

The mask

Wear it your own way



The Lovers (left)
The Search (below)



By David Langwallner

A MASK IS an object normally worn on the face, typically for protection (physical or spiritual) of the wearer or of another.

Although it is difficult to see that masks will ever be seen the same after Covid-19, we can see from our abortive immanent Hallowe'en, that masks are not always compelled and protective.

They can also be used for disguise or entertainment.

Sometimes they straddle purposes.

Hallowe'en is the eve of the resurrection of souls.

People believed that wearing masks and

costumes protected them from ghosts whose big night out it is. Over the centuries and as Hallowe'en has travelled the world as a medium of disposable US cultural hegemony they have embraced another role as entertainment - fancy dress for children's fun.

In a post-modern twist they have also been used to symbolise evil – as with evil clowns, the Joker in Batman movies, the 'Gimp' in Pulp Fiction or Frank Booth in 'Blue Velvet'.

Masks are an artifice in many horror films to conceal the identities of a killer. Notable examples include Jason Voorhees of the *Friday the 13th* series, Jigsaw Killer from *Saw*, Ghost-face of the *Scream* series, and Michael Myers in the *Halloween* series.

Which illustrates how complex masks are. What else grounds a celebration of the resurrection, children's glee and film horror, and can cause pitch fighting on the streets of the capitals of the world, driven by aversion to their compulsory use?

There's a good bit of theory about masks, certainly the heaviest of which is 'The Way of the Masks' (1975) in which Belgian-born anthropologist, Claude Lévi-Strauss, sets out to demonstrate, through a case study, that masks worn by certain native Americans cannot be interpreted in themselves as separate objects but, as with myths, must be returned to their transformation set: the set of masks and their associated myths in which each echoes and transforms the others. "My hypothesis", Levi Strauss laid down, "will be proven right

if, in the last analysis, we can perceive between the origin myths of each type of mask, transformational relations homologous to those that, from a purely plastic point of view, prevail among themselves". Since he was a structuralist we won't have to find out if his hypothesis was indeed proven. Or even necessarily understand what he meant.

Belgians seem to have a thing for masks. Surrealist René Magritte fetishised them

The Lovers "is a series of at least four pieces in which Magritte features smothered lovers. The skin-on-skin pleasure is absent. The act is repugnant—kissing through cloth

Magritte's 'in search of lost self' shows that human emotions can be adopted and dropped like a mask – or an umbrella.

Perhaps the Belgian penchant for surrealism grounds its place at the heart of the EU, that centre of bureaucratic absurdity.

Belgium naturally made the widespread wearing of masks compulsory in the pandemic, as soon as it could (before beating a dra-



Britain

matic retreat).

On the other hand the bureaucracy-busting nation of shopkeepers of England detests the wearing of masks. The best mask-avoiders are English. According to YouGov data in July just 38% of Britons said they wear masks in public places. You can't imagine the Queen in a mask. Dominic Cummings would sooner wear a beret. By comparison, 88% of people in Spain and 83% in Italy said they did so. Meanwhile, 90% of people in Singapore wear masks in public, as do 82% in China. Many in the far East didn't even need a pandemic, or any other apparent



ISIS



IRA

reason, to wear a mask.

In Britain masks are associated with wartime anti-gas behemoths and emergency. Here's a congerie of children during World War II.

Anything associated with the Second World War has a special place in the jingoist hearts of many English people and is not to be worn lightly.

Masks are also associated with crime, violence and terrorism. Isis are masters of mask use. They made it more difficult for a drone to pick out the perpetrators of unspeakable on-

line violence, in a crowd.

The IRA loved a balaclava. For a paramilitary they're intimidating as they bespeak immunity. The term was applied retrospectively to knitted headgear sent from home and worn by many British troops at the battle of that name in 1854 during the Crimean War.

The earliest known masks come from the Judaeen Desert in Israel about 9,000 years ago.

They are not the first masks ; merely the earliest ones we know of. Older masks were almost certainly made of perishable matter: leather, feathers, pigments such as ochre, or plant remains, and used for camouflage, and beautification. Neanderthals may have worn masks 60,000 years ago.

Mask experts get very caught up in the issue whether make-up constitute maskery.

Masks of course are deceivers: performers in Ancient Greek theatre and in traditional Japanese Noh drama wore masks. In medieval Europe, masks were used in mystery and miracle plays to portray allegorical creatures, and the performer representing God frequently wore a gold or gilt mask.

Masks represent much more than you'd think. Men are inexplicably hostile to them. But only as protection from disease, not when used as spiritual protection or for entertainment purposes. So men are overall less inclined to don masks in public than women. Real men don't wear masks.

Trump/Pence loathe them and only wear them because if they don't there's a chance they die. There are indications that men are more likely to feel negative emotions (such as shame) and stigma for wearing masks.

Masks can be religious designators and suppressers of female sexuality.

And masks can conceal sexual exploitation, role concealment and debauchery.

Dennis Hopper's sinister mask in Blue Velvet



Noh drama

gave him cover for sexual violence.

Stanley Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut* shows how Venetian masks conceal a multitude of infamies or role play, and far from suppressing sexuality, can be a licence for debauchery.

Leonard Cohen could afford to be coy about masks:

If you want a lover
I'll do anything you ask me to
And if you want another kind of love
I'll wear a mask for you
If you want a partner, take my hand, or
If you want to strike me down in anger
Here I stand
I'm your man.

But ultimately masks serve sterility and cleanliness by covering mucous organs. Fascism not Fascism. Wear yours. 🇺🇸

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Loathes it



Religious designator and suppressor of sexuality



Sinister