

RELIGACIÓN

R E V I S T A

Concealment of the face in social protests. Performances, affects and politics

Ocultamiento del rostro en la protesta social. Performances, afectos y política

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ABSTRACT

Throughout time, the mask has been a fundamental semiotic device in social protest and artistic practices, and it is considered a versatile figure that expresses a double identity: the one that it hides and the one that it shows. In today's digital society, the concealment of the face through masks and make-up has become a symbol of protest facial recognition that exercises biopolitical control of faces. The objective of this work is to analyze, from a sociosemiotic perspective in connection with the theory of affects and performance studies, the construction of aesthetic-political meanings that emerge from the concealment of faces in two actions of artistic activism in Argentina: "8M, Women's Day", action of the ContraArte collective in the streets of Córdoba, and "Radio funo vol. 7 portraits" of the FUNO group in the city of Buenos Aires. Said analysis will be carried out on the images of both interventions that are published on the social network Facebook. The research results show how the masks used in both experiences configure signs of collective resistance that activate affections in the public space as policy of dissent.

Keywords: Semiology; aesthetics; political crises; resistance to oppression; emotions.

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RESUMEN

A lo largo del tiempo, la máscara ha sido un dispositivo semiótico fundamental en la protesta social y las prácticas artísticas, y es considerada como una figura polivalente que expresa una doble identidad: la que oculta y la que muestra. En la sociedad digital actual, el ocultamiento del rostro a partir de antifaces y maquillaje se ha vuelto un símbolo de reclamo ante el reconocimiento facial que ejerce un control biopolítico de la fisonomía. El objetivo de este trabajo es analizar, desde una perspectiva sociosemiótica, en vinculación con la teoría de los afectos y los estudios de performance, la construcción de sentidos estético-políticos que se desprenden del ocultamiento de los rostros en dos acciones de activismo artístico en Argentina: “8 M, día de la mujer”, acción del colectivo ContraArte en las calles de Córdoba, y “Radio funo vol. 7 retratos” del grupo FUNO en la ciudad de Buenos Aires. Dicho análisis se realizará sobre las imágenes de ambas intervenciones que se encuentran publicadas en la red social Facebook. Los resultados de la investigación muestran cómo las máscaras y los antifaces que se utilizan en ambas experiencias configuran signos de resistencia colectiva que activan afectos en el espacio público como una política del disenso.

Palabras clave: Semiología; estética; crisis política; resistencia a la opresión; emociones.

Introduction

In recent years, social media has been the battlefield where faces are disputed, from profile pictures in apps such as Facebook, Tinder, Instagram, and Twitter and the creation of selfies and avatars, to the activist faces that show resistance to control and surveillance devices. Regarding these devices, more and more governments and companies use facial recognition devices for different purposes. They use faces to design, organize, discourage, repress, control, and surveil. They are no longer faces from paintings from other centuries as central figures. Today we talk about digital, algorithmic, and artificial intelligence faces; let aside contemporary cosmetic surgeries and how those faces spread in social media as the acceptable and readable subject norm (Angenot, 2010). What does it mean to talk about faces? And about face concealment? From what and how are faces concealed? This article focuses on the concealment of faces in social protests, more specifically on artistic activism initiatives. The author of this paper developed this topic as a member of the project “Biopolitics of the digital face: surveillance, control, concealment and protest,” which is part of a more extensive project called FACETS–Face Aesthetics in Contemporary E-Technological Societies that have a subsidy from the European Union. The host institution of the FACETS project is the Università di Torino, and its director is Dr. Massimo Leone.

Talking about faces involves talking about signs and rhizomatic groups of semiotic cells whose structure and reordering are shaped by changing and varied discourses. Faces turn into a bodily story of life through the meaning of discursive devices that biopolitically organize bodies and define inclusions and exclusions. Thinkers like Lévinas (1967), have characterized faces as an opening to others, while Montaigne holds a theory of faces as bastions of singularity (Leone, 2021). Deleuze y Guattari (2012), on their part, developed the concept of faciality as a progressive loss of expression created by the semiotics of power. Based on Le Bretón’s ideas of the body and how it represents a barrier between individuals, that is to say, the closure of the subject, Pagnotto

(2010), states that the face is precisely the most individualized part of the body that becomes a person's hallmark to which three functions can be attributed: 1) individualizing, 2) socializing (it shows a social role) and 3) communicative (it ensures communication between two people and within oneself). Soledad Boero (2012), on her part, analyzes the face as a privileged semiotic system that accounts for a set of transformations related to subjectivity and writing. The face becomes and comes to subjectivity. Finally, we can mention Nancy's works (2006), who studied portraits and stated that "the value of the face as the sense of the other is truly given only in the portrait (in art)" (p. 131).

