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The visage and the mask: semiotic considerations around representations of visages in Japanese Nō

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Abstract: This paper aims at confronting a semio-anthropology of the face, based on the principles of Lévi-Strauss and Greimas, with the representation of the visage in Japanese Nō theater. As a theory, semiotics permits an explanation of the signification of faces, reduced at first to a series of masks, and their representations in different cultures. Within this framework, we will show that representations of visages in Nō form a semiotic system specific to both Japanese culture (myths, legends) and theatrical performance, and that the latter reintroduces a dynamic dimension which questions their status. Initially described as "narrative masks" depicting characters, they finally emerge as "movement masks" that blur the boundary between mask and face even further.

Keywords: movement mask; narrative mask; Nō theatrical performance; semio-anthropology

1 Introduction

This article intends to approach the visage, and its representations, from the point of view of a semiotics of culture. Our analysis will follow three steps: first, we will be discussing previous theories on the face in order to establish the principles of a semio-anthropology of the visage (Lévi-Strauss, Greimas) – i.e. "textualization." Then, we will apply these principles to investigate and analyze the representation and status of the visage in Japan through Nō masks. We will demonstrate that they can be considered not only as "narrative masks," portraying a specific identity with codified emotions, but also, and foremost, as "movement masks," whose "neutral" or "ambivalent" expressions can be actualized by theatrical practice and eventually claim the status of a visage.

In general, the visage can be defined as a cultural object, in the same way as the body (Goffman 1968; Lévi-Strauss 1958). As Leroi-Gourhan (1964) and Van Lier (2019

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[2010]) point out, it has the particularity of being the face, or interface, which allows humans to enter in contact with the world and with others; thus, Le Breton (2003 [1992]: Ch1 §62) considers that "*le visage d'emblée est sens. Nul espace du corps n'est plus approprié pour marquer la singularité de l'individu et la signaler socialement*" [the visage is immediately meaningful. No other body part is more suited to marking the singularity of the individual and signaling it socially (my translation[1])]. The several ways in which cultures attempted to give it meaning generated representations, or discourses, of particular interest for anthropology, and require visual analysis methods (Alloa 2017; Belting 2017; Lévi-Strauss 1975).

In this context, the research carried out recently in the field of semiotics regarding the face/visage, and in particular its digital representations (Leone 2021; Dondero 2022), highlights how *physiognomy* (Lavater 1979), *morphopsychology* (Ekman et al. 1972; Ekman and Friesen 1978), and typological representations (Bertillon's anthropometric inventories [1890, 1893] and Galton's composite photographs [1878]) gave meaning to the visage. We intend to extend or complement this work by assuming the perspective of an anthropological – therefore symbolic – and structural semiotics of the visage, which seeks to understand the representations and statuses of the visage within different cultures.[2]

To this end, we must begin pointing out the difficulties the visage raises to any "study" attempting its description – in both the sciences and the arts. The visage is a complex "object," on the one hand, because it constitutes the singularity of individuals, their geography or landscape, and on the other hand, because it allows an infinite number of emotions to be dynamically expressed (Simmel 1988: 138). In brief, the unpredictability and ambiguity of the visage, regarded as the "anamorphosis of the individual," resists any grammar and any "semiological reading" (Le Breton 2003 [1992]: ch2 §1).

Although, as we shall see later, the semiotics of the visage may have some methodological principles in common with physiognomy, the latter presents two major problems: (i) it operates through the mediation of photographic images, and (ii) it supports an interpretative semiology associating, a priori, an expression with a content for classification purposes. Le Breton (2003 [1992]) has demonstrated very clearly how physiognomy emerged from a (distant) heritage of Hippocrates' medical semiology, which used certain facial features for diagnosing diseases. Thus, Lavater's definition of physiognomy as "*la connaissance des traits du visage et de leur*

1 All translations from French to English in this paper (within square brackets) have been made by the author.

2 In this respect, our perspective is in line with recent research carried out as part of the Facet project, which has investigated the various meanings of faces in different sociocultural contexts (see: Barbotto et al. 2022; Leone and Gramigna 2021).

signification" [the knowledge of facial features and their meaning] (Lavater 1979: 6) and the devices he employed led Le Breton to believe that

> *La physiognomonie est une démarche sémiologique, elle s'attache à déterminer un certain nombre de particularités du visage humain, qu'elle transforme en « indices » et qu'elle met en relation avec une série de dispositions psychologiques. [Elle repose sur la construction] de systèmes laborieux qui éliminent le visage pour ne considérer que la série de ses constituants* [Physiognomy is a semiological approach; it attempts to determine a certain number of particularities of the human visage, transforming them into "indexes" later related to a series of psychological tendencies. [It relies on the construction] of elaborate systems that eliminate the visage to consider solely the series of its components]. (Le Breton 2003 [1992]: ch2 §26)

In addition to reducing the visage to a collection of fixed features – which is difficult to avoid – *physiognomy* associates them with moral characteristics, passions, or criminal predispositions which, in return, allow an interpretation of the world. This perspective seems to be incompatible with the project of semiotics as a tool for analyzing and understanding cultural productions; if anything, it could be its object of study.

