object or event produced by nature or human action (intentionally or unintentionally), and existing in a world of facts as a fact among facts, comes to be viewed by an addressee as the expression of a given content, either through a pre-existing and coded correlation or through the positing of a possible correlation by its addressee. [...].

Thus the act of recognition may re-constitute the object or event as an imprint, a symptom or a clue (Eco 1976: 221).

This process of recognition, for example, should lead contemporary spectators to detect traits in certain expressive configurations of the actor's face which could be ascribed to *overacting* (thus “theatrical”) behaviors, namely, perceived as extra-daily. We are dealing with behaviors detectable by the spectator-receiver as conventional, “non-natural” as meaning “non-daily”. Nonetheless, the key fallacy—if we could label it as such—lies in the idea of grounding the theatrical discourse on a /nature/ vs /representation/ debate. As Mirella Schino states, this assumption is the consequence of misconceptions acquired since the principles of Naturalism spread in the theatrical forms. Instead, until the second half of the nineteenth century, the term “natural” was used to refer to *organicity* only, namely, to the effect of coherence which the audience experienced due to the interpretation of an actor when compared to the artificiality of another actor. “By the term “natural” we should mean the inference of a complexity and coherence of behavior comparable and equivalent to the coherence and complexity that characterize a living organism” (in Barba-Savarese 1991 [2011, p. 174], our translation). In fact, such term properly refers to the effect achieved on the spectator. In other words, it denotes the manner of perceiving the actors' composition and the strategies they employ. Therefore, to avoid potential misunderstandings and misconceptions, it should be better replaced by the term “organic”.

Hence, “theatricality” entails a certain degree of conventionality which the spectator will “believe” (*regimes of belief*) because of the effect of coherence elicited by the actors' performance and not because of their adherence to an alleged “naturalness”. The spectators are aware of partaking in a fictional event—at least according to the willing suspension of disbelief they have joined—and this awareness allows them to be attuned to the performance, as we shall see further on.

Once this premise has been made, the focus of our investigation is to comprehend the function of the face in the broader context of the theatrical performance before Naturalism (and then cinema) “neutralized” the face's expressiveness considerably claiming a closer adherence to daily life. To fully grasp this point, we should first focus on the

mask in theatrical cultures. The role of the mask has always been to represent emotions and characters—in various and heterogeneous forms—to convey an expressiveness detectable at the intersubjective⁴ level. Or perhaps it would be more appropriate to say at the intercorporeal level, as we shall illustrate.

We agree with Erika Fischer-Lichte's statement that “[t]he actor's body is the condition, as it were, which makes theater possible [...]; the actor's external appearance is normally the first thing we notice about the actor. [...] To this extent, the character's identity is sufficiently secured and validated for us by this appearance—at least in the beginning and, so to speak, for our initial hypothesis about the figure” (1992: pp. 67–68). Costumes, makeup, hairstyles, and gestures have always had a “sign function” in the theatrical performance.⁵ Among these, since Greek theatre the mask has been the most relevant device to connote the idea of theatricality across different cultures. The mask is the highest sign of the mismatch between theatre and daily life having the purpose of establishing a distance from it. The mask covers the performer's face emphasizing the relationship with mythical, almost non-human, figures thus becoming the symbol of an “abdication of the human” (Allegrì, 2005, p. 199, our translation).

According to George Simmel's aesthetic perspective (cf. Harrington 2020), at least up to the modern⁶ forms of theater, we could consider the mask as that feature connoting the actor as an *aesthetic threshold figure* (cf. Beato 2021), such as the frame for a painting. Simmel claims that such devices (curtain, frame, etc.) are designed to both separate and connect the sphere of art (*counterfactual reality*) and the sphere of reality (*factual reality*). He states that “[t]he arts, so to speak, seem to present us with the content of life without representing life itself” (2020, p. 157). Likewise, in *The Anthropology of the Actor* Helmuth Plessner argues that the bodily and gestural means of the actor, as well as the means of line and color for the painter, should be inscribed within the horizon of an expressive limit aimed at the composition of what Plessner defines in terms of “figure”, meant as the production of the *image* that the actor wants to *monstrate* to the audience:

⁴ “The masked drama of antiquity developed firm rules that made rigid types of masks and plots transparent to the audience. The wearers performed their masks as readable signs” (Belting 2017, p. 49).

⁵ “The moment the actor appears on stage, we form a specific opinion about the character he is portraying and have certain expectations as to how that character will behave and what he will do” (Fischer-Lichte 1992, p. 64).

⁶ The mask will later return in the experiments of the historical Avantgardes, in the puppetised disguises of Dadaism and Futurism, in the grotesque temperament of Expressionism, and even to qualify the characters in Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (cf. Allegrì 2005).



Fig. 1 Theater mask from, 5th century B.C. (Syracuse: Archaeological Museum). (Color figure online)



Fig. 2 Terra-cotta comedy mask, 200–250 A.C. (Color figure online)

[T]he spectators trace the expressive power of the actor back to the intensity with which the expressive image satisfies their feeling, but they do not forget that behind this figure—even if one aspires to immediate naturalness—lies not feeling, but the plastic distance of the actor who identifies with a character in a given situation, which is not an easy occurrence. As well as the actor-player in a role, the film actor likewise remains a representer, remains the vehicle of a mask (Plessner 2007, p. 81, our translation).

Nevertheless, although crucial to Plessner, the image is insufficient on its own unless it includes the face.⁷ In fact, the mask-face fulfills a primary role in acting performance. Faces are undoubtedly the privileged channel to reveal someone's identity⁸: hence, the mask apparently has the function of concealing the personal identity of the actors re-semanticizing their figure. In ancient Greek theatre, for example, the actors were only considered as a means, and they were significantly nameless to denote their profession. Indeed, the *hypokrites* was closer to a priestly figure, to the one who interpreted a clue. As a *medium*, the actor was conceived as someone capable to translate signs, as the one who materializes the word embodying it (cf. Allegri

2019). However, since the perception of its ancient ritual value decreased, the mask has been used to better connote the features of the character, especially portrayed as an absolute monad in Greek tragedy (Fig. 1, 2). The mask had the function of *attuning* the spectators to the character, allowing its immediate visual identification.