This gives us some clues to reflect upon the face, but what about concealment? Why do certain people decide not to show their habitual faces? What do they hide from, and what aesthetic resources do they use to do it? The mask has occupied a preponderant place in semiotic studies. Paolo Fabbri (2012), for example, has analyzed the forms of concealment and camouflage as they relate to representation systems and their distortion. Another unavoidable reference is that of Bakhtin, who, in his study on carnival, characterizes the mask as an expression of transferences, metamorphoses, the break with natural borders, ridicule, and nicknames; the mask embodies the principle of the game of life, establishes a relationship between reality and the individual image (1985). The re-masking does not hide but multiplies the subject, re-connects it with other worlds, transforms it, and empowers it.

We can go back to the Greek mortuary or carnival masks from the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, among many others. However, this research studies the use of masks in the second half of the 21st century when two big groups that use this resource appeared. 1) the pro-privacy movements against facial recognition and create distorting and concealing mechanisms; 2) the activists who build performances with different aesthetic resources, such as masks, balaclavas, and make-up that allow the creation of aesthetic and political meanings in their discursive productions. The aim is to focus on the second group from which we can construct a contemporary history of using masks can (such as Anonymous), balaclavas (Zapatistas in México), and make-up in the public protests against the existing inequalities. This issue has been studied by different authors, among which we highlight Benali (2020), who talks about the political and artistic potential of the use of masks in social protests, and the research by Subirats (2011), about identity and non-identity that enable the use of masks as a symbology play. Masks are considered, from these perspectives, a multipurpose figure that functions as a mismatch (Gramigna, 2022).

With the aim of creating a powerful image of protests and avoid persecution and authoritarian repression, masks very often detach from the idea of an individual identity to create a collective ethos. These artifacts create signifiers that can assign or apply meanings of identity policies about themselves (the ones wearing masks) or others (the external watchers). Masks represent, but mainly transform and enable the creation of new imaginaries. It affirms and it denies; it is a presence and an absence.

In recent years, different ways of concealing the face have been used in protests in Chile (with the famous balaclavas), Hong Kong (with various witty masks), France (the Joker masks that the yellow vests wore), Argentina (the green make-up worn in pro-abortion protests), especially to denounce gender, political, institutional, and environmental inequalities (Young, 2017). The different masks are part of the activist aesthetics and protect protesters from possible facial recognition and subsequent repression. Moreover, those identities exposed with masks create community bonds that shape special affectivity, a topic we will develop later.

From the perspective of this double sense (concealment as an aesthetic and protective resource), this research is interested in studying this issue in groups called artistic activism. To make a brief characterization, we consider Ana Longoni's ideas. Based on the German Dadaist proposals, this author defines them as a set of "productions and actions, many time collective, which draw on artistic resources intending to take a stance and have some impact on the political field" (2009, p. 1). These groups propose aesthetic forms of relationality, placing social action before the traditional view of autonomy in art and presenting artistic overflowings towards politics without restricting them to art history or museums since that hybridity between art and activism has a semantic mechanism in which art is considered a channel through which the possibility of change and transformation can be communicated (Aladro-Vico et al., 2018).

