



Faceless Evil in Popular Culture (20th and 21st Centuries). Introduction

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Faceless Evil in Popular Culture (20th and 21st Centuries)

Introduction

Facial recognition in popular culture (... and in COVID-19-times)

Over the last years, facial recognition has become a major technological, economic, political, and, last but not least, ethical issue. A person who refuses to show his or her face in public seems immediately suspect, as he or she does not respect the transparency rules that society sets. However, the multiple forms of power using this technology deny the uniqueness of the face – and therefore of the individual – by reducing the face to a set of features, consequently objectifying the person. Facial recognition is thus similar to previous attempts of measuring the face, albeit with different agendas, as described by French body anthropologist David Le Breton : « The entire physiognomonic or morphopsychological enterprise aims to destroy the enigma of the face by turning it into a geometric figure¹. » With facial recognition, faces can no longer blend in with the crowd. A former place of identity, the face becomes a sign of overexposed identity.

Does that mean that someone without a recognizable face does not accept the rules of society or even tries to go against them ? The perfect illustration is of course one of the most popular supervillains : Batman's counterpart the Joker, whose face is not recognized by face scan technology in *The Dark Knight* (2008)².



Ill. 1: Christopher Nolan, *The Dark Knight*, © Warner Bros. Pictures, 2008.

The *Gilets jaunes* crisis in France or the protests in Hong Kong are recent examples of democratic events which lead the authorities to ban any scarf or mask hiding the face, making everyone who does a potential criminal. However, with the French « Loi interdisant la dissimulation du visage dans l'espace public (Law prohibiting the concealment of the face in public space [our transl.]) in 2011 more debates emerged focusing rather on identity than on security : any veiled person is perceived not only as a physical danger, but also as a cultural threat.

Those were the introductory lines of the conference « Die Figurlosigkeit des Bösen in der populären Kultur des 20. und 21. Jahrhunderts / Le mal sans visage dans la culture populaire des XX^e et XXI^e siècles », which was held at the University of Luxembourg in October 2019, only a couple of months before the virus SARS-CoV-2 was revealed to the world. In the following global pandemic, authorities all over the world took more or less severe measures to reduce social interactions in order to contain the widespread. The obligation to wear face masks raised fierce opposition among many. This mistrust may have various motivations, going from a right-wing refusal to be « muzzled³ », to a broader fear to lose an essential part of one's psychological and social identity, constructed in the interaction with others, when a state power orders to cover the face.

What may seem as a change of paradigm, as we went from the legal prohibition to cover the face to a mask obligation, reveals itself to be two intertwined ways to negate the humanity of the face, as Agamben puts it :

The face is the most human of things. Humans have faces and not simply muzzles or snouts because they dwell in the open, because through their faces they expose themselves and communicate. This is why the face is the site of politics. Our unpolitical era does not want to see its own face, it keeps it at a distance, masks and covers it. There must no longer be faces, only numbers and figures. Even the tyrant is faceless⁴.

There is an almost « apocalyptic tone » here, which is not atypical for the discussion about wearing masks in the COVID-19-era. By categorically refusing to acknowledge a medical justification for wearing masks during the pandemic, Agamben comes astonishingly close to the arguments of conspiracy theorists. In the current state of emergency, surprising political alliances seem to emerge, for example between Giorgio Agamben and Donald Trump. Whether it is being covered or overexposed, but reduced to a pattern of recognizable features, the current context is a reminder that the face is highly political, when it comes to considering the individual as a physical body to observe and to control, or as a potential consumer to target. The 2002 science fiction movie *Minority Report* already presented those two stakes :



Ill. 2: Steven Spielberg, *Minority Report*, © 20th Century Fox / DreamWorks Pictures, 2002.

This scene perfectly shows the double discourse which characterizes popular culture, particularly in the movies and series media : consumerism and ubiquitous advertising are singled out, but at the same time, brands benefit from a state-of-the-art product placement. This contradiction is inherent in pop culture representations – and in no way delegitimizes them, as they simultaneously deconstruct and perpetuate images and narratives anchored in the contemporary social and cultural context. Its « aesthetic and political force⁵ » results from this discursive peculiarity.