Furthermore, we should not overlook the structure of ancient Greek theatre, which required some physical distance between the spectators and the actors and thereby the employment of a quick and evident device for reading the characters and their related functions. Thus, as Fischer-Lichte points out, the mask as a theatrical sign does not denote natural facts, but cultural phenomena: “actor A's mask denotes character X's face and figure in the sense that, as a sign, it is indicative of the signs employed in the surrounding culture” (1992, p. 72).

The mask figuratively refers to a role (or character) of which it becomes a sign. However, as Hans Belting (2017) underlines, due to the Baroque reform, actors were required to provide deeper and more articulated expressions of feelings, thus compelling them to use their own faces. An adequate capacity of transfiguration on the iconic level is thereby expected of them, thus leading necessarily to designate their own body as an expressive medium and the face as a (new) mask.⁹ As a result, from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards, a proper process of *embodiment* has been triggered by this act of impersonating a character. This gradually determined the surplus of reality in naturalistic acting at the expense of the image, namely, the contamination between the boundaries of art and those of daily life, for which Simmel argued in his essays (cf. Harrington 2020). The concern of liberating the actors from the naturalistic “anarchy” aims to dissuade them from the belief of being able to rely on an alleged aesthetic efficacy of casual daily action exclusively, in order to assert instead the importance of entrusting themselves to the “form” of a specific compositional language, as should be required for any aesthetic creation.

Due to the opacification of the mask's distinguishing features, the spectator is solely dealing with the “flesh” of the actor, i.e., with the *human being* alone. Whilst as a device-interface the mask transduced passions and emotions fixing them in a set of intersubjectively recognized and categorized figures, the “naked” face of the actor is essentially aleatory. Scholars such as Charles Le Brun (1992), for example,

⁷ Cf. Belting 2017, p. 49.

⁸ Cf. Leone 2020.

⁹ “Within the context of their profession, actors frequently must portray the emotions experienced by their characters. The extent to which the portrayals are realistic depends on the repertory, but actors must sometimes be able to perform very convincing emotional portrayals. Dramatic plays, in particular, require that actors achieve a great level of authenticity in portraying emotions so as to produce the expected effect” (Ekman and Rosenberg (2005), p. 244).

Fig. 3 Tranquility as zero degree of the expression (Le Brun 1992, p. 24)

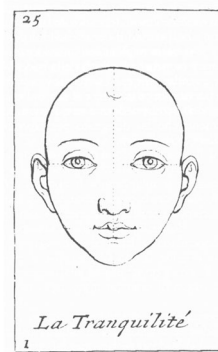


Fig. 5 *Admiration*, described by Le Brun as the first and most temperate among the passions, and the one whose heart feels the least agitation.

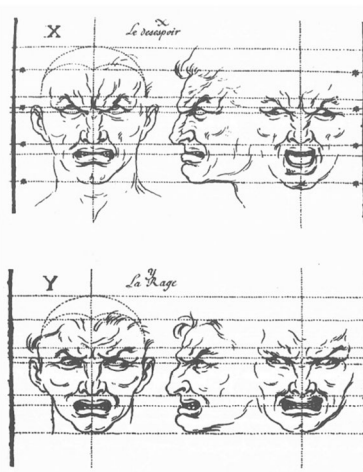
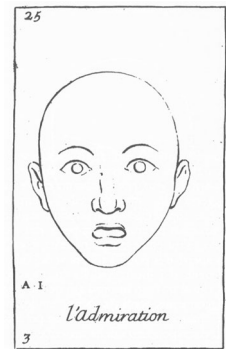


Fig. 4 *Desperation* and *Anger*, depicted in Le Brun's paintings (Le Brun 1992, p. 128)

attempted to investigate the passions of the soul portrayed in the human face in order to illustrate their modalities of representation. In *Conférence sur l'expression générale et particulière*¹⁰ (1698), he outlines a complete grammar of the face, consisting of combinations and variations, which will lead to a wide range of further studies on the actor's expressiveness. To identify the shift from one passion to another, Le Brun assumes a basic figure called “Tranquility¹¹” (Fig. 3), meant as the *zero degree* of the expression. Every *differential deviation* from this “neutral” position marks a change and, therefore, the shift to another passion. From Tranquility one passes to Admiration (Fig. 4), then to Amazement until reaching, through a gradual increase

in intensity, Anger (Fig. 5), considered by Le Brun as the ultimate degree of expression.

Not by chance, Le Brun's lesson constitutes a crucial point of view for all nineteenth-century handbooks of scenic postures. In fact, in the nineteenth century, the actor's art was considered to be transmitted through the teaching of rules and methodologies rather than through stage practice. In *Problèmes de la typologie des cultures* (1967), Jurij Lotman defines cultures according to the mode of transmission of knowledge: there are cultures conveying knowledge based on *texts*, i.e., through the work of artists or their representatives, and cultures relying on *grammars*, norms, and rules, instead. Nineteenth-century rationalism—with its commitment to the rewriting the rules of civil coexistence and the modalities of art according to the standards of the new rising bourgeoisie class—belongs precisely to the second category.¹²

In this regard, the works of Antonio Morrocchesi (*Lezioni di declamazione e d'arte teatrale*, 1991) and Alemanno Morelli (*Prontuario delle pose sceniche*, 1854) are particularly noteworthy. By adopting precepts and portrayals, they claim to describe how the body posture or the facial expression capable of denoting (and therefore iconizing) a feeling or a passion should be. Morrocchesi refers explicitly to Le Brun's studies, to elaborate a sort of inventory of gestures and postures useful to the actor (Figs. 6, 7, 8).

[I]t is difficult to learn how to separate simple vigor from resentment, ardor from arrogance, fury from indignation, melancholy from sorrow, in the language of physiognomy. The famous French painter Charles Le-Brun, well known for his battles vividly expressed on canvas, has likewise demonstrated the manner of treating physiognomy with the brush, by means of the collection of the passions of the soul vividly and naturally painted, then engraved in copper, and sufficiently known to scholars of the beautiful art of Zeuxis and Apelles. As there is no doubt, having the above artist

¹⁰ Inspired by the Cartesian theories exposed in the treatise *Les passions de l'âme* del 1649.

¹¹ We shall illustrate, throughout this essay, how the concept of “tranquility” as the zero degree of facial expression recurs in Lecoq's conceptualization of the neutral mask.

¹² Indeed, this century also marked the development and consolidation of bourgeois drama and its conventions.