The analysis will focus on two Argentinean groups that have performed actions for more than a decade in public spaces establishing strategic alliances with social movements and groups, assemblies, organizations, and other artists, generating space-time of group expressions on social issues: *ContraArte*, created in 2009 in the city of Córdoba, and *Colectivo Fin de UN MundO* (FUNO), founded in 2012 in Buenos Aires. In turn, both have significant differences: the first one performs actions with and in a specific community, a strategy that can be linked with community theatre (Proaño Gómez, 2012), while the second one performs more spectacularly with displays in strategic places of the city. In addition, most of the *ContraArte* performances are put on spontaneously without much planning. At the same time, FUNO strategically prepares the previous moments, the ongoing performance, and primarily the subsequent actions (Verzero y Manduca, 2019), that is to say, how a particular action will spread in social media. This group has a Facebook page with folders with all the actions (and the rehearsals), unlike *ContraArte*, whose material is disorganized and all over this social network.

Two actions were selected: 8M, Women's Day, a *ContraArte* intervention in the streets of Córdoba, and "Radio funo vol. 7 retratos" of the FUNO group in the city of Buenos Aires. Two demonstrations on emblematic days of Argentine history: Women's Day and March 24th, Day of Remembrance for Truth and Justice, commemorating the beginning of the last military dictatorship in 1976 to say "never again". In addition, both took place in 2019, during the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis that spread globally in 2020, changing habits and ways of life. In that calendar

period, society was going through turmoil globally. Demonstrations in places such as Chile, Lima, Lebanon, Paris, Puerto Rico, and Argentina, among others, were evidence of one of the most acute crises in recent years. An institutional and political crisis and, above all, of the democratic system (Gutierrez-Rubí, 2020).

What have we said up to here allows us to formulate these questions: What types of concealment of the face operate in these performances? What aesthetic-political meanings are constructed with the use of masks? What affects and emotions are configured? These are some of the questions that we will try to answer in this paper. From a sociosemiotic perspective, particularly from Angenot's theory (2020) and in connection with the theory of affects and emotions (Illouz, 2007; Verzero, 2022) and the performance studies (Taylor, 2015) our research's main goal is to analyze the configuration of aesthetic and political senses from the concealment of the face in contemporary performances.

Theoretical and methodological perspective

The actions that both groups perform can be called "performances in public spaces," embracing the "untranslatability" nature of the term (Taylor, 2015) as art and theory, which, even though it led to misunderstandings, has also provided the ground for debates that "enrich its field of analysis, making it more sensitive to the community of voices that address it" (Prieto Stambaugh, 2009, pp. 24-25). Taylor (2005), states that performance is not limited to mimetic repetitions. It also includes the possibility of change, criticism, and creativity within repetition. The author, and we may say that other thinkers as Verzero (2013), and Diéguez (2016), consider that artistic activism "uses performance to be involved in the contexts, struggles or political debates in which they live. Performances are the continuation of politics through other means" (Taylor, 2015, p. 115). In turn, every performance has the distinctive feature of not having a closure since, as Diéguez (2016), based on Bakhtin's theory, states, it is a discourse with a responding nature, immediate or not, but that is always open to dialogue. This idea of performance allows us to reflect upon the discursive performativity of these actions, based on Austin's proposal [1975] (2016), that linguistic utterances describe states of affairs and have a performative nature. Performativity, then, involves both performance and discourse. We should thus, from a contemporary reading of Butler (2002), Ardti (2014), Taylor (2015), and Fisher-Lichte (2011), consider the journey of words toward bodies taking into account that actions transform the world (and politics) as we know it.

We can then say that specific performances also create affection as a political experience. In his analysis of Argentine performances, Verzero (2022), states that "activist actions work on the intersection of affect and emotion. In that sense, every performance deploys emotional politics made up of some common elements and other specific ones" (p. 191). At the same time, it is not easy to talk about affect without talking about bodies. In this case, we will focus on faces. Deleuze y Guattari (2012), state that a close connection exists between creation, art, bodies, and resistance.

We should consider the artistic experience (in this case, the performance experience) as changes into artistic power that intersects with politics which is in turn linked to resistance and creation. This creation produces signs. These signs produce affection, and faces play a political, artistic, and resistance role in artistic activism demonstrations that are linked to affection and collectively manifested.