Serial killers, serialized evil

Beside this peculiarity, seriality can be seen as another characteristic of popular culture. In one way or another, all contributions to the volume are about serial works and serial characters. Ruth Mayer defines serial characters as « flat, immediately recognizable, iconic, and fated to execute a stock repertoire of actions and attitudes in ever changing settings and contexts, against a backdrop of increasingly complex scenarios and devices⁶ ». She refers to popular serial characters from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, such as Tarzan, Sherlock Holmes and Fu-Manchu. The narratives about these characters are « flat » insofar as they dispense with psychology, in contrast to the realistic novel of the 19th century. Instead, exotic settings appear, but above all an exciting plot that enables and encourages easy and quick consumption. This facilitates media transformations and adaptations, for example from the medium text to the medium film. Serial tension, on the other hand, has an obvious affinity to serial crime : the supervillain is, so to speak, the serial figure *par excellence*. In this perspective, the « facelessness » of evil characters is nothing more than a feature of serial narration itself. According to Ruth Mayer, the serial figure must be immediately recognizable and immediately comprehensible in every media staging : Count Dracula's face, for example, is in this sense, like that of the devil : nothing but a mask of himself.

It remains to be asked, however, whether the « flatness » of seriality, which Mayer asserts as constitutive, also applies to seriality in the times of « Quality TV⁷ » – the new era of seriality in the present –, which has triggered a new wave of preoccupation with popular culture in the Humanities. A character like Walter White, the criminal chemistry teacher from *Breaking Bad*, definitely has a psychological depth and character development that clearly distinguishes him from early serial villains like Dracula or Fu-Manchu. However, the villain's mask-like nature will undoubtedly remain, even if it may no longer be possible to clearly follow a serial consumption logic. It becomes a symbol : open to a variety of meanings and interpretations.

Figur(e) : body – face – identity

There is a pop culture obsession with evil. Anyone who wanted to list examples here would not even know where to start. Ever since *The Silence of the Lambs* (Jonathan Demme, © Orion Pictures, 1991), the genre of crime fiction (or thriller) has concentrated more on psychopathic killer characters than on criminal investigators. It seems that no superhero movie can be shot without a charismatic supervillain. All conceivable discourses and media are currently talking about evil forces, calamity and ruin, ranging from political extremism and terrorism to climate disasters.

Modernity has – at least increasingly – developed a reservation against personifying or giving form to evil phenomena, for example in the figure of the devil in Christian mythology. As Peter-André Alt points out, in modern times, evil is represented less and less by physical personifications (such as the figure of the devil). Instead, it is increasingly understood a psychological phenomenon⁸. Therefore, at least in advanced literature, in the place of

allegorical clarity, there is more and more psychological complexity and ambiguity. It suggests that, in the present era, evil is primarily represented *as* unambiguous evil in films, television series, genre novels and other works in popular culture, whereas works of 'high culture' tend to underscore psychological complexity and moral ambiguity.

The following papers revolve precisely around the problematic phenomenality of evil in popular culture : problematic phenomenality insofar as evil is represented again and again as a figure with a disfigured or masked face and / or a missing face, often even without a physical body. Therefore, facelessness will sometimes blend in with a larger absence of body, form or shape, failing to embody a person or an entity. As the face is obviously part of the body, the relationship between face and body can be seen as a gradation of two principles. First, the face is the « territory of the body where individual distinction is inscribed⁹ », thus defining a person in his or her relation to the outside world. Socially and psychologically¹⁰, the face therefore builds the foundation of the relationship with oneself and with others. Conversely, the absence of a face (masked, disfigured or not recognizable as such) hinders this relationship. Once again, the Joker personifies both : the scarred one is on the margins of society, while the wearer of a mask seeks to plunge society into chaos¹¹ :



Ill. 3: Christopher Nolan, *The Dark Knight*, © Warner Bros. Pictures, 2008.