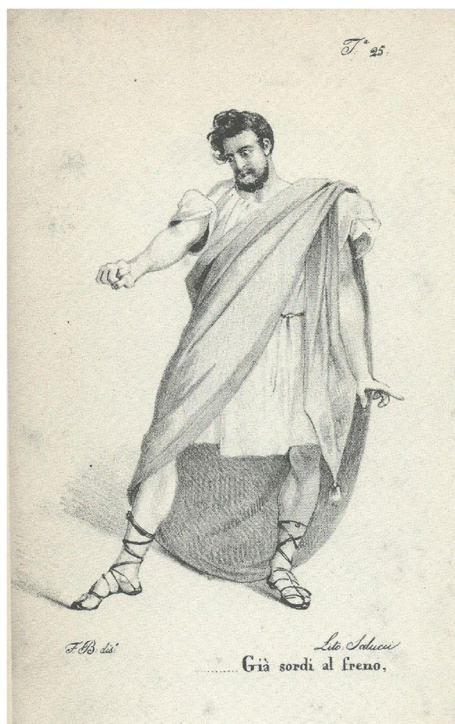


Fig. 6 Painting 25: portrays the character of Pylades, in the dialogue with Aegisthus from Act IV Scene II of *Orestes* by Vittorio Alfieri

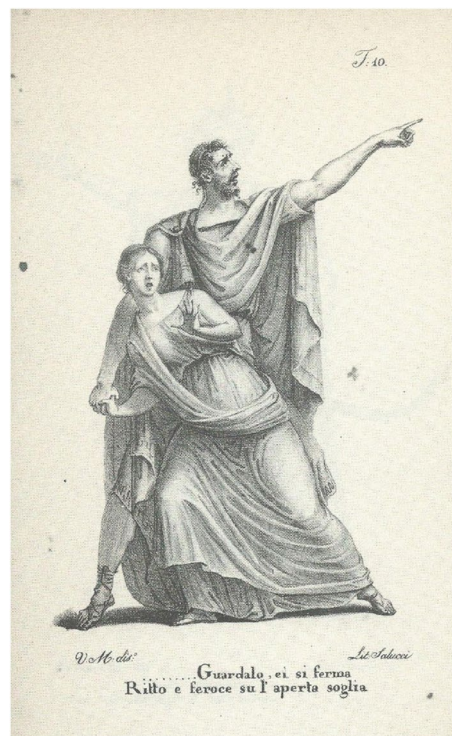


Fig. 8 Painting 10: portrays the character of Aristodemus, in the dialogue with Cesira from Act IV Scene II of *Aristodemus* by Vincenzo Monti

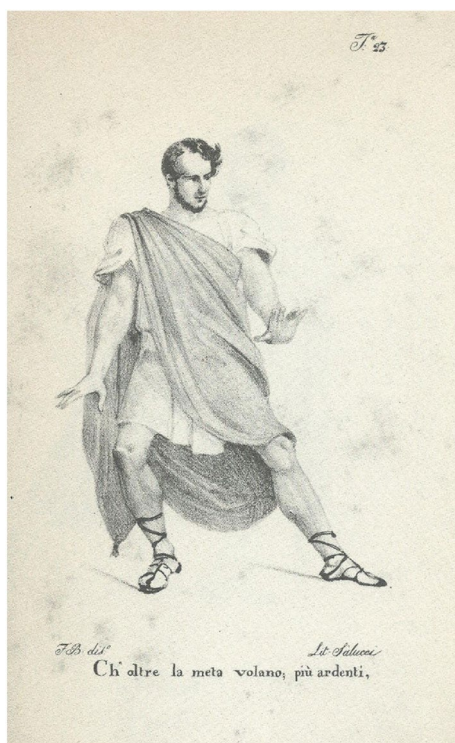


Fig. 7 Painting 23: portrays the character of Pylades, in the dialogue with Aegisthus from Act IV Scene II of *Orestes* by Vittorio Alfieri

modelled his paintings on the images of nature,¹³ that he will certainly have laid down on paper the correct and essential notions on this subject, so that those who wish to advance in such a praiseworthy and necessary application can acquire them (Morrocchesi 1991, p. 227, our translation).

He addresses an entire lecture to the study of “Fisonomia”, identifying the face as the “noblest and most essential part of man, [and] it would be false that reciter adorned with all the prerogatives already indicated by us for good and beautiful declamation, who lacked one of the most effective means that the soul uses to show the passions that agitate or cheer her/him” (Morrocchesi 1991: 217, our translation). Significantly, the concern to account for the relationship between *inside* and *outside* in the actor’s act of interpretation emerges through these words. However, the idea of a table of equivalences between feeling and body or facial poses is taken for granted. The actor is required to “monstrate” their own inner world made of psychology and passions motivating her/his action on stage thus making it visible to the external world. The spectators perceive the actor’s body (i.e.,

¹³ Morrocchesi invokes a supposed adherence to “nature” that is, however, the result of a process of culturalization of the norms of the age whereby it is therefore perceived as “naturalized”.

facial expressions, postures, movements, voice, etc.) as a *sign*, in other words, as something that refers to something other than itself.

As Allegri points out regarding these models of acting, “the actor’s performing mechanism is *from the inside to the outside*, whilst the spectators are asked for the inverse mechanism, whereby their perception and decoding of the actor’s signs should be *from the outside to the inside*, from the corporeality exhibited as a sign to the feeling or passion to which it refers” (2019, p. 23, our translation). All this means that the actors, their gestures, and facial expressions, are expected to *mean* to somebody.¹⁴

Morelli’s stance is similar; by formulating a complete dictionary (*prontuario*) of poses in alphabetical order, he illustrates to aspiring actors how to convey feelings and passions through the face and gestures. As an example, here are a few entries related to the detailed articulation of facial expressions pertaining to “Curiosity”:

- Suspicious curiosity—Half-closed eyes.
- Affectionate curiosity—Half-closed eyes, placid forehead.
- Sentimental curiosity, Admiration—Half-open mouth.
- Indifferent curiosity, Peace of mind—Mouth closed (Morelli 1854, pp. 19–20, our translation).

All this seems to imply a “semiotic” approach to the system, wherein inflections of the eyebrows or mouth, along with movements of the nose or eyes, etc., function as distinctive traits combining to denote the various passions.

Nonetheless, in addition to a system of signs, we also find a system of marks, namely, of *clues*, as well as of imprints (still quoting to Eco). Otherwise, as Le Brun terms, a system of *marquers*,¹⁵ mostly designed to constitute a sort of *alphabet* rather than a specific language.