Masks, from a socio-semiotic perspective, are understood as a discourse that has a double function in the structure of collective enunciation resources: it is a product of affection at play (masks because of helplessness, anger, and pain) that at the same time affects others (passers-by moving around public spaces). Masks show visions of the world. They question time-bound imaginaries and allow for the creation of collective emotion (Illouz, 2007; Verzero, 2022). This way, the concepts of performance, affection/emotions, and discourse will allow us to understand the aesthetic and political meanings derived from the *ContraArte* and *FUNO*'s interventions. With that aim, we will analyze and interpret photographs of the performances taken from their Facebook pages to identify semiotic instances as visions of the world, fetishes, and taboos (Angenot, 2010). Finally, we will make a comparison between the two actions to identify significant convergences and divergences. As we have said, we will consider faces as significantly relevant semiotic devices, although we will also briefly characterize other body elements and objects that are part of the performance, without which it would be difficult to understand the affective and political dimension of these actions.

Results

Black masks in the 8M day, a *ContraArte* performance

The group was created in 2008, when the artist Dolores Cáceres and other colleagues, dressed as Chinese farmers, sowed a hectare of soy in the Museo Caraffa's gardens of the City of Córdoba. The action was called "Qué soy" ("What I am"), making a play upon words with "soy" and "sou" (which means "soy" in old Chinese). That action occurred amid a conflict with the agricultural sector for Resolution 125, which caused controversies at a national level, generating roadblocks organized by agrarian sectors against Cristina Fernández de Kirchner's government. The exhibition was rejected by citizens and artists who marched towards the museum, which made police presence necessary. As a result of this dispute, the *ContraArte* group was created, and its members were artists who were against Cáceres' work. Since then, they carried out actions with *Vecinos Unidos en Defensa de un Ambiente Saludable (VUDAS)*, from San Antonio neighborhood), the *Movimiento Campesino de Córdoba*, the citizens who showed resistance to the eviction in Villa La Maternidad, and mainly with the *Asamblea de Malvinas Argentinas* and the blockage against the setting up of the Monsanto multinational plant, in which they participated for more than four years. In addition, they organized interventions in the 24 March walk, the demonstrations for the disappearance of Santiago Maldonado, and the "Marcha de la gorra," among others.

The 8M protest in 2019, was a unique event since there was an ongoing fight to legalize abortion in Argentina, and even though the law did not pass that year, this protest worked as another link of resistance that would lead to the passing of the law a year after. In addition, that year, Mauricio Macri's neoliberal government ended. It left high levels of unemployment, an increase in inequality, debts, and intense repression against dissident groups. In that context, and as every year, the ContraArte group made a public appearance to make an exceptional performance: women dressed in black (mourning) with green scarves and black masks held up signs in the middle of the street with unique themes and world visions (Angenot, 2010) referring to the relationship between the State, the judicial power, the church and the patriarchy (considered as taboos by the group), central actors that create, according to the narrative frame, the submission and even death of those forced to give birth and who are, in many cases, little girls.

Picture 1. ContraArte intervention



Source: Facebook Comunidad ContraArte.

“Girls, not mothers” is one of the main mottos of this intervention, which, apart from the masks, consists of an “Elia’s bed” (named like that by the artist) that works as a hospital bed where illegal abortions are presumably performed. The demand is apparent: the State must legalize abortion and grant women sovereignty to decide what they want to do with their bodies. What is more, the church’s traditional role in a city like Córdoba is crucial. That is why female activist artists question this conservative imaginary using the religious theme. Around them, there are other women with their faces covered. They are probably citizens marching on their own and not active members of the ContraArte group. Another possibility is that they are guests of the group who walk along the procession dressed in black without masks.

Now, the meanings that masks create are related to a face that is hidden, and that has a solid black tone in which it is almost impossible to find traces of skin, a typical rigidity of masks (as opposed to masks that only cover eyes or make-up) that attribute a ritual and religious character to faces. We can consider that these are mourning masks in memory of those who are gone. All the artists wear the same mask and are observed and accompanied by other uncovered faces. Maybe it is death and life coming together to demand justice. This is where affection starts to be created as a collective power because, in semiotic terms, masks operate as a frontier between those lost lives and those behind those devices, presented as a reaction-action that looks for justice and makes death visible and legible. They are thus masks that represent death and show anger and hopelessness, but at the same time, show resistance, a device that covers a living face that long for another world of other possibilities.