Secondly, the aforementioned violence against faces results from erasing the distinctive feature that the face is the mirror of emotions, which makes it the essential place where flesh meets affect¹². Despite what is at stake with face recognition technology, the face stays therefore less inclined to objectification than the body¹³. On the contrary, adding a grim face to a bottle of lemonade creates the most iconic villain in French popular culture in France – right behind Darth Vader and the Joker :



Ill. 4: Johan Camitz, *La Bûche de Noël* (film publicitaire), © Orangina Suntory France, 1997.

Because the face is more than flesh, it appeals to an ethic that goes beyond the perception of the distinct features of an individual's appearance. In *Ethics and Infinity*, Emmanuel Levinas states :

I think rather that access to the face is straightaway ethical. You turn yourself toward the Other as toward an object when you see a nose, eyes, a forehead, a chin, and you can describe them. The best way of encountering the Other is not even to notice the color of his eyes! When one observes the color of the eyes one is not in social relationship with the Other. The relation with the face can surely be dominated by perception, but what is specifically the face is what cannot be reduced to that. There is first the very uprightness of the face, its upright exposure, without defense. The skin of the face is that which stays most naked, most destitute. It is the most naked, though with a decent nudity. It is the most destitute also : there is an essential poverty in the face; the proof of this is that one tries to mask this poverty by putting on poses, by taking on a countenance. The face is exposed, menaced, as if inviting us to an act of violence. At the same time, the face is what forbids us to kill¹⁴.

Faceless evil : the villain's face or the impossible face-to-face

Resorting to violence in front of the nudity and poverty of the face is central to ethics. What happens however when there is no face ? Or, at least, no human face ? Are faceless characters necessarily evil ? Let us not forget that many superheroes also wear a mask when they plunge into combat with their foes... In many pop culture narratives, the villains are clearly identified as the hero's counterparts. The overexposure of their moral status and part in the plot may either come from a clearly recognizable face or, on the contrary, from their facelessness. The latter then signals their non-participation in the rules of society, but it also underlines their antagonistic symbolic and narrative role¹⁵. Levinas's claim remains utterly valid : ethics are the

possible result of the relationship created by the recognition of a face. As soon as there is a face, there is a connection, even based on conflict.



Ill. 5: John Woo, *Face/Off*, © Paramount Pictures / Buena Vista International, 1997.

The research topic « faceless evil » invites us to deconstruct the overlapping dichotomies good *versus* bad (of course) and face *versus* the absence or negation of face. The central question would be if facelessness means evil, because of an absence of a recognizable face or because of the absence of relationships, which are central to ethics : relationship with oneself, with one's environment and with the others ? Facelessness could then for instance be a trait of the « banality of evil¹⁶ » : the face is not purposefully hidden nor destroyed to exclude its owner from the human community, but it is from the get-go never constituted as such, unseen behind bureaucracy and unquestioned routine.

How, in popular culture, can faceless evil be represented as this absence of relationship or impossible connection ? We would like to show three more examples to draw a possible development from the villain's face to faceless evil.

The first scenario describes characters with a face that represents evil. There is a long tradition that says that evil is embodied in the illegitimate and unjust ruler – the tyrant. In popular culture, this idea is linked in many ways with the motif of ugliness. As an example, one could cite the Disney film *The Lion King* (Roger Allers and Rob Minkoff, © Buena Vista Pictures, 1994), with the character Scar as the evil murderer of his brother, the king, and his subsequent reign as a usurper. Of course, the film takes up numerous elements from Shakespeare's dramas. The murder of the king and the assignment to the son of the slain king follows the plot of *Hamlet* ; the design of Scar, in turn, is based on *Richard III* : like him, Scar is filled with boundless ambition, with an infinite lust for power, and, like him, he is ready to kill his own family members in order to gain power. As with *Richard*, this greed in Scar is largely motivated by physical ugliness. In the case of Scar, the distortion of his face has become his name (« scar ») : it symbolizes his essence, his character. The disfigurement of the face can thus be read in at least two ways : on the one hand, it may be understood as a sign of his outsiderhood and malice

– the external ugliness, according to a long aesthetic tradition, represents an internal malice. On the other hand, however, the scar points to the illegibility of his face for the other protagonists : he is a deceiver and manipulator, and only then does he succeed in not only killing his brother Mufasa, but also convincing his son Simba that he is responsible for his father's death.