The aim of these studies—which at first sight might appear eccentric and antiquarian—is to investigate the *transductive* rules underpinning the actor’s performative-monstrative strategies, to seek out some kind of “law of correspondence”. This is precisely the purpose of another important theorist of actor’s expressivity: François Delsarte.

¹⁴ According to Peirce, such is the property of the sign or *representamen*. “A sign, or representamen, is something which stands somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign which it creates I call the interpretant of the first sign. The sign stands for something, its object. It stands for that object, not in all respects, but in reference to a sort of idea, which I have sometimes called the ground of the representamen” (C.P. 2.228).

¹⁵ Le Brun employs this term in the meaning of “rendering visible”, i.e., imprinting on the surface of the body the sign of an inner excitement.

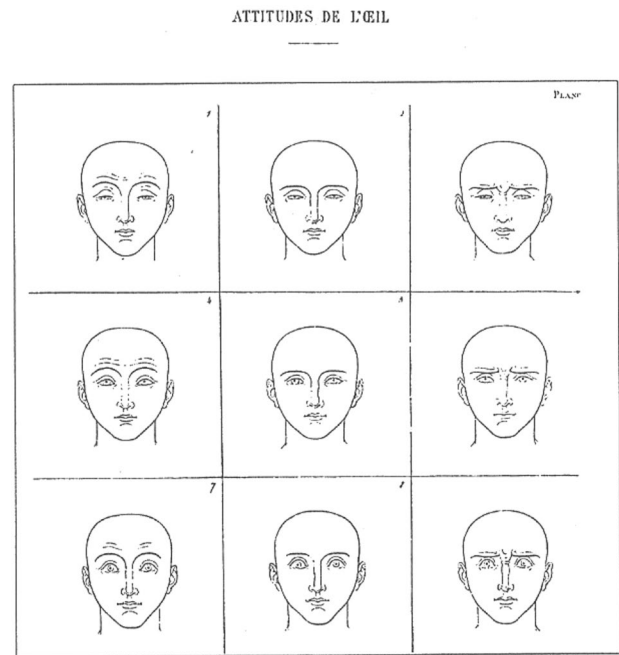


Fig. 9 Table designed by Alfred Giraudet to depict the possible combinations of expressive eye movements (Librairies Imprimeries Réunies, Paris 1895)

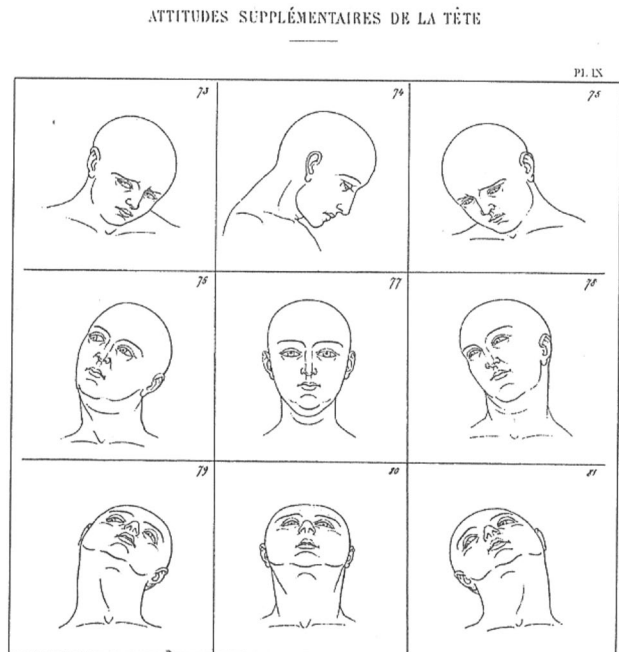


Fig. 10 Table designed by Alfred Giraudet to depict the possible combinations of head position (Librairies Imprimeries Réunies, Paris 1895)

Between 1840 and 1870 in France (in the same ages as Morrocchesi and Morelli), Delsarte developed a system of aesthetic expression named as *applied aesthetics* and

ruled by a sort of trinity law. As Eugenia Casini Ropa notes (Figs. 9, 10):

The regulating law of both all things and human beings is the *trinity*. Mankind benefits from the threefold divine nature through its three constituent components: *life*, *soul*, and *spirit*, which respectively govern its sensory (sensations), moral (feelings) and intellectual (thought) states. Each of these three interior states corresponds to an exterior mode of expression, which is inextricably intertwined with them [...]. Hence, there can be no “truth” in human expression if the manifestation, the outward expressive motion, does not correspond to a respective inner impulse or motion (and vice versa) (in Lo Iacono 2007, p. 63, our translation).

If a gesture, or a facial expression adopted to display (*monstration*) an inner feeling, is not responding to this law of correspondence, it will therefore be assessed as false, affected, or conventional. Nevertheless, we need to be careful with the concept of “conventional” mentioned by Delsarte. In fact, his statements belong to the critical shift from the “representative” theatrical tradition of the nineteenth century to the “expressive” one of the twentieth century. Thus, his attempt is precisely to emancipate the actor from the rigours of declamatory rules in order to embrace a more *organic* study of the actor’s corporeality, to regain a *naturalness* (meant in terms of organicity) of acting, thereby liberating the performer from the stylistic features prescribed by nineteenth-century tradition, judged by Delsarte as inadequate and therefore false and conventional. In pursuing his aim, he defined his own expressive system by induction, i.e., as a result of the systematic monitoring of human expression to attempt to understand its mechanisms and elicit its laws. This approach, in turn, does not preclude him from adopting a schematism perceived somehow likewise as “conventional”, since he considerably reduces the human expressive capability of face and body to a limited range of postures and figures.

All the above acting models—as well as many others that we do not mention here—aspire to achieve a “truth effect¹⁶”, or perhaps, referring to Schino once again, an “organicity effect”. As a result, if the actor’s performance is organic, then as spectators we may believe it and therefore consider it *true*, in the meaning of (*it seems*) believably true.¹⁷ In fact, when a given culture perceives certain gestural configurations as being far from its shared image of organicity,

it perceives them as “false”, “artificial”, “and therefore it distances from them. In other words, after comparing a facial expression or a gesture with its own *intercorporeal interface system*—meant as the space of mediation between the subjects of experience—the culture does not identify its own body in those configurations. Hence, the spectators achieve an “apperceptive transposition” that allows the perception¹⁸ of another’s body as akin to their own (*analogical prehension*¹⁹).