The masks do not show smiles; they are serious and match the mourning atmosphere. The cheekbones have a standard shape, as well as the forehead that covers the face up to the hairline, which is practically the only thing that can be seen. Masks cover the skin, from the green scarf to the hairline. In another picture, we can also see girls with green make-up, a different form of concealment of the face, but that has a special aesthetic-political effect when they come together with the ones with black masks. Are they nieces, daughters, or neighbors? What we do know is that they are girls, not mothers.

Resistance masks in the 24M day, FUNO action

The group was founded in 2012 after a call by the drama group Tres Gatos Locos. They proposed a horizontal type of organization, with a centralizing phase and the division of tasks in “circles”: “action” (dramaturgy and movements), “visuals” (graphics and visual design), “Com&log” (communication and logistics), “abundance” (finances), “identity,” “focus” (audiovisual, photographic, etc. records) and the circle FUNAS (which is in charge of the feminist agenda). So far, they have made more than 30 actions in different places of the country using the epic genre, irony, and humor as resources and starting points.

As we have said, 2019 was a period of tedium after four years of Mauricio Macri’s administration. Just like the 8M had a particular year, it was also memorable for the 24M, after the former president said that the ‘human rights racket’ had to come to an end and did not promote consistent policies to take the last military dictatorship genocides to court. However, it is not only that, but there were also significant events against human rights, such as Santiago Maldonado’s death. He was protesting the eviction of ancestral lands traditionally occupied by the Mapuche community. Protesters were dispersed by National Border Patrol officers in the early morning of August 1, 2017. Then, the Security Minister, Patricia Bullrich, justified the repression of the Mapuche people. This case made thousands of people angry, and on March 24, they took to the streets to protest executive power.

Picture 2. FUNO intervention.



Source: Facebook Colectivo Fin de UN Mundo

The action places women dressed in black (showing grief again) with a white piece of fabric in time and space (Buenos Aires, 24M). The group planned and coordinated the performance with rehearsed choreographies and precise instructions, which sets a difference from the *ContraArte* performance, a less spectacular action with a modest display. A choreography shows resistance signs using humor, a carnivalesque device developed by Bakhtin (1987). He identified an inversion of the daily experience and beliefs in those forms of protests that bring a suspension of reality to draw new meaning coordinates. What takes relevance as a discursive regularity is life, resistance, and humor (considered as fetishes by the group). An intense life is presented to alleviate the pain created by the death and the disappearances resulting from the last military dictatorship. Laughter, songs, and dance are seen in the pictures exhibiting women of different ages, creating a spectacular multi-choral composition.

The masks of this group are white, which generally represents peace and life and contrasts with the masks of the previous action. Another difference is the size of the object. Since it does not cover the entire face, it only covers the upper part of the nose and the forehead. In this way, faces create another effect, and the mouth has a significant role. The mask creates an aesthetic difference and a political-affective difference since the collective identity of the masks allows us to see a range of lips, teeth, tongues, and cheekbones that contort. Even the voice range is different because mouths are not covered.

With the face covered and the impossibility of identifying the people behind the masks creates a unique effect for a 24M. What is at stake is precisely the identity: the identity of the missing people, of the genocides, and of all the victims that somehow suffered during the dictatorship. Masks, in this case, could be considered a play of what can and cannot be seen. It is also not a coincidence that some of the pictures published on Facebook show people with masks on their head, leaving faces uncovered for a short period. Beyond those few pictures, most of the albums show a collective identity under the white masks as a significant center that displaces the black fabric from the rest of the body to a less important place. It is maybe about how carnival and joy beat death.

Discussion

Both interventions construct different political-aesthetic meanings of resistance with performances in public spaces. The concealment of the face covers an identity (the person's facial features) but shows another one (the one of the mask). It allows the creation of a collective identity with a specific purpose: truth, justice, and a step towards human rights, in the case of FUNO, and the legalization of abortion and more rights for women, in the case of ContraArte. It is about themes and world visions that question time-bound imaginaries. Everyone is equal under masks, and everyone shows expressions of resistance: the first group giving (new) meaning to death and the ones responsible (as taboo) for it, and the other one reclaiming joy, humor, and laughter (as a fetish).