2 "Writing of the visage" and structuralism

During an interview with Bernard Pivot on French television, Claude Lévi-Strauss mentioned Albrecht Dürer's work on visages as an exemplary, if not the original, case of structuralist approach:

> *Albrecht Dürer, s'est aperçu – parce qu'il était peintre, que c'était un problème qui le préoccupait, il dessinait … – que, s'il n'était pas possible de décrire très exactement un visage et un autre visage, on pouvait trouver une règle de transformation très simple qui permettait de passer d'un visage A à un visage B, par une déformation en elle-même facile à réaliser. Et bien au fond, le structuralisme c'est ça, c'est en face d'objets très compliqués, se dire : "nous n'essayerons pas de décrire ces objets dans les moindres détails parce que nous n'y arriverions jamais […] mais nous essaierons de comprendre quelle est la différence entre [cet objet et un autre objet (NDA : de même type)]*" [Albrecht Dürer realized – because he was a painter, because he was concerned about this problem, he was sketching … – that, if it was not possible to describe one visage and another visage very precisely, one could find a very simple rule of transformation allowing a visage A to switch to a visage B, through a distortion that was easy to achieve. Well, basically, this is what structuralism is all about, it is, when confronted with very complicated objects, saying to ourselves: "we won't try to describe these objects in the slightest detail because we'll never manage to do so […] but we'll try to understand what the difference is between [this object and another object (AN: of the same type)]]." (Cl. Lévi-Strauss 1984)

In this general explanation, we find the elementary principles of an approach aiming at investigating human products as languages, dividing the totalities into parts, in

order to grasp and understand their meaning by means of sign systems which reveal their relations of opposition and transformation.

A close look at Dürer's work, particularly Book III of his *Treatise on the proportions of the human body* (1614 [1528]) devoted to the visage, shows that in order to reproduce a variety of faces and expressions, the artist initially draws them within a square and subsequently determines a set of variables. In brief, he establishes a topological system in which the face traits are positioned, allowing him to (i) draw different types of faces and (ii) maintain transformational relations between them (Figure 1). These principles correspond to the basics of structural investigation later developed in natural sciences by Goethe, D'Arcy-Thompson, and later by Lévi-Strauss.[3]

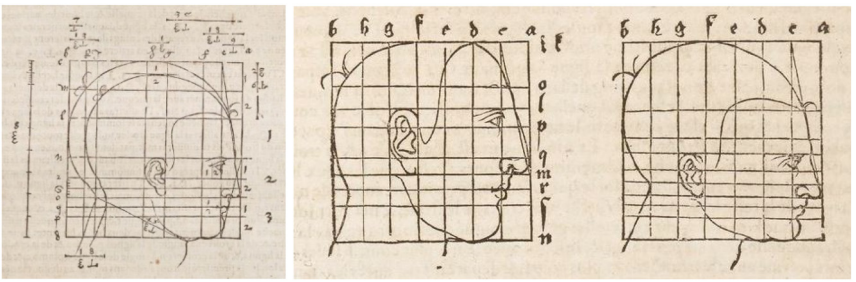

Figure 1: Dürer's grid of facial proportions and examples of transformations (Dürer 1614 [1528]: 72 and 81).

In Japan, Hokusai adopted a similar approach in his depiction of the human world. But rather than using a "grid" like Dürer, he relies on an underlying geometric structure of circles, squares, and triangles (Hokusai 1814) to constitute an iconographic repertoire of visages in his *manga* (Hokusai 1818–1878) (Figure 2). These three-quarter-view faces not only represent specific types (men, women, monks, travelers, blind people, old people, etc.), recognizable through a combination of stereotypical features, but also emotions expressed by different variations of gazes and mouths.

These two examples, acting both as a counterpoint and a complement to physiognomy, suggest that the question of the visage, and the knowledge of it, inevitably involves the mediation of writing or representation techniques that codify it in the form of *fixed visage-objects*. Hence, the objective of *semiotics of the visage*, inheriting

3 For further information on this point, we refer to the work of Petitot (2003).

Figure 2: Inventory of visages in Hokusai's manga, published between 1818 and 1878 (source BnF: http://expositions.bnf.fr/japonaises/albums/manga/index.htm).

from structuralism, is to describe the "appearance" (*paraître*) of "visages," i.e. the images that represent them in a given culture, rather than the referents.

3 Outlining semiotics of the face

Overall, semiotics of culture analyses "texts" (objects, images, narratives, practices) in order to understand meaning by bringing into perspective differences at the level of manifestation, i.e. the plane of expression, and oppositions at the level of signified, i.e. the plane of content, organized into systems that ultimately characterize singular cultural forms (Floch 1995; Greimas 1970, 1983; Lévi-Strauss 1958; Marin 1971, 1994; Marsciani 2012).

Semiotics constructs its "object" of analysis through a process of "textualization," defined as

> *la préparation d'un texte (qui) comprend non seulement l'élimination d'une dimension de la manifestation au profit de l'autre, mais aussi celle de toutes les autres isotopies de la même dimension considérées comme non pertinentes pour la description envisagée*[the preparation of a text (which) includes not only the elimination of one dimension of the manifestation in favor of another, but also the elimination of all other isotopies of the same dimension considered irrelevant for the intended description]. (Greimas 1966: 146)

It consists more precisely in a series of operations of abstraction, reduction, and discretization, allowing the closure of an object in order to demonstrate how it signifies. In this context, the visage can be approached by means of visual, figurative, and plastic semiotics (Greimas 1984; Groupe μ 1992), associating a plane of expression composed of *visual formants*, i.e. an overall shape, a mouth, a nose, eyes, whose variations from one face to another permit the apprehension of a signified referring to an individual's identity or relating to particular "states of mind" and passions (Courtés 2007 [2003]: 10; Fabbri 1987).