Ill. 6: Roger Allers and Rob Minkoff, *The Lion King*, © Buena Vista Pictures, 1994.

In another variant of the first scenario, the face of the antagonist bears the features of the Other. It is immediately recognizable as belonging to someone who does not share the same ethical, cultural and political values. An example, from the point of view of the United States (and an illustration of the globalization of Western imagery through popular culture), is the face of the Russian Ivan Drago in the *Rocky* series, where ethnically stereotypical representation is obviously a construct of Otherness¹⁷. Besides, in the ring, the face – ultimately disfigured – plays a symbolic role of being the target to the opponent's attacks :



Ill. 7: Sylvester Stallone, *Rocky IV*, © MGM/UA Entertainment Company, 1985.

The second scenario involves evil characters without faces. As Luther Link explains in his study *The Devil: A Mask Without a Face* (1995), our clichéd idea about the external appearance of the devil – a grimace with horns on the head, a goatee and pointed ears – is nothing but an empty masquerade that is in no way represents a person, a « mask without a face¹⁸ ». The

traditional face of the devil is, according to Link, a « flat » symbol, almost without any meaning. The Christian devil receives power and effectiveness only when he assumes a human form and consequently a human face. Countless legends of saints from the time of early Christianity, such as the stories about St. Anthony, report on this, in particular, for the purpose of seduction and temptation. The devil assumes an attractive form in order to appeal to his allies in us, the instincts and physical desires to appeal. The devil is essentially a force of deception, temptation, manipulation. His facelessness is his real power, which, not least, must always leave open the possibility of whether he exists at all.

In this case, the absence of a (human) face responds again to the complete Otherness of evil characters. Adapted from a graphic novel, the movie *300* opposes not only East and West, but also pure race *versus* bodily and cultural hybridities. The enemy army of « Immortals » is doubly faceless : the masks deny the soldier's individuality whereas their monstrous face strips them of all humanity.



Ill. 8: Zach Snyder, *300*, © Warner Bros. Pictures, 2007.

This absence of a face therefore signifies radical Otherness, thus also creating enemies one can kill to one's heart's content¹⁹, as suggested by the slaughterfest that is *300*.

The third scenario describes cases in which evil is completely invisible. In this case, the presence of evil is totally transposed into the sphere of discourse : Keyser Söze in *The Usual Suspects* is faceless, therefore indefinable. Unlike Ivan Draco, he cannot be challenged. Faceless evil ultimately culminates in an impossible face-to-face²⁰.



Ill. 9: Bryan Singer, *The Usual Suspects*, © Gramercy Pictures / Spelling Films International, 1995.

Again, « evil characters frequently steal the show²¹ », as writes Jamey Heit, which appears profoundly true for faceless evil, because it paradoxically offers limitless possibilities for aesthetic representation and narrative meaning. The innumerable depictions of masked or disfigured faces, or, more broadly, of spectral beings, anonymous entities behind a screen²², digital algorithms, etc. will give the opportunity to go beyond the duality of identity and otherness, and beyond the Manichean opposition between good and bad. Which poetic and iconic processes does the absence of a face generate and what is it the sign of ? What does this ultimately mean for the reader or the spectator ? Does faceless evil reinforce their temptation to identify themselves with evil characters without being seen²³ ?

Our three narrative scenarios, which are by no means historical, but rather typological, will structure this volume, trying to present different expressions of the problematic phenomenality of evil in popular culture. It is important to say that this narrative does not go hand in hand with a graduation of complexity in terms of representing or meaning. Besides, some papers are not easily categorizable, either because their representations of evil do not fit into this mold, or because they picture multiple forms of faceless evil, like the villains in the Luxembourgish comic *Superjhem*, where, on the one hand, evil characters appear as stereotypically masked cartoonish villains, but, on the other hand, the political structures at stake remain largely invisible. Our choices then mostly consider a first level of analysis, whereas the authors of the papers usually deconstruct easy classification, by using different conceptual frameworks or by highlighting the ambivalence of aesthetic representation.