The differences are noticeable: how they address the themes, the colors, the aesthetics of the masks, and the possibilities of gestures that those devices offer. However, they use masks in common: why do they choose a mask that covers the entire face or the eyes to perform on such important dates? Furthermore, affection is a possible answer to the extent that a collective identity strengthens the demand: they all look the same, and everyone wearing masks is a pictorial project that creates a new distribution of the sensible on the symbolic plane (Rancière, 2009) on the Argentine streets.

Emotions can be thought of as a way of knowing that generates a politicization of the individuals. In these actions, performances are a mediator that triggers affection in the ones who participate in the performance. This is evident in the pictures of both interventions when we see the contagious effects created among the occasional passers-by who dance, accompany, and hum. Those emotions are also triggered by the life and death masks when they show knowledge and emotions about the present situation in Argentina. In the case of FUNO, the triggered emotions are joy, hope, humor, and love, and in the case of ContraArte, they show pain, hopelessness, and anger. While in the first action, we can see a funeral procession, in the second one, there is an atmosphere of carnivalesque joy.

These actions have a "ritualization" character as a dynamic social practice process that stages repetitive conventions. It is a matter of thinking about performance as a ritualization process in which a memory is updated, and the passage to the symbolic fact is allowed. In this sense, the mask is a link in that recognizable ritual state for citizens as an artifact representing both a protest situation and a space for celebration.

If we recover Bakhtin's proposal (1987), we can see two different uses of the mask: one more linked to the grotesque (as in the case of ContraArte with the black mourning masks) and another more linked to the festive carnival (as the white masks in FUNO). They are two ways of expressing visions of the world as a subversive power: what the social drama of the time challenges (abortion) and a way to face the pain of March 24 through joy and humor.

Finally, the collective as a transformative power is completed with the occasional passer-by, whose face we see in pictures on Facebook. In that sense, it is crucial to follow Ahmed (2017), when she says that we interpret emotions and feelings of a specific moment we live in, but also because what we feel can depend on the past, and we can also say simultaneous, interpretations to refer to the contagious effect that is created in social protests. This is related to the discursive semiotic perspective since, as Angenot (2010), and Bakhtin (1987) state, every discourse (in this case, performance) interacts with previous and simultaneous ones building an infinite semiosis. Masks, on their part, establish links between us and other faces and masks that are part of the collective memory.

Conclusion

Doing research on faces and, more precisely, on ways of concealment in social protests is a topic that becomes more relevant in the current digital era in which the biopolitical control of the faces through facial recognition is being debated. Whether it is to avoid these forms of surveillance or to emphasize different demands through protesting, the artistic activism groups propose new ways of affection using artistic resources on faces such as masks that cover the eyes or the entire face. Masks can be then thought of as a symbology play and multipurpose figures, as a mismatch and a double identity: the one that it hides and the one that it shows. Wearing a mask creates a physical transformation, a new face, and new meanings.

This paper had the purpose of analyzing the creation of aesthetic and political meanings in two Argentinean performances and the concealment of the face with different mask was taken as the central axis. Masks that cover the eyes or the entire face convey themes, world visions and question time-bound imaginaries by showing the face of death or contrasting it against the life that is impersonated in a carnivalesque time-space. ContraArte puts on display the social drama of an era and FUNO tries to show other possible horizons with joy; both actions activate collective resistance emotions and knowledge about certain events in two very significant dates for the Argentine history.

In the case of ContraArte, outrage, anger, and rage are used to criticize the world and question the occasional passer-by, while in the case of FUNO, semiotic regularity refers to joy and celebration. Two different horizons of meaning, but they have the questioning and exposure of feelings in common. In that sense, masks play a significant role since they are discursive organizers. A big part of what happens is triggered by the aesthetics that cover faces as a resistance policy.

It will be necessary for future generations to delve into the affections theory and choose other comparative instances of concealment of the face using a variety of devices. It is not a coincidence that many demonstrations of artistic activism use masks. This may be so because they offer possibilities and aesthetic creativity to convey different emotions, and there is also a political potentiality that the concealment of the face produces in social protests.

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