At first, given its "synchronic" dimension, semiotics cannot avoid reducing visages to masks. Indeed, as we already pointed out, the visage is alive, unstable, and ambiguous, it only signifies in movement within the sequence wherein it occurs – in this respect, we could call upon the notion of *movement-image* (Deleuze 1983). Such properties make it resistant to any type of notational system and resonate with the concerns of artists such as Rodin (2005 [1911]), who wondered how to represent bodies in movement. In the case of visages, Beyaert-Geslin (2022) underlines, following Belting (2017), that "le mouvement étant continu, la transformation peut se poursuivre en occasionnant le figement des traits" [since movement is continuous, transformation can proceed resulting in the fixation of the traits]. This principle was also formulated by Le Breton in these terms:

> *Le visage, si on suspend hors de lui toute signification vivante, si on le considère comme une chose, un masque, « un problème à résoudre », devient un volume et une surface, c'est-à-dire, un agencement de traits dans une forme* [If we suspend all living meaning from the visage, if we consider it as a thing, a mask, "a problem to be solved," it becomes a volume and a surface, that is, an arrangement of traits within a form]. (Le Breton 2003 [1992]: chapter 2 §37)

Thus, every representation or analysis of the visage necessarily involves, for practical reasons, the mediation of masks, or "false faces" as Damisch (1980) would claim, i.e. images (or graphs) depicting types of individuals or facial expressions displaying passions, related to a grammar and a cultural repertoire. There, we agree with Belting's (2017) considerations: "face" and "mask" are "operative concepts" enabling their relative vagueness to be overcome.

Therefore, a semiotics of the visage should investigate the way faces symbolize, make culturally coded passions intelligible and communicable, particularly via their diverse representations (makeup, masks). Not only does it reconstruct the operations of selection or stylization constituting visage-objects but, beyond limiting itself to analyzing fixed forms, semiotics is capable of exploring the dynamic meaning of the visage by reintroducing each form into the syntagmatic chain in order to reveal its transformations, as well as incorporating the modalizations governing its manifestations.

From now on, we propose to investigate the representation of visages in Japan by studying the masks of Japanese Nō theater. With the help of the semio-anthropological method, we will show how these representations of faces constitute a semiotic system, specific to Japanese culture (myths, legends) but also to theatrical practice, enabling us to understand the status of the face in Japan. We shall see that, while Nō produces stereotyped faces depicting characters from the literary and mythical repertoire, it also has the particularity of producing masks with complex expressions actualized during the movement of the theatrical performance. Thus, Nō masks challenge the boundaries of facial representation since, despite being fixed, it seems to aspire to being, or becoming, a face again.

4 The way of Nō masks

Nō theater is a form of ancient Japanese "lyrical drama" with religious essence considered as a "liturgical art" (Sieffert 1985 [1960]). More precisely, it is a motional, spoken, sung, and danced performance inherited from Sarugaku (猿楽), a theatrical art inspired by Chinese dances – *Sanqu* (散曲) and *Nuo* (儺戯) – from the eighth century. It is often described as a "conventional mannerism" whose principles were mainly established by Kan'ami and Zeami in the fourteenth century, before it became an official art during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (Komparu 1983; Mikiko 1994; Nose 1949; Sieffert 1985 [1960]: 32).

The play consists of a series of scenes narrating a traditional story based on legendary or mythological tales, as well as the lives of the nobles from the Heian period. Nō actors have a specific role in the play; there are mainly two types, the *shite*, the main character of the play, and the *waki*, the secondary character (often a monk narrator), both of which impose a certain way of acting and positioning on the stage.

Nō is a strongly codified performance wherein the actor embodies a stereotypical character by adorning himself with a set of signs: a mask, a costume and a series of movements allowing the sensitive animation of the character. The carved and painted wooden mask worn by the main actor *(shite)* is not only the "essence of the Nō performance" (Wu 2019) but also at the origin of Nō's "highly stylized play," which excludes "realistic physiognomy plays" (Sieffert 1985 [1960]: 22).

While not fully describing the production of the artifact, it should be noted that it is also the result of a precise and codified craft. The Nō mask is a sculpture traditionally made out of *kiso hinoki* wood (Japanese cypress), which is particularly well suited for dance performance; the visible surface of the mask is painted with *gofun* (white chalk powder); the hair and teeth are blackened with *sumi* (Indian ink); and *furubi*, a soot-based liquid, is used to create shades and effects (see Pulvers 1978) (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Woman mask (女面) of "Fukai" type (深井) (source: https://www.the-noh.com/).

In accordance with the principle of Nō, based on mannerist and stylized evocation, the mask does not attempt to realistically simulate the human face, but rather "[pushes] the expression of the human face and human emotion to the last limits of abstraction" (Doi 2019 [1993]: 21). This process of abstraction, or stylization, corresponds to a semiotic operation of selecting traits aiming at "characteriz[ing] a type rather than an individual" (Sieffert 1985 [1960]), including a few variations; in other words, it intends to make a generic identity intelligible. In addition, abstraction generates two (or even three) types of expression: (i) an *over-expressive face* or *mask of passion*; and (ii) an *inexpressive* or *ambivalent face*, which holds a great potential of expressiveness, both for the actor and the spectator (Mikiko 1994). The latter, specific to Nō, relies on the possibility of producing the "illusion of facial expression" (Komparu 1983) using the plastic properties of the mask (volume, color, syntax of components) while performing. In other words, the Nō mask intends to recreate the sensitive dynamics of an authentic visage.

After these observations, we consider the Nō mask as a cultural artifact used in religious practices, sacred or profane ceremonies, and rituals, associated with an artistic dimension (theater, dance, chant). First and foremost, it has a symbolic function (Komparu 1983), which creates and structures the sociocultural universe in the sense that (i) it is part of a ritualized figurative practice (a craft) relating to a certain way of

making (knowledge), transmitted over time, and (ii) it represents (*makes being*) figures pertaining to Japanese myths and legends through a collection of selected and accentuated traits, forming recognizable specific types. In brief, it exploits a repertoire of codified figures of passion (rules, syntax) specific to both the Japanese culture and worldview and the kind of performance in which they are manifested.