Nevertheless, with respect to the studies examined so far, it appears significant that these scholars-observers foresaw a sort of sensory-motor resonance mechanism allowing the spectator to read as coherent—and therefore organic—certain expressive configurations and thus *resonate* with them. Therefore, regardless of the aesthetic conventionality²⁰ that can engender certain configurations, namely, net of the theatrical aesthetics the actor employs from time to time, these scholars question the issue of the corporeality *expressivity*.²¹ Although at first glance it might seem that they were seeking rigorous display rules, I assume that they were rather driven by a broader conception of the actor’s body as a “threshold of meaning” (cf. Stano 2019). In other words, their focus lays not inasmuch on what emotion actors might convey via their face or actions, but on what they might achieve with them in the interaction with the audience, namely what the function of their bodily shapes could be. Thus, they seem to have been more concerned with a functionalist approach—rather than a merely semantic one—according to which “faces, like our words, are ways of influencing our interaction trajectories with others” (cf. Crivelli and Fridlund 2019, p. 185).

¹⁸ It is meant as the perception of the presence of another organic body that is also the subject of experience. Edmund Husserl, in *Cartesian Meditations*, mentions an apperceptive transposition between bodies to indicate a *synthesis performed by analogy* that allows the relation of the body with another body to be based on a relation of similarity (cf. Husserl 1960, pp. 110–111).

¹⁹ Cf. Contreras-Lorenzini 2008; Fontanille 2004.

²⁰ We cannot go further into the strictly philosophical aspects tied to what we define as “aesthetic conventionality” here, but the thought of the philosopher Helmuth Plessner can render this idea better explained. He defines the condition of the actor as paradigmatic for describing the mode of existence, the position of *eccentricity*, of the human being: “His relationship to himself as corporeality is instrumental at first, since he experiences this corporeality as a “means”. Compelled to ever seek new compromises between the body he somehow is and the corporeality he inhabits and controls, he discovers—not only through abstraction—the mediated nature, the instrumental role of his physical existence” (Plessner 2000, p. 71, our translation). Therefore, we might conceive the history of the actor in terms of the history of the strategies of formalization of such *compromises* as mentioned in Plessner’s words.

²¹ According to Plessner, “expressivity is an original way of coming to terms with the fact of living in a body and owing a body as well” (Plessner 2000: 78, our translation).

¹⁶ As Dario Turrini explains, “the truth (or fiction) of stage action is always a semiotic truth (or fiction), of textual interpretation” (Turrini 2001, p. 169, our translation).

¹⁷ “I do not believe it” (“Ne veryu”) was the famous phrase with which Konstantin Stanislavsky urged his actors to seek the truth of the character on stage, which was the obsession and the utopia of his entire research and of many other pedagogues of the early twentieth century (cf. Allegri 2005, p. 181).

1.2 A "Noble" Mask

In a 1901 essay, George Simmel claimed that "[t]he human face is of unique importance in the fine arts [because] in the features of the face the soul finds its clearest expression" (Harrington 2020, p. 231). In this regard, he wonders whether there are inherent aesthetic qualities that render the face especially significant as an artistic subject. According to Simmel, amongst all the parts of the human body, the face has the highest degree of internal unity. "The primary evidence of this fact is that a change which is limited, actually or apparently, to one element of the face—a curl of the lips, an upturning of the nose, a way of looking, a frown—immediately modifies its entire character and expression" (*ibidem*). The unity of the face is further emphasized because of the head arrangement on the neck, thus providing the head itself with a peninsular position with respect to the body and making it appear reliant on itself. Additionally, this effect is enhanced since the body is usually clothed up to the neck. Hence, Simmel considers unity to be meaningful only insofar as it contrasts with the multiplicity whose synthesis it is. In his opinion, if complexity were not simultaneously a complete unity, the face—including its multiplicity and variety of parts, forms and colours—would be something very weird and aesthetically intolerable from a merely formal point of view.

The face strikes us as a symbol, not only of the spirit, but also of an unmistakable personhood. The entire body along with its movements—perhaps as well as the face—can express psychological processes. Nonetheless, these movements become visibly revealed only within the facial features which disclose the soul distinctly and decisively. For Simmel, "[a]pppearance would then become the veiling and unveiling of the soul" (Harrington :2020 235). Plessner shares this stance, claiming that "although the appearance of the entire body shows the condition of the soul, the face—especially the gaze—becomes the mirror, the "window" of the soul" (2000, p. 80, our translation).

Early physiognomic studies were interested in the question of image on the assumption that the face offers a reliable image of human beings. It was supposed to be possible to describe the character of a human being from the face itself and consequently abstract the existence of a similar character from similar faces (cf. Belting 2017, p. 63).

So far, what we intend to underline is mostly that the face somehow represents the place where the personal identity of the subject is displayed. Regarding the actor's performance, this point raises the challenge of how to separate the performer's own face (identity) from that of the character whose figure is being *monstrated*. In other words, since the twentieth century, one realizes that the identity of the



Fig. 11 Lecoq's neutral mask designed by Amleto Sartori (our photo). (Color figure online)

actor-persona tends (often perniciously²²) to overlap with that of the character. In fact, before being an actor, the performer is mainly a medium, a flesh and blood persona. Due to this reason, we could assume that the requirement of shaping and managing the actor's figure has been conceived as pivotal in the very process of training. Thus, to deal with the actor's body as an instrument means to make it a blank page to be used to re-design the character's body, including the face. In this regard, it is worth mentioning amongst many others the method of the pedagogue Jacques Lecoq—one of the greatest teachers of contemporary theatre—which consists in the use of a special mask during the training process: the so-called *neutral mask* (Fig. 11).