First, we will focus on examples in which particular aesthetic or symbolic attention is given to evil characters' faces. They seem visible at first, but generally contain one or more particularities which makes them essentially or phenomenologically elusive. **Stefanie Heine** focusses, in *Breaking Bad* and *The Fall* on the motive of breathing, highlighting its recurrence in pop culture imagery, but also its ambiguous narrative role in the series, regarding visibility and readability. For **Claude Kremer**, who presents the aforementioned satirical comics *Superjhem*, the stereotypical and serial representation of villains tends to overshadow political and sociological criticism, especially when the very first purpose of the media is to entertain its readers. **Irene Husser**'s analysis of *Fargo* shows on the contrary that the absence of true *figura* endorses the series' critical and counter-discursive meaning. The same goes for the transgressive lyrics, performances, and/or poetry of the German rock band Rammstein and its leader Till Lindemann, which **Max Becker** reads in their thematic, poetic and methodological connections to Werner Hoffmann's popular children's book *Der Struwwelpeter*.

A second part completes our catalogue of faceless evil by presenting characters whose faces literally cannot be seen, thus emphasizing however their identification as evil characters. In other words, their facelessness signifies their Otherness. **Nicolas Cvetko** presents a series of *giallo*-movies, analyzing the figure of the masked criminal both from its semiotic and narrative (non-)presence, as well as a personage that is truly embedded in its sociopolitical and -cultural context. **Jelena Filipovic** analyzes the figurations of evil in J.R.R. Tolkien's work in the context of political theology, referring primarily to Machiavelli and Carl Schmitt. **Oliver Kohns** describes serial criminals as important content of serial fictions around 1900 and emphasizes that the representation of evil in Doyle's *Sherlock Holmes*, Rohmer's *Fu-Manchu*, and Jacques' *Dr. Mabuse* are negotiations of popular ideas of social « others ». **Juliane-Prade Weiss** describes, in texts by Faulkner and Bernhard, the villain as the figure who questions the categories of recognizability, coherence and the « identity compulsion », the principles of the biopolitical paradigm of modern state.

Finally, the papers in the third and last part describe facelessness as various forms of concealed evil, undermining any possible confrontation. **Caroline Bader** textually and semiotically analyzes two songs and music videos by the German band Kraftklub, where faceless evil refers

to rightwing populism hidden in the crowd and unidentified social violence. In the video game *The Last Guardian*, presented by **Daniel Illger**, the players have to create a friendship between two wholly different beings, whereas evil, aesthetically expressed in the form of abstractness, watches over the maintenance of a dichotomous order. **Matthieu Freyheit** compares several stories of cyber-mobbing in Young Adult literature, stating that this recent faceless avatar of the stereotypical bully challenges the ways adolescents and adults identify and deal with the problem, but also how literary texts manage to create a salvatory visibility for victims caught between the anonymity and the overexposure of intimacy in social media. Also giving an important part to the didactic function of literature, **Eric Muller** stresses that the hidden presence of evil in dystopian fictions has to be read in relation to other forms of unknown, especially in the representations of space and time which frame those imaginary worlds. **Sascha Seiler**'s study on new weird fiction follows up here : unlike typical horror movies monsters, the weird entities he describes appear in unconventional contexts, thus not only increasing their uncanniness, but questioning conventional frameworks to produce sense and meaning.

¹ « Toute l'entreprise physiognomonique ou morphopsychologique vise à détruire l'énigme du visage pour en faire une figure, une géométrie ». David Le Breton, « Visage », *Anthropen.org*, Paris, Éditions des archives contemporaines, 2017, DOI:10.17184/eac.anthropen.065.

² See Juliane Prade-Weiss's paper in this volume.

³ « Die Rechten gehen ja auch auf die Straße und sagen, Maskentragen sei wie das Tragen eines Maulkorbs. » Slavoj Žižek, « Die Pandemie ist nur eine Probe für die wirkliche Krise », *Berliner Zeitung*, 01/12/2020, https://www.berliner-zeitung.de/kultur-vergnuegen/covid-19-slavoj-zizek-die-pandemie-ist-nur-eine-probe-fuer-die-wirkliche-krise-giorgio-agamben-levinas-coronavirus-lockdown-light-li.122802?fbclid=IwAR2gKslGTS6iouLT43xPXZWxs7hmK_nCDJX5F5DqIYqmq29D8ZYMNXjUbA.