In *La voie de masques* (1975), Claude Lévi-Strauss demonstrates that masks draw their meaning and plastic invariants from myths; they express a certain affinity to a material, an object, an actor. Moreover, they are mutually organized in relations of opposition, or transformation, by means of their plastic components. Lévi-Strauss's methodology, although not explicitly semiotic, suggests

> Regrouper l'ensemble des informations dont on dispose à son sujet, c'est-à-dire tout ce qu'on connait sur ses caractères esthétiques, sa technique de fabrication, l'usage auquel il est destiné et les résultats qu'on attend ; enfin sur les mythes qui rendent compte de son origine, de son apparence et de ses conditions d'emploi [Collecting all the information we have about the object, i.e. everything we know about its aesthetic characteristics, its fabrication technique, its intended use and the expected results; finally, everything we know about the myths that explain its origin, its look and its conditions of use]. (Lévi-Strauss 1975: 35)

Consequently, an analysis of the mask as a "semiotic object" (or "text") requires studying the way it was made (enunciation) and examining the myths that can help in its interpretation. At this point, masks are suited to a semiotics of cultures that uses visual semiotic methods. Within this framework, our research will now demonstrate how the masks of Nō first appear as "narrative masks" making the identity of a character intelligible; secondly, we will show how their status as "danced masks" (or "movement masks") reintroduces a sensitive complexity capable of blurring the threshold between visage and mask.

5 Visages and mythical figures

The first part of this analysis focuses on reviewing the types of faces depicted in Nō, in order to determine how they identify characters from Japanese culture (Figure 4).

First of all, Nō masks construct a series of codified faces by modifying a certain number of features and their proportions:

> Nō masks are made according to specific measurements, which, with the development of types for specific roles, gradually became prescribed, down to the finest detail including length of eye, style of eyebrow or size and shape of eye-opening for a particular type. The size of a mask will vary according to type. The height (length) may vary from about 19–22 cm. […] Proportions of facial features are also regulated: distance between eyes, width of mouth, length of nose, and so on. (Pulvers 1978: 5)

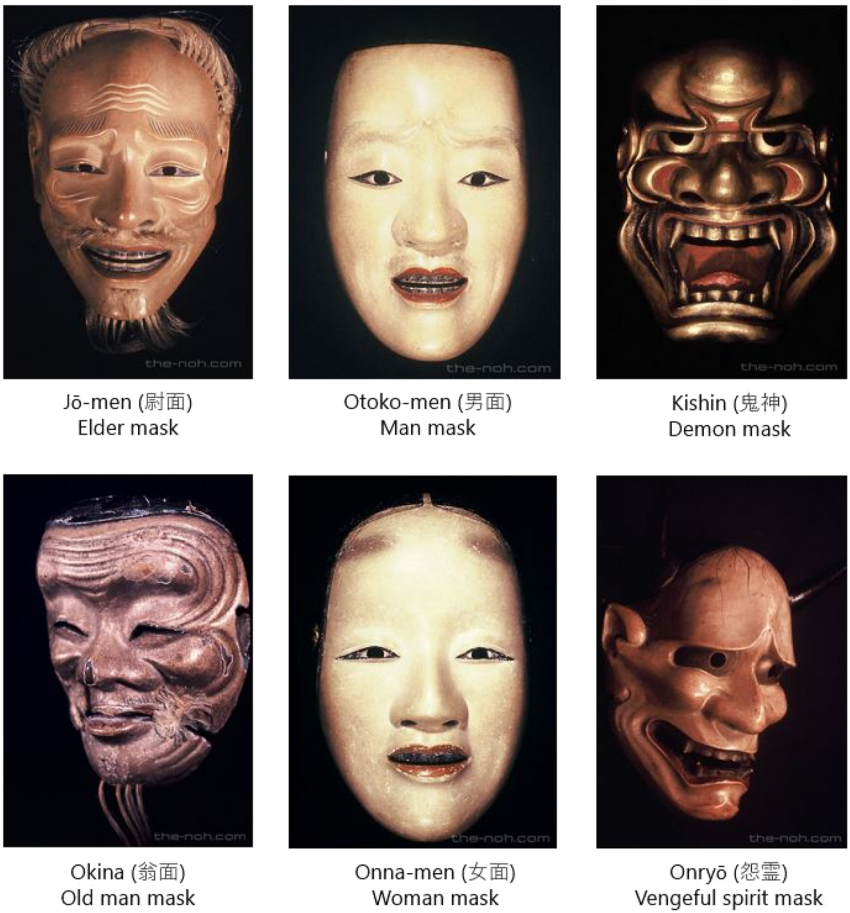

Figure 4: Types of masks in Nō theater (source: www.the-noh.com).

In semiotic terms, masks are described as configurations of formants, i.e. features whose selection (or exclusion) constitutes faces, as figures, and whose variations and combinations permits the representation of different types of characters and emotions. Once considered as a "semiotic object" or "text," the mask appears as a language with its own grammar and rhetoric (Groupe μ 1992).

Plastic categories suggested by Greimas (1984) and completed by the Groupe μ (1992) can be used to establish the key elements of the characters' semiological identities. (i) At the *topological level*, the position of the eyebrows on the face distinguishes, for example, men from women. (ii) At the *chromatic level*, we can identify a color code consisting of white and black (and a little red for the lips) for humans,

expressing beauty and nobility. Red is used to color the face of fierce (demons) or angry characters; a touch of red around the eyes is usually sufficient to evoke grudge. Gold color characterizes supernatural beings or beings with special powers (divinity, demons, ghosts), in particular when applied to the eyes or the teeth – traditionally colored in black. (iii) At the *level of forms (eidetic)*, there are the examples of eyebrows; of "rictuses" distinguishing demons' roaring mouths from a whole range of smiles and more or less marked drawn-down lips or pouts; or eyes, which are closed for the blind, thinner for women, or range from being without pupils to represent introspection for older characters up to having very prominent pupils, saucer shaped, accentuating the intensity of the gaze, for demons. Finally, (iv) in terms of *textures*, we can see a primary difference in the effects used to represent beards and mustaches, either painted or with glued fur, or the opposition /smooth versus striated or wrinkled/ to distinguish between youth and old age; we can also note that the facial expressions of demons are more sculpted than those of humans.