This mask was designed by the sculptor Amleto Sartori. After World War II, he focused on studying the *Commedia dell'Arte*, developing a technique for modelling leather masks on a wooden mold. Thereafter Jacques Lecoq introduced him to Giorgio Strehler and Paolo Grassi to work at the Piccolo Teatro in Milan. Lecoq's pedagogical research aimed to delay the use of words in the actor's performance still influenced by a declamatory tradition. According to him, "[t]he imposition of silent performance leads the students to discover this basic law of theatre: words are born from silence. At the same time they discover that movement, too, can only come out of immobility" (Lecoq 2009, p. 36). He comprehends that within the actor's work (on oneself) the corporeality should be re-acquired: the word would be a conquest. It should be, as it were, the outcome of a process triggered by the body. In this respect, the neutral mask only

²² In the act of performing, a tension is created between the phenomenal living body of the actor and his/her impersonification of a *dramatis persona*, namely, of another-than-onself. According to Gordon Craig, for example, this *conditio humana* is the reason why actors should be replaced by super-puppet—*Über-Marionette* (cf. Beato 2020).

serves to train the body awareness to escape uncontrolled spontaneity and to discipline the actor's figure. Emotions have to be directed toward the audience and, especially, shaped to be displayed to it. To deal effectively with this task, Lecoq considers to be imperative erasing the identity²³ of the actor-persona, compelling them to (dis)engage one's individual and idiosyncratic body, in order to regain a *new* controlled body to shape the character properly. However, before achieving this goal it is pivotal to delete that part of the body most capable of expressing the personhood of everyone: the face. After all, as Gabriele Marino points out, "The mask-face—and not, simply, the face mask—is the screen onto which the form of life hiding, revolving, arising behind it is being projected" (2021, p. 322).

Yet, it is worth remarking that Lecoq's research is situated in what Eugenio Barba defines as the *pre-expressive level* meant as the basic technique level which creates *presence* on stage; a dilated and effective body which can hold and guide the spectator's attention.

The pre-expressive principles of the performer's life are not cold concepts concerned only with the body's physiology and mechanics. They also are based on a network of fictions and 'magic ifs' which deal with the physical forces that move the body. What the performer is looking for, in this case, is a fictive body, not a fictive person (Barba 1995, p. 34).

For Lecoq, the neutral mask has no technique, it is rather a mask "of calm", whether compared to the other (expressive) masks. Due to this reason, it was named "noble mask" as it is far from emotions.²⁴ Neutral mask allows the actor to find the economy of movement. Moreover, this mask has no conflict, therefore it "never goes on stage". It is a sensory mask, without reasoning. It exhorts to pure perception abandoning thought, whose highest display would seem to be the face. The mask aims to erase every cultural element we belong to.

The neutral mask is an object with its own special characteristics. It is a face which we call neutral, a perfectly balanced mask which produces a physical sensation of calm. This object, when placed on the face, should enable one to experience the state of neutrality prior to action, a state of receptiveness to everything around us, with no inner conflict. This mask is a reference point, a basic mask, a fulcrum mask for all the other masks. Beneath every mask,

expressive masks or *commedia dell'arte* masks, there is a neutral mask supporting all the others. When a student has experienced this neutral starting point his body will be freed, like a blank page on which drama can be inscribed (Lecoq 2009, pp. 36–38).

The neutral mask device affords the actor wearing it to exercise the zero degree of his own gestures via "engagement effect"²⁵ (*embrayage*) on the traits of one's face, as aspiring to designate the effect of a return to an *ante persona* enunciation. In fact, firstly neutral mask neutralizes the singular features of the actor, secondly it should enable hereafter them to play a character without conflict. In this context, one could say that the mask is perceived as an *embrayage* (rather than *débrayage*) device to provide the actor with a *natural* face meant as "mask degree zero" (cf. Marino 2021, p. 325). In fact, the face of the actors nevertheless tells a story, whether one likes it or not, and this story does not always necessarily coincide with that of the character they play.

Although it works on the face, the effect of the mask is conveyed to the entire figure which as body learns to move and gesture in a coherent manner to that neutral face. However, as Francesco Marsciani²⁶ points out, the neutral face cannot "advocate" any significant behavior of the body, nor anything interpretable as detectable, nor any reference to a motivation of the gesture, to a reason, to an intention. The neutral mask therefore obliterates the subjectivity, and not only that of the actor. It stands before any character and becomes its generative ground, its zero degree. This procedure of neutralization of the whole corporeality results extremely interesting, since it begins from the annihilation of the face-form of the actor, thus converting his/her face into an almost inexpressive "generic" one: the smile is removed from the mouth, the frown from the eyebrows, the anger from the nostrils, the attention from the eyelids, the confidence from the jaws, the disgust from the line of the nose, the whiteness or the redness from the skin. This procedure, by operating directly on the face, provokes a void of signification in the intersubjective relationship and, according to Marsciani, exposes the subject wearing the mask to absolute *undetectedness* regarding their identity. As a matter of fact, the figure wearing the neutral mask denies its enunciative rooting—both as subject of the enunciation and as subject of the utterance. In other words, its nature as discourse, which is the manner the world takes its place among human beings

²³ Identity should not be conceived as something given and stable, but as a place of *monstration* of the narrative and relational complex inhabiting the faces of everyone in a given cultural context. In fact, "the semiotic approach warns us against matching it to identity off-hand" (Marino 2021, p. 331).

²⁴ It is interesting to point out a comparison with Charles Le Brun according to whom "tranquillity", as synonym for calm, was considered the zero degree of expression (see footnote 11).

²⁵ "Engagement is the inverse of disengagement. The latter is the effect of the expulsion from the domain of the enunciation of the category terms which serve as support for the utterance, whereas engagement designates the effect of a return to the enunciation. [...] Every engagement thus presupposes a disengagement operation which logically precedes it" (Greimas 1982, p. 100).

²⁶ Cf. <https://marsciani.net/personale/testi-sparsi/>



Fig. 12 A picture of actress Clara Bow by Rolf Armstrong (1930)

Fig. 13 Caricature of Clara Bow by Swedish artist Carl Berglöw (1929)



and acquires meaning, is denied. Removing the subjectivity, the mask denies itself as object, as thing among things, and it solely maintains its charge of potential subjectivity. To neutralize the face thereby means to interfere with the conditions of meaningful prehension of bodily experience, namely, with the quality and nature of the act of sense-making in general. The face itself, as exhibited in its neutralized nakedness, seems to reveal a more general function, a condition that transcends the singularities onto which our perception is articulated.

Hence, according to Lecoq, the face is the place where our inner conflicts unfold. The face identifies us and thus it is not by chance that the face will become the main protagonist of the early cinema.

1.3 CLOSE-UP Faces

The rise of cinema witnessed the ascent—or, perhaps, it would be more appropriate to say the return—of the face as a protagonist with respect to the entire figure of the actor. By means of the camera, it became possible to film faces in close-up and to investigate their feelings and passions down to their tiniest folds. The face portrays the hidden intimacy of the person acting on the screen. For this reason, at first cinema recovers some tenets of the past physiognomic tradition (Fig. 12–13). Riding on the crisis of declamation

theatre, the supremacy of verbal communication and words is questioned to rediscover the culture of gesture and, especially, mimic expression. The focus is entirely on the close-up as a tool capable of revealing the soul of the subject. As a result, there was a sort of “facial stardom” (Pravadelli 2014).

