

# MASKS

by Carlos Alberto Augusto © 1992



1- Masks are mysterious objects. But their mystery may well reside in the fact that we do not know these objects well. Scholarship has traditionally regarded masks as either symbols, or instruments which enabled human beings to establish bonds with universal forces: gods and the natural elements. Masks may indeed be regarded as symbols or links with more or less hidden forces. But I have a different reason for approaching this subject. It does not seem legitimate to consider masks as fortuitous

objects; their design and production must have a well defined and more solid goal. That goal has never been thoroughly explained but it seems obvious that masks were not conceived to be symbols, as this character can only be bestowed on them *a posteriori*. On the other hand, if we consider them instruments it will become necessary to analyze in which exact way they will be instrumental. Masks are or were used in ceremonies of a religious or artistic character. I will discuss their use in the latter case, and I will focus on the use of masks theatre of the western tradition. I will attempt to prove in this article that masks, in this specific context, were designed and produced to provide solutions to problems in audio-visual communication. Masks seem to be used as devices that keep the visual sense neutralized while the auditory sense remains active. In order to explain this theory I will briefly describe - within this well determined context, i.e. Western theatre- , firstly, how masks change due to changes in the original conditions which gave rise to their appearance, and conclude that masks are the embodiment of a process, and as such there maybe more than what the simple object probably suggests.

Theatre in the Western tradition -i.e., theatre based on a written script- begins in ancient Greece. The use of masks is readily observable in Greek theatre. It stems from their use in religious ceremonies out of which this emergent art form aroused. Ancient Greece can be briefly described as an oral civilization moving towards literacy. The spoken word clearly dominated communication. The weight carried by the spoken word

can best be illustrated in the fears of Plato against rising literacy. Says Plato in the *Phaedrus*:

*"Writing is reputed to have an efficaciousness which is contrary to that which is indeed capable of achieving; because it will lead to forgetfulness in souls, by bringing them to neglect memory. In entrusting writing it is outside them, through alien characters, and not within them, at the bottom of themselves, that they will attempt to reconstruct their memories."*

Writing freezes thought there where it does not live: outside the mind, concludes Plato. The issue may seem worthless to us now but it is of the greatest importance. Plato's vehement words permit us to see more clearly through this problem. Greek theatre though based upon a written text is indeed an acoustic theatre. Characters were identified through sound. The Latin word *persona*, from which the English word person originated, literally means *per son*, through sound. *Persona* is the Latin root of Portuguese, French, English and Italian words for character. Sound was indeed present through the voice of the actors which constituted their most identifiable trait. Radio theatre *avant la lettre*...

It was also present in the choir and in the extreme care with which theatres were built. Sound was present in audience participation which was not reduced to simple applause. Sound was indeed the main component in Greek theatre and its role was pivotal. The visual component was reduced to a minimum. But it is important also to note under which circumstances sound's central role was played. Greek theatres were -we may presume after examining the observable remaining examples- true musical instruments, where acoustics were subject to special attention. Moreover, as Arnott (1989) notes, their sizes were impressive. Stages could be 20 m wide and the back rows could be 90 m from stage. An actor 1.80m tall would look about 3 to 8 cm to spectators seated in the front rows or at the back respectively. Moreover, these theatres held tens of thousands spectators, the most staggering example being the Ephesus which held 55 000 spectators. "The best comparison in our world to the ancient theatre is the football stadium or bullring," Arnott further notes.

Actors wore masks and we may safely presume that acting under these circumstances was no easy task. The role of the spectator was not an easy one either. Arnott says that "Clearly, the Greeks possessed a level of aural attentiveness far superior to ours." (Arnott,1989:79) Space defined in Greek theatre was clearly an acoustic space: dynamic and omnidirectional. Actors, choir and spectators were immersed in this acoustic space, and changes took place through sound, a situation that may seem hard to fully understand now. The visual environment of Greek theatre relied mainly upon masks. There was no auxiliary lighting, stage

settings or costumes did not carry the weight they do today, and gestures were above all designed to help project the voice. Props and even the actors' entrances and exits were not as rigorous as the treatment that they are subject to in contemporary theatre. Masks played a major role in building the visual dimension of Greek theatre. They drew the character's main features and created a permanent reference. Unlike theatre's acoustic environment, masks created an univocal process as no information was reflected back.