When applied to a corpus of masks, these elements permit the distinction of a group of figures forming the Nō mask system. As we mentioned earlier, they represent figures from Japanese culture through the combination of distinctive features that identify gender (male/female), social rank (noble/commoner), age (young/old), and ontological status: human or supranatural being (deities, demons, ghosts, spirits), the latter being either living or dead, sacred or profane, good or evil. Among these features, we find a series of stereotyped emotions inherent to each character and his or her history, condensed into the fixed form of the mask (sculpted and painted) and capable of being actualized by the actor's movements.

1) The *old man masks*, inherited from older, ritualistic forms of Nō, are characterized by their wrinkled faces and foreheads and sunken cheeks. They are associated with age as an expression of divinity (the ancient trees).
2) The *man masks*, especially noble ones, resemble the female mask, but are distinguished by a less rounded shape (or outline), thin eyebrows above the eyes, a faint moustache, and lips slightly less red than the woman's mask. The "noble man" type contrasts with the "commoner" (non-noble), whose moustache may be represented with fur. Less pale and female-like faces are used to depict fishermen, farmers, or soldiers. Their mouths are usually slightly open, displaying two rows of teeth, expressing an outward (dialoguing) openness.
3) *Woman masks* are generally characterized by traits relating to the stereotypical beauty of Heian nobles: white skin, blackened teeth, red lips, shaved eyebrows painted higher, a slightly open mouth in a rictus – turned inwards in contrast to men. Age differences appear either through wrinkles or through hollowed cheeks and eye sockets, but also through the eyes, not as clear and frontal as those of young women.

4) The *ghosts or vengeful spirits* are represented by a variation of masks distorting human traits with livid complexions, sunken faces, colored eyes (with a touch of red and gold) and very pronounced drawn-down lips signifying the despair of Nō characters, up to figuring a quasi-demon (*Hannya*).
5) Finally, the *demons or deities* follow a specific color code (red, black, gold) and possess elements evoking their bestial nature (fangs, horns). Their faces are more expressive, with exaggeratedly frowning foreheads and clenched jaws (*Beshimi*), roaring jaws (*Shikai*), or tense smiles (*Tobide*). The sculpted forms of their faces rely on lines of force concentrated on the mouth, which give them a more aggressive and violent appearance.

This inventory of masks reveals their construction in tension between "organic individuals" and "semiological individuals" (Saussure 2003). On the one hand, the simulacrum of the alteration of a body of flesh caused by age and experience, and on the other hand, a sum of legendary or mythical attributes which identify a character independently of who is displaying them. As such, we consider that Nō produces "narrative masks" that aim at translating into a specific expression a lifetime, an ethos, and emotional experiences.

We must now pay particular attention to the fact that, as we already noted, Nō masks are organized within a system of transformation (Lévi-Strauss 1975): they signify in relation to each other and, more particularly, they are subject to inversion and hybridization. If we consider the classic example of the young woman's mask, more generally known as *ko-omote* – each school of Nō possess its own model: *waka-onna*, *fushikizō*, *magojirō* – we can compare it to the young man's mask and then to the masks of old women and ghosts or demons (Figure 5).

We note that the looks of the young man and the young woman, both noble, are very similar but vary in eyebrows, forehead (frown on the man), eyes (the man's eyes are more open), facial hair (he has a mustache), and mouth (the man mask shows two rows of teeth). The man expresses a more agitated and fearless character, projected toward the observer, whereas the woman expresses a general gentleness, turned toward herself.

If we compare the mask of the young woman with those positioned on the top line, we can see how, through several different types of masks, the young woman turns into an old woman, and then into a desperate ghost. In relation to the same initial model, we remark that a series of modifications operate an inversion of "youth" into "old age," of "innocence" into "despair": the gaze gradually directed downwards, the mouth becoming explicitly "sad" (corners of the lips drawn down, bitterness folds), sunken cheeks and eye sockets. Gradually, the Nō shows the (tragic) experiences of a woman's life on the sculpted face.

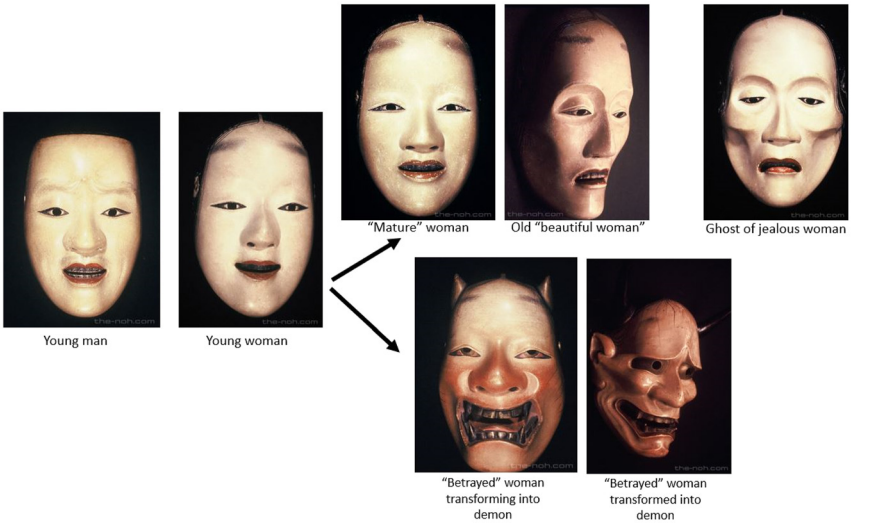

Figure 5: Group of transformation based on the mask of woman *ko-omote* (images from https://www.the-noh.com/).