⁴ Giorgio Agamben, « When the House Is on Fire », Richard Braude (transl.), *Ill Will Editions*, 05/10/2020, <https://illwilleditions.com/when-the-house-is-on-fire/>.

⁵ See Florian Niedlich, « Einleitung », p. 9-12, in Florian Niedlich (ed.), *Facetten der Popkultur*, Bielefeld, transcript Verlag, 2012, p. 9 : « Entgegen vorschnellen Verurteilungen des Populären als trivial, kunstlos und zwingend affirmativ wird gegenwärtig seine ästhetische und politische Kraft in ihr Recht gesetzt. »

⁶ Ruth Mayer, « Image power : seriality, iconicity and The Mask of Fu Manchu », p. 398-417, *Screen* 53.4 (2012), p. 398.

⁷ See Daniela Schlütz, *Quality-TV als Unterhaltungsphänomen: Entwicklung, Charakteristika, Nutzung und Rezeption von Fernsehserien wie The Sopranos, The Wire oder Breaking Bad*, Wiesbaden, Springer, 2016.

⁸ Peter-André Alt, *Ästhetik des Bösen*, München, Beck, 2010, p. 13.

⁹ David Le Breton, « Visage », *op. cit.*

¹⁰ David Le Breton, « Le visage à l'épreuve de l'identité », p. 209-23, in Laurent Guido *et al.*, *Visages. Histoires, représentations, créations*, Lausanne, Editions BHMS, « Bibliothèque d'histoire de la médecine et de la santé », 2017, p. 215.

¹¹ « Impossible de concevoir un monde sans visage sans l'appréhender comme un univers de chaos. » David Le Breton, « Visage », *op. cit.*

¹² Jean-Jacques Courtine, « Prélude. L'histoire du visage est-elle possible ? », p. xi-xxi, in Laurent Guido *et al.*, *Visages. Histoires, représentations, créations, op. cit.*, p. xii.

¹³ See Roberto Esposito, *Persons and Things. from the Body's Point of View*, Zakiya Hanafi (transl.), Cambridge (UK) and Malden (MA), Polity Press, 2015.

¹⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, « The Face », p. 83-92, in Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity. Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, Richard A. Cohen (transl.), Pittsburgh, Duquesne University Press, 1985 [1982], p. 85-86.

¹⁵ See Daniel A. Forbes, « The Aesthetic of Evil », p. 13-27, in Jamey Heit (ed.), *Vader, Voldemort and Other Villains*, Jefferson (NC), McFarland, 2011, p. 19.

¹⁶ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, New York, Viking Press, 1963.

¹⁷ « [...] la méchanceté s'inscrit dans le registre du discours », Lucien Faggion et Christophe Regina, « Introduction. La méchanceté : la fabrique de l'Autre ? Discours, représentations, stéréotypes », p. 11-13, in Lucien Faggion et Christophe Regina (dir.), *Dictionnaire de la méchanceté*, Paris, Editions Max Milo, 2013, p. 11.

¹⁸ See Luther Link, *The Devil: A Mask without a Face*, London, Reaktion Books, 2015.

¹⁹ See David Le Breton, « Le visage à l'épreuve de l'identité », *op. cit.*, p. 212.

²⁰ See Olivier Douville, « Présence du visage, pouvoirs des masques », *Olivier Douville*, s. d., <https://sites.google.com/site/olivierdouvilleofficiel/articles/presence-du-visage-pouvoirs-des-masques>.

²¹ Jamey Heit, « Introduction », p. 3-11, in Jamey Heit (ed.), *Vader, Voldemort and Other Villains*, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

²² See Bogomir Doring and Brigitte Felderer (ed.), *Faceless: Re-Inventing Privacy Through Subversive Media Strategies*, International, De Gruyter, 2018.

²³ See the correlation between readers and masks in Claude Le Manchec, *L'Adolescent et le récit. Pour une approche concrète de la littérature de jeunesse*, Paris, L'école des loisirs, 2000, p. 23-25.