Slowly, the visual elements began dominating the theatrical universe and accordingly the role of the mask changed. Masks as we traditionally understand them were also used regularly in Roman and Tudor theatre and in the Commedia dell'Arte. In these cases however, and even though the origin of its use is still the same, they no longer played the role they did in Greece. In other words, masks as static visual references in counterpoint with the dynamics of the acoustic environment disappeared and their role progressively became that of a mere prop, perhaps not far from the use of make-up. Masks are seldom used today.

2 - If "Western wisdom has been attempting for twenty-five centuries to see the world," as J. Attali (1977) once noted, one may be tempted to say that it may have taken a while but it has succeeded in that endeavour. The ties that bond us to sound are, in fact quite thin. In Greece mastery of the spoken word, the attention given to it and aural acuity were part of the set of virtues to nourish, whereas today mastery of the written word, a sharp sense of observation and visual acuity have loosely replaced those virtues.

The theatre environment did not escape the dominance of visual elements as well. Producing a play increasingly meant creating a complex set of scenery, costumes, gestures, facial expressions and the actor's placement within a three dimensional space. In this visually rich context, sound is of secondary importance. In Greek theatre the absence of proper scenery and lighting on the one hand and distance on the other created an almost exclusively acoustically perceivable environment. Sight was kept at an idle pace. This situation gradually changed and hearing would in turn become idle. The visual environment went through a gradual but radical change. Theatre buildings became smaller and the importance of the smallest visual details grew. The homogeneity of acoustic space was dissected: shadow and light indicate the playing and sitting areas. Acting techniques changed, in particular, gestures and facial expression gained a new importance. Audience participation, which was quite vigorous and mostly carried out through sound almost ceased, and it was reduced to thin applause prompted by light. An elaborate set of techniques including stage settings, costumes, lighting, gesture and movement within the playing area became a pivotal element in the rendering of the play. The

script was still being voiced, but what the word explicitly exhibited the gesture and facial expression implicitly denied. Theatre of the Western tradition thus became static and directional, that is, it stressed one vector. Acoustic theatre was multi-vectorial and constantly and unexpectedly changing. Visual theatre with its lights, shadows and silences seem to transform the theatrical event into the reading of a printed text.

One legitimately wonders what is sound doing in that writing space and to what role precisely sound was relegated in the reading process? This is a major question I will attempt to illustrate it by briefly examining the use of electroacoustics in modern theatre production. Electroacoustic devices are used to cope with intelligibility problems and to provide an easily operated acoustic background. With the use of these devices the acoustic space thus created seems static. This constitutes a seeming contradiction given the nature of acoustic space as described earlier. But if we examine the main characteristics of the electroacoustic space it looks obvious that there is no contradiction. There are three factors which contribute to bestow



on the electroacoustic space this static character, which Schafer (1977) has summarized in the term "schizophonia". Firstly, the directionality of the transducing process through the loudspeakers. Movement within the visual space does not correspond to movement of the electroacoustic sources. Secondly, the dynamic compression inherent to all electroacoustic devices will further stress the alien character of electrically reproduced sound. Thirdly, the amplification of the original signal helps creating an artificial focus, the control of which cannot be disputed.

All this seems to contribute to the creation a virtual *proscenium*, or in other words an authentic sound mask, which although perhaps less traditional and not carried by any actor seems to fulfill a similar role: one channel (auditory) is kept neutral while all variation is processed through the other channel (visual). I suggested earlier that masks seem more complex than the mere object appears to indicate. This I call *masking* and it could be generally described as the neutralization of one or more channels in a multi-channel communication process while the other channels remain active. It may even be a species trait, a process of protection against information overload that can occur in certain circumstances. The three Chinese monkeys which are traditionally shown

each shutting its eyes, ears and mouth, should perhaps be seen under a different light.

I want to conclude by briefly referring my own interpretation of this subject. Even if *masking* seems to have a protective role, this process reveals an impairment. Westernized societies have become more and more shut off from the outside world. They almost lost their sense of smell and refrain from touching. The ears played an unique role in perceiving the environment but this important role is almost lost. Westerners seem to rely more and more upon their eyes but the general trend appears to be a sort of voluntary sense deprivation. And an undeniable environmental crisis will only contribute to make these matters worse. Moreover, I think that perceiving the world solely through the ears or the eyes seems as much and as real an handicap as deafness or blindness. An attempt should thus be made to pay attention to the developing of a different human being. After centuries of orality and literacy it may be time for true multimediacy. This maybe a step forward in regaining the full dimension of the human character. We now possess technology that can function in a true holistic manner. It seems all we have to do is to reconcile ourselves with the very technology we created.

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