The second path shows the transformation of the woman into an avenging spirit (*Hannya*). Indeed, we consider, on the one hand, the "young woman"'s face (eventually more mature) as the "starting" form, and on the other, the "final" form of a "vengeful spirit" displaying features similar to demons: red skin, horns, golden eyes, and fangs indicating its supernatural nature and bestial appearance, a wide mouth forming a rictus which, associated with the shape of the forehead, draws a rictus of "pain," "grief," or "lamentation." We can highlight the intermediate position of the *manawari* mask, which combines the lower part of a demon mask (a gaping roaring jaw with golden fangs and golden rimmed eyes, indicating supernatural power) with the upper part (forehead) of the mask of a young woman, still "human" despite the small horns. The relation between these masks clearly demonstrates how the sadness of the human character operates its transformation into a vengeful ghost or demon; it is illustrated by the shifting from /white/ to /red/, from the /absence/ to the /presence/ of horns, from the "neutral" mouth to a "howling" mouth and finally to a "lamenting" mouth, and from /black/ teeth and pupils to /golden/ ones. In other words, it reveals how the transformation from purity to anger simultaneously produces a change of nature, from human to supernatural.

Similarly to physiognomic works, Nō masks appear as semiotic representations associating facial traits with personalities, emotions, social status, and the possibility of ontological transformation (into an animal or a mythological creature).

6 The Nō mask as "movement mask"

So far, our analysis has demonstrated that Nō masks are *narrative-prototypical-faces* that identify characters through a selection of traits and attributes. In this section, we intend to demonstrate that despite being fixed, these masks can be viewed as dynamic objects, as *sensitive masks* which seek to become (or revert to) faces. To support this claim, it is necessary to take into account two fundamental elements of Nō masks: (i) they are rooted in a theatrical practice that associates them with body movements and gestures, thus making them "danced masks"; (ii) their plastic and figurative properties are characterized by the interaction between the sculpted and colored volume and light and the syncretism of ambiguous or even contradictory emotions, turning these masks into dynamic objects actualized through movement. Therefore, the coding of Nō masks must consider their presence within a context where *perceptual actualization* induces *semiotic actualization*.

As mentioned when outlining the principles of Nō, Zeami advocates the "depersonalization of the actor" by using a mask with an "impassive" expression (Sieffert 1985 [1960]). The character must be imitated through "his behavior and his appearance" rather than the "mimics" of the natural face, considered too coarse – which in contrast were at the core of Sarugaku and Kyōgen. The mask, designated using the ancient term *omote*, meaning 'face,' is seen as a "second self," a more expressive visage than the actor's face (Johnson 1992). Let us observe how the mask intends to evoke, or even claim, this status.

The Nō mask is an expression of *Yūgen* – "subtle charm" or "grace of a moment," a fundamental concept of Nō sensibility that values the becoming of things, betwixt realism and emptiness. Thus, it appears as a sensible object insofar as, despite its fixed physical properties, it is capable of conveying all kinds of different emotions (Miyata et al. 2012). Similarly, Wu (2019:106) explains that masks "express two completely different moods of sadness and smile in the form of 'no expression.'" This overlap between ambivalence and inexpressiveness refers in semiotics to "complex" and "neutral" terms, that is, respectively, the combination of contrary terms (joy + sadness) and the combination of sub-contraries (non-joy + non-sadness).[4]

The emotional expression synthesis in the Nō mask relies primarily on the formants that compose a visage. The example of Courtés (2007 [2003]: 10) shows that the signifier "impassibility" is constituted by "separate features distributed at different levels to express the signifier "eyes" or "mouth" related to /horizontality/," producing, in our opinion, an "aphoric" face (Figure 6).[5]

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4 See the entry "*carré sémiotique*"[semiotic square] §5 in Greimas and Courtés (2003 [1979]: 32).

5 Here we employ the thymic categories, which correspond to "basic affective dispositions" and are structured in terms of euphoria/dysphoria, with aphoria as a neutral term (see Greimas and Courtés

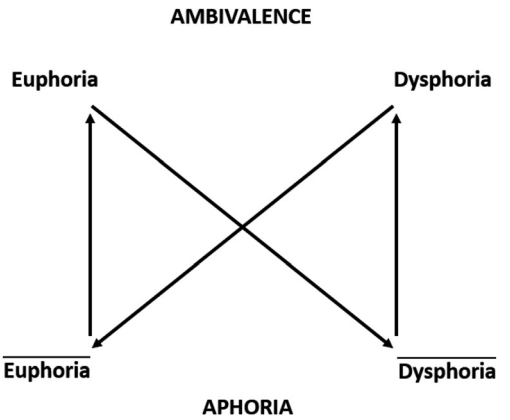

Figure 6: Semiotic square of thymic categories.

Our examples display, on the one hand, /closed/ or /half-open/ mouth shapes, neither /curved down/ (smile, sneer) nor /curved up/ (pout, sadness), communicating (suggesting speech) or not, resulting in a polysemous "neutral" face. On the other hand, "ambivalent" faces, where "the eyebrows, the eyes, and the mouth each express different emotion, form composite expressions involving both happiness and sadness simultaneously" (Miyata et al. 2012: 3). This ambivalence of emotions conveyed by the combination of eyebrows, eyes, and mouth emerges as a first "dynamic" factor since, according to Rodin (2005 [1911]), it creates a tension generating the effect of movement; consequently, the Nō mask appears as a *movement mask*. Indeed, through the combination of traits suggesting contradictory emotions, the mask seems to suspend categorization, oscillating between type and occurrence, simultaneously joyful and sad, euphoric and dysphoric, or neither (aphoric), it achieves an effect of vagueness that reintroduces a type of indeterminacy characteristic of the natural face, as well as an added depth of meaning. The mask of Nō does not express one single (realized) emotion, but offers the observer a configuration of potential meanings usually constitutive of the complexity of the expression of human feelings, and far more ambiguous than masks, which may or may not be actualized by the narrative.