Using the image of the human face, cinema aims to show the essence of its characters and to portray their emotions so the spectators can recognize them, thus identifying themselves with those passions displayed on the screen, which in turn becomes a form of *mediated* intersubjectivity (cf. Gallesse 2015). The human face close-up should be conceived as a boundary ground that joins the outer world to the inner one, as a *threshold* for passing from one universe to another, namely, a map of signs that makes visible the invisible. Yet the face is entrusted with the telling of several stories. Reading faces as narrative devices means precisely investigating the difference between the face as an immobile surface that conveys a “state” of mind and the face as a ground wherein the “moves” of the soul are performed. According to a semantic approach to facial behavior, the past theatrical tradition was obsessed to seek a law of correspondence between inside and outside. Instead, cinema no longer relies on the mere stiff detection of detailed (and predefined) visual movements allegedly related to certain emotions due to cultural training or tradition instantiated via “display rules”. Besides, in a movie the articulation of the story is entrusted to different textual layers of organization in syncretism with each other. Therefore, the face becomes only one of these, and facial expression one of the many devices involved in conveying conflicts and passions.

Furthermore, as Belting observes, in the first half of the twentieth century cinema was the only media to be able to convey the experience of faces.

The fact is that nowhere else but in the movies could one see faces that assaulted viewers with such movement and expressivity of life and then suddenly disappeared. Nowhere else could such power of suggestion be experienced than on the movie screen in the darkness cinema where the feeling of place seems suspended and one sits alone under the onslaught of images (2017, p. 211).

However, the close-up reveals every slightest wrinkle which is immediately perceived as a distinctive character trait. Likewise, the smallest contraction of a facial muscle, whether zoomed in on screen, may suggest complex and articulated inner tensions. The face is the landscape of emotions so the actors must learn to control their expressions and to condense on their faces the deeper meaning of the story they are telling. On the one hand, it is not by chance that cinema recovered the legacy of nineteenth-century acting handbooks interested in outlining a grammar of the face. In this scenario, the face regains its original function as a mask, cementing its bond with the persona. The actors of early cinema identified with their masks, often stuck in a dramatic



Fig. 14 The actor Paul Newman (Public domain photo, 1958)



Fig. 15 The actress Joan Crawford (Public domain photo, 1936)

or comic grimace (Fig. 14–15). The concept of close-up, of widening, displays thoughts and emotions more strongly than in the theatre (especially in the stage/auditorium modes requiring a certain distance between actor and spectator). As Vittorio Gallese points out, “the close-up is configured as a field of sensory and affective attraction capable of enhancing the emotional and empathic potential of the film [...], it sharpens the multimodality of our interaction with the film and favors a greater resonance with bodies” (2015, pp. 214–215, our translation).

As a result of this closeness, actors are therefore required to perform more detailed, but simultaneously restrained, work on their facial expressions. Indeed, such expressions may even be merely “hinted at” by sometimes imperceptible moves nonetheless captured by the camera’s probing eye. Moreover, compared to the tradition of silent movies wherein the entire narration was entrusted to the actor’s face, the advent of sound involves further devices to enact the story: editing, music, camera movements, etc. Although maintaining its own role, the face is increasingly subject to an opacity process aimed at reducing its expressive power, focusing attention exclusively on the actor’s gaze.



Fig. 16 Portrait of Marilyn Monroe as Rose Loomis in the 1953 film *Niagara*, photograph that Warhol used as a basis for his many paintings and prints of Marilyn (public domain)



Fig. 17 Actress Charlize Theron compared to her character in the 2003 film *Monster*. (Color figure online)

Ultimately, the eyes have always been conventionalized as a “sign *par excellence* of identity” in Western cultures (Pollock 1995, p. 585). Thus, the eyes play the role previously held by the whole facial configuration. Extra-ordinary movements or expressions will be labeled as “over-acting” or, worse, “theatrical” because perceived as extra-daily.

The faces of movie stars become iconic masks, which make the actors always recognizable to the spectators in every film regardless of the role played. The result is a progressive overlap between actor and character. Nevertheless, such faces are necessarily “altered”, e.g., due to make-up which often fulfills a crucial function. In fact, wearing makeup means adopting a different identity or hiding one’s own. Such is the paradigmatic case, for example, of the actress Marilyn Monroe (Fig. 16), whose mask-face,



Fig. 18 Actress Nicole Kidman compared to her character in the 2002 film *The hours*. (Color figure online)

moreover, was made immortal by the American Pop Art artist Andy Warhol, who transformed her into the iconic face of American society itself.

On the other hand, in the contemporary cinema there is a countertrend. In fact, actors who are considered notoriously fascinating or somehow “recognizable” are often asked to “transform themselves” to affirm their performing abilities (and to win an Oscar, in the best of cases). As an example, actresses such as Charlize Theron (Fig. 17) or Nicole Kidman (Fig. 18) have had to *conceal* their uncontested beauty, a distinctive trait of their diva identity, to highlight their acting talent. Therefore, we can notice a sort of return to theatricality, a return to the mask that alters, that “covers” the actor-player’s face as a deceptive device, literally making it sometimes disappear to be replaced by the face mask of the portrayed character.²⁷

In a certain way, the matter is posed in the following terms: if the spectator somehow manages to forget that behind the face of that character hides a certain actor or actress, then it means that their performance can be considered of value.

If we somewhat examine the issue from the enunciation point of view—or better, from the monstration point of view—we may suppose that actors, more or less aware of their *eccentric* condition (as Plessner says²⁸), perform several acts of *débrayage* and *embrayage* on their face, adopting strategies of exhibition, concealment or alteration. For example, these acts can often be observed in the contemporary

²⁷ Thus, the aleatory effect otherwise caused by the overlapping between the actors’ face (along with their own expressive idiosyncrasies) and the face of the character they are playing (which is supposed to display different expressive configurations to detect a diverse identity) is reduced.