The plastic properties of the mask, especially its volume, as a sculpted object, enable it to be perceptively dynamic. In order to analyze this phenomenon, it is necessary to pay particular attention to light, which, as the Groupe μ (1992) and Fontanille (1995) have shown, constitutes a plastic category capable of producing particularly sensitive effects of meaning. From this point of view, the mask should be approached as a sculpture, i.e. a body, constituted through its relations with a source of light, which is prone to actualizing and re-actualizing it dynamically during its

2003 [1979]: 396). In our view, they correspond to content categories structuring human narratives, which are important for studying cultures. Courtés' analysis of the funeral procession is a fine example of this approach (see Courtés 1991).

movements – which change its relation to the light source. Regarding our thymic categories, it means that the mask in movement can lift its ambivalence and may signify either euphoria or dysphoria (one or the other).

A more detailed analysis of the Nō mask reveals several features that modify its interaction with light and enable the alteration of its aspect: (i) "the depth of the mouth region is exaggerated relative to the human face" (Lyons et al. 2000); (ii) there are "slightly indented areas" at the level of the eyes – especially for the *ko-omote* (see Pulvers 1978); (iii) color layers on the surface of the mask produce reflections and shadings, and (iv) both the carving and the painting of the face are asymmetrical.

Consequently, as the researchers interested in the representation of emotions by the Nō mask have noticed (Johnson 1992; Kawai et al. 2013; Miyata et al. 2012; Pulvers 1978; Wu 2019), all of these plastic characteristics produce lighting effects that allow the mask to "hide and reveal" some of its features (Johnson 1992) and to control the transformation of emotional expression. Indeed, the actor's movements that control the light–shadow ratio operate at the same time the plastic transformation of the mask's outlines and of some of its formants, especially the mouth.

> [The young women's masks] cast shadows when the mask is moved up or down – "lit up" (*terasu*) as the head is lifted and light is allowed to play on the face, giving it an expectant or joyful expression, or "shaded over" (*kumorasu*) as the head is bowed and shadows fill the hollows, giving a sorrowful or demure expression. (Pulvers 1978)

On this topic, experiments in cognitive science (Kawai et al. 2013; Miyata et al. 2012) demonstrated that:

> [S]hadows extracted from the emotional Noh-mask faces considerably alter the recognition of the emotional expressions. […] Specifically, the corners of the lips are pulled up for the downward tilted Noh mask, which are elements of a happy expression. This seems to explain why downward tilted masks are recognized as happy (and vice versa), because the shape of the mouth serves as a distinctive feature in the judgment of emotions. (Kawai et al. 2013: 3)

From a semiotic perspective, changing the relation between the light-source and the mask-target creates the illusion of a rearrangement of formants and thus allows the perceptive transformation of a /downward bent mouth/ (a smile) into an /upward bent mouth/, i.e. from "joy" to "sadness."

In the lighting conditions of the Nō scene, favoring subtle shadow play – so important in Japan (Tanizaki 2011 [1978]) – this effect is reinforced, on the one hand by the colors of the painted mask

> if the appropriate lighting and color effect is provided at the same time, the mask can be changed in multiple angles, and different emotions can be reflected by the change of light and shade. In this way, the face that seems to have nothing expressions contains joy, sad, beauty and ugliness; the superficial expression is neglected. Wu (2019: 105)

On the other hand, based on a left versus right opposition, the asymmetry of the mask mentioned above (Pulvers 1978) describes two slightly different eyes, in terms of shape and position, or a mouth with asymmetrical edges), also helps give the impression that the mask's facial expression changes as the actor moves through the scene.

The elements we tried to emphasize in this section converge to making the mask dynamic, as they produce effects of meaning relying on the transformation of the expression (or simply the illusion of this) as it shows or hides certain of its aspects. This way, the actor manipulates the spectators, *making them believe* (Greimas 1983) the mask is a visage by reintroducing its characteristic strangeness. In fact, this simulacrum is less founded on perception than on the culture associated with the Nō spectacle and its linguistic, hence semiotic, properties. Indeed, the cognitivists mentioned throughout our investigation have generally shown that emotions perceived when the mask is raised or lowered do not correspond to what the Nō actor is representing. The raised mask, supposed to be read as a happy face, spontaneously evokes sadness instead. The "correct" meaning of the mask is therefore dependent on the competence of the spectator, i.e. the knowledge of Nō rules and conventions (or codes). Finally, the Nō mask appears as a fixed type, legible in the language of Japanese theater that gives it meaning through the practical situation and that also allows it to be dynamic and thus maintain a link with a living and singular expression capable of generating emotions.

Our observations demonstrated how masks, and by extension expressions of passion by faces, concern semiotics of culture. As "semiotic objects," they form a semiotic system belonging to the theatrical discourse, i.e. that of Nō, that imposes its own codification on natural perception, thus ensuring a located meaning that involves other cultural elements (knowledge, beliefs). Moreover, we pointed out that a moving or "living" theatrical practice operates on the semiotics *modes of existence* by transforming a fixed mask into a dynamic one, through the actualization of its potentialized traits. In other words, similar to music in Lévi-Strauss's work, the theatrical mask involves both *a physiological grid, harnessing organic rhythms that make relevant some discontinuities which would remain in a latent state otherwise, and a cultural grid that organizes them* as a singular system (Lévi-Strauss 1964: 24).