²⁸ Cf. note 20.

trend of many movie stars to display themselves “without filters”, “without make-up”, as to exhibit their pre-actorial face. In other words, we might assume that their purpose is somehow to show the actor-persona behind the actor-performer who is preceded by the actor-player, thus triggering an intricate and fascinating process of enunciation projections, or rather “monstrations”. Thus, the spectator is requested to undertake a complex abductive work betting each time on what he/she perceives via the actor’s face, which he/she therefore considers an interface for connecting with the emotional universe of the film.

2 Conclusions

The forms of expression which actors adopt to display their passions using their own face require specialization and high levels of symbolization and conventionalization. Therefore, the aim of the actors’ training should be to make them reach a controlled, skillful employment of their figure, by means of plastic manipulation of physical bodily matter. The goal is to endow one’s body with a qualitatively effective and recognizable presence and salience to realize different kinds of aesthetic (and aesthesia) effects. However, there are no universal aestheticizations of the mimic configurations that actors produce to render visible emotions.

The monstration of passions rather depends on the intercorporeal relations at stake time after time in the several forms of mediated intersubjectivity whereby (theatrical or cinematographic) actors’ performances are displayed. Hence, the symbolic translation of the body in gestures and facial expressions is deeply rooted in cultural corporeal habits. Nonetheless, what significantly emerges is the extent to which the condition of the actor is paradigmatic of the condition of the human being. Ultimately, the fictional level is not so alien from that of daily life. As a matter of fact, the actor’s activity provides us with an idea of the complex and multifarious process of symbolization constantly undergone by our body and, especially, by our face Jack and Schyns (2015): in its daily action, it literally *stages* subjectivity, giving it shape by means of a range of expressions or postures and thus projecting itself into the world; it simply theatricalizes and transforms such world, to some extent, into a stage. The only difference is that actors submit their expressiveness to a symbolic formalization. While doing so, they employ different monstration strategies to *resonate* with the spectators and thus allow them to comprehend the performance “from the inside” by means of their own bodies.

According to the categories and notions suggested by Roman Jakobson, we might claim that in the theatrical models we have described so far, the actor’s face assumes a *poetic function*. In other words, the face is offered as an “aesthetic text” and as such entails a manipulation of the plane of

expression. The spectators perceive this manipulation process by the recognition of the clue value of certain moves of the single units composing the facial configuration. The more one lies in the domain of conventionality, the more the signs produced by certain mimic configurations are detectable. On the other hand, the more one lies in the domain of daily life, the more the signs produced are opaque and, consequently, their detectability too. Yet, the case of cinema suggests to us the extent to which not only a semantic issue is at stake—namely, the combination of an expression with a content—but the context itself has a syncretical decisive relevance. Compared to theater, cinema proves that emotional expressions are considerably more context-sensitive and thus variable than the traditional theatre has tried to advocate.²⁹

Hence, what the theatrical models examined are concerned with is the extent to which the mimic gestures are crucial in the process of spectator attuning. As regards facial expressions, the aim is to perceive the *density* whereby the single parts functioning together—eyes, eyebrows, nose, mouth, etc.—produce a “synthesis”, in other words, lead to a new meaning, thus making the mimic configuration complete. The corporeity of the actor is offered to the spectator as an *ambiguous* and *self-focusing* text. It is ambiguous, insofar as (a) it consciously breaks the usual rules of code; (b) it draws the attention of the spectator, as the addressee of the performance, to the mimic-gestural codes and strategies adopted to reveal the underlying narrative layers organizing the performance; (c) it produces an increase of the content plane, perceived as possible and interesting. Finally, it is self-focusing insofar as it draws the spectator’s attention to its own material organization and forces the addressee to reconsider the entire organization of the content. As a result, the spectators’ glance recognizes clues generating saliencies and therefore wonders about their meaning (via abductive work). As Umberto Eco states, the outcome of such ambiguity and self-focusing is a cognitive review consisting of two processes. On the one hand, the addressee perceives “a *surplus of expression* that he cannot completely analyze (though maybe he could)” and, in an undefined but pathemically recognizable manner, combines it with “a *surplus of content*” (Eco 1976, p. 270). The spectator-addressee “does not know what the sender’s rule was; he tries to extrapolate it from the disconnected data of his aesthetic experience” (Eco 1976: 275). Secondly, this undefined meaning—full of possible whether elusive meanings—is perceived as an aesthetic experience modifying, to some extent, the addressee’s perception of the world.

Consequently, we might assume that, first the function of the mask, and then the function of certain “expressive figures” of the face stabilize an interpretative conventionality

between actors and spectators, in order to encourage the legibility of the mimic-gestural configurations adopted by the actors and thus reduce the potential opacity of the signs employed. Whether moving away from conventionality, the lack of signs intersubjectively recognized as “theatrical” leads the spectators to be at the mercy of a perceptual disorientation: this means that they are not properly modalized on a “knowing-how-to-do” such as to allow them to process which information is dramaturgically relevant and which is not. This occurs since in the performing context daily life unavoidably leads to an opacification of the theatrical sign and, therefore, to a pernicious intertwining between the sphere of art and the sphere of reality. In fact, as we noted, turning to a certain “naturalism” threatens to undermine the very reading protocols of the spectators who nevertheless know that they are participating in a conventional event, a metaphor for life and not a mere copy of it. Anyway, the spectators are at the mercy of aleatory stimuli, lacking explicit procedures of iconization intersubjectively shared and, above all, recognizable. For this reason, we may presume that the aim of acting handbooks such as Morrocchesi’s or Morelli’s was to provide the actors with straightforward rules of *compositionality* to be effectively detectable by the spectator. As well as providing the actors themselves with effective tools to convey their expressive *intentionality*.

In conclusion, there is a further outcome arising from the above considerations. It concerns the extent to which the face is, amongst the others, the place of the body wherein the narrations are significantly materialized, as, moreover, the case of the neutral mask has already revealed. Without the face and its expressions, the gestural configurations themselves risk appearing opaque, as they are denied the subjectivity that allegedly produced them. Thus, compared to the entire corporeality, the face seems to assume a predominant narrative function, especially in the context of mediated intersubjectivity models such as the cinema. In addition, the spectators fulfill a key role which should not be underestimated: they are in turn part of the physical or mimic gesture, since their co-presence endows it with meaning and may modify its action via their “assent”. In fact, in the artistic performances, the assent is not only that of the person who performs the gesture, but also that of the person who participates in its creation. After all, stage presence is a presence for someone, i.e., it is necessarily generated by someone’s gaze.

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²⁹ Cf. Le Mau et al. (2021)

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