7 Beyond the mask: *becoming* visage

May the mask of Nō then claim to be or become a visage? The ambiguity between face and mask formulated by Belting (2017) seems to resonate with the conception of *Omote* in Japan, which is liable to assimilate visages to masks and masks to visages. The work conducted by the psychoanalyst Doi (2019 [1993]) on some structuring concepts of the Japanese way of thinking highlighted the importance of *omote* and

ura. These two non-polarized terms define each other, as a pair: *omote* (表) means *the visible surface of things, what is presented to the view*, which Doi associates with *soto* (what presents itself to the outside) and the visage; *ura* (裏) means *what remains sealed beneath or behind this surface*, which Doi associates with *uchi* (what is preserved inside) and the heart or the spirit. They both reflect and articulate the affinity of Japanese culture for "ambivalence" of meaning – in semiotics words, for the *coexistence of opposites* or the *neutral*. In this context, the psychoanalyst initiates a discussion on the visage and the mask based on the fact that the term *omote* (表) is also the Japanese reading of the ideogram (面), "Men" in Chinese reading, which designates the mask or face – as found in "Nōmen" (能面): "mask of Nō."

Pointing out first that "facial expressions conceal the mind while expressing it, and express it while concealing it" (Doi 2019 [1993]: 20 and 22), Doi mainly suggests, as like we observed, that

> *Le masque de Nō stylise ce procédé. Un aspect de l'expression du visage est accentué, tandis que tout le reste est supprimé. Lorsque nous disons que le visage de quelqu'un ressemble à un masque de no, nous voulons dire qu'il est impassible[…] [Pourtant] c'est le jeu du masque qui produit l'effet de Yūgen et on ne peut parler des possibilités qu'à le masque de Nō de produire cet effet qu'en termes d'étrangeté* [The mask of Nō stylizes this process. One aspect of the facial expression is accentuated, while everything else is removed. When we say that someone's face resembles a Nō mask, we mean that it is impassive […] [However,] it is the interplay of the mask that produces the effect of *Yūgen*,[6] and we can only discuss the possibilities of the mask of Nō to produce such an effect in terms of strangeness]. (Doi 2019 [1993]: 22)

This comment is particularly important because, as we attempted to demonstrate through our semiotic analysis, both the coding of the mask's expression and, more particularly, its transformations due to the movements inherent to the practice – a de-formation and re-formation – recapture the strangeness that characterizes human visages. The "Nō faces" not only identify characters, but also try to bring them to life. Thus, beyond a simple "face," assimilable to an "empty sign, ready to integrate all possible projections" (Fabre 2022: §5), they call upon the *questioning*, and enigmatic, *dimension* (Fabre 2018, 2022) specific to the natural and "living" face (Le Breton 2003 [1992]: 10–11).

From this standpoint, "Nō faces" establish themselves as simulacra of a *presence* that is not simply the *being there* of the represented figure (this character or another) but the capacity to *make it occur* (*advenir*) and *become* (*devenir*) (Zilberberg 2016) on the stage. As we mentioned in other sections, this character is really animated by its depth and its complexity, encompassing both narrative (its identity manifested by

6 *Yūgen* is a term mainly developed by Zeami referring to a "subtle charm" underlying Japanese aesthetics and sensibility. It designates a mysterious beauty partly based on ambivalence.

singular traits) and, above all, passionate dimensions. Indeed, if, as Anne Beyaert-Geslin suggests, the natural face is

> […] *toujours en devenir, (et) fait non seulement le pont entre passé et futur, mais se dédie aussi au mélange, à l'indéfini, au changement des passions. S'il se fixe dans le présent et s'abîme dans une passion unique, il devient un masque* [always in the process of becoming, (and) not only bridges the gap between past and future, but also dedicates itself to the mixture, the indefinite, the change of passions. If it gets fixed in the present and gets stuck in a single passion, it becomes a mask]. (Beyaert-Geslin 2022: §11)

In contrast, the Nō mask aims to "be" a visage given that the ambivalence of the expression of the faces, sometimes syncretic (both sad and happy), sometimes neutral, produces an effect of meaning "suggest[ing] that there are always other faces (remembered or invented) before the present one" (Beyaert-Geslin 2022: §29). As it calls upon the memory and the imagination, the mask appears as a "floating image" capable of evoking a behavior, an ethos, i.e. a way of being and acting, but also a singular life trajectory. We believe that this is how the mask of Nō, redefined as a *movement mask*, or even a *mask in act*, can pretend to be a visage.

8 Conclusions

This research has established the relevance of a *semio-anthropology* of faces which, although requiring the textualization of its object, and its fixation as a "mask," does not fall into the same pitfalls as *physiognomy*, which was more interpretative and instrumental than strictly scientific. In contrast, semiotic methods first permit the cutting of the object into parts in order to explain it, before reintegrating a dynamic perspective, if necessary, i.e. by considering its figurative, modal, or existential transformations.

Within this framework, our considerations on Japanese Nō masks showed that they form a semiotic system specific to Japanese culture (myths, legends) but also to theatrical practice, which helps us to comprehend the specific status of the face in these representations, and in Japan. The masks of Nō are primarily *narrative-prototypical faces* that represent characters through a selection of traits and attributes to make them legible. But, unlike other masks, they are not fixed but dynamic. Indeed, their plastic features combined with theatrical performance, in movement, enable the actor to actualize the "neutral" or "ambivalent" facial expression through the interplay of light and shadow. This modulation of *presence* suggests that the masks of Nō are *sensitive masks* which recapture the attributes of natural visages. If masks cannot be visages, Japanese aesthetics and sensibility expressed in Nō seem to envision their reversibility.

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