

The Duality of the Face in Cinema: From Ubiquity to Obscurity
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I. Facelessness

Michael Myers wears a white mask as he terrorizes a teenage babysitter on Halloween night. The mask is clearly that of a human face but devoid of the distinct signifiers of the face, such as the shape of the lips or height of the forehead. Not only is Myers' face unidentifiable but it is illegible, obscured from our view; it is unable to emote and express itself. How do we read this invisible face and others like it? *Halloween's* (John Carpenter, 1978) Myers is one of many "faceless" characters in cinema, therefore a conversation about the purpose and effect of the concealment of the face is necessary. The face in cinema and the close-up shot have been the focus of a great deal of film theory, and the more value these works and their authors place on the face, the more questions arise regarding how the spectator reads or accesses a film in which there are no identifiable faces. How does the spectator connect with the expressions of persons they cannot fully see?

From this question the concept of "facelessness" in cinema emerges – a characteristic that is born out of the deliberate withholding of the face from the viewer by the filmmaker. What effect does *not being able to identify with a character by looking directly at their face* have on the individual spectator? Does it inhibit the viewer's ability to identify with the film? In the 1960's, philosopher Emmanuel Levinas argued that encounters with the Other rely on the visibility of the face, without which we are incapable of finding ourselves within them; the face of the Other instills us with a responsibility for them. When Levinas uses the term "face," it is not in reference to the primordial face but rather the way in which a person presents themselves, thus the faceless character in cinema can have "face" without having *a* face; their presence can

exude a shyness or danger that goes beyond what the visible human face can communicate.¹

Therefore the primordial face is not necessary for a connection to form between two people, in this case a spectator in a theater and a faceless character in a film. But then how does cinema *specifically* grant access to characters without faces?

Major theories on identification with the film narrative include Jean-Louis Baudry's apparatus theory, Laura Mulvey's male-gaze theory, Christian Metz's mirror theory.² These theorists are each proponents of ideologically-based theories that fueled a conversation around the relationship between the spectator and the screen beginning in the 1970s. Jean-Louis Baudry published *Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus* in 1974 in *Film Quarterly*, a scholarly film and visual media journal. Baudry viewed cinema as an apparatus whereby the projector, viewer, and screen were aligned to create a circumscribed effect on the spectator, who was passive and impressionable. Laura Mulvey and other feminist film critics challenged Baudry's apparatus theory, arguing that viewers were not passive but had the agency to engage with a critique a film for themselves. Mulvey's *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* was then published in 1975 in *Screen*, a British film theory journal, as an androcentric response to the previous identification theories. It is in this essay that Mulvey coins the term "male gaze," a concept that embodies the act of viewing women through the eyes of a heterosexual male by presenting women as sexual objects so as to pleasure the male spectator. By highlighting the scopophilic, fetishistic desire fueled by the male gaze, Mulvey is politicizing the camera and criticizing the passive acceptance of a patriarchal social system.

¹Michael L. Morgan, *The Cambridge Introduction to Emmanuel Levinas*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011, 64-65.

²The essays I refer to are as follows: Jean-Louis Baudry, "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus," *Critical Visions in Film Theory: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, edited by Timothy Corrigan et al., Bedford/St. Martin's, 2011, 34-45; Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: a Film Theory Reader*, edited by Philip Rosen, Columbia Univ. Press, 2008, 198-209; Christian Metz, "The Imaginary Signifier [Excerpts]," *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: a Film Theory Reader*, edited by Philip Rosen, Columbia Univ. Press, 2008, 244-278.

In 1977, Christian Metz published *The Imaginary Signifier*, a more psychological perspective on the cinematic viewing experience than Baudry or Mulvey. The spectator is an integral part of the process of film projection, and cinema as we have come to understand it would cease to exist without voyeuristic observers. Metz's theory uses Jacques Lacan's mirror theory as a starting point, combining it with Freudian psychology to construct a psychoanalytic approach to theorize the film spectator's identification within narrative cinema. It is this idea that brings me to the question posed by Metz in "The Imaginary Signifier": "But *with what*, then, does the spectator identify during projection of the film?"³ Metz emphasizes the importance of continued identification when watching a film, without which the film's meaning would be unclear. After concluding that secondary identification is insufficient at times when there is no on-screen human with which to identify, Metz goes on to argue that it is *themselves* that the spectator identifies with, however I find the primary link between the spectator and the film to be the cinematic face.

In Hollywood cinema, there are ubiquitous faces and there are obscured faces that exist at two ends of a spectrum that I will discuss in the next section. The ubiquitous faces in narrative films are the human faces of actors that contain a conspicuous or manifestable quality, such as Charlie Chaplin or Clara Bow. As actors of the Silent Era, they relied on subtle facial cues in place of audible dialogue. In cinematographic terms, the close-up of the face was a substitute for sound in its absence. Often the facial movements of silent-era actors were so minute or complex that they had no verbal equivalent. In *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (Carl Theodor Dreyer, 1928), after being taunted by a priest who demanded she tell him how soon God had told her she would be released from prison, Joan's (Renée Falconetti) expression slowly turns from one of hope to one of despair; her tear-filled eyes dull and her head tilts down in defeat. A combination of skill

³Metz, "The Imaginary Signifier [Excerpts]," 251.

on the part of the actor, photogénie, and a unique quality that lies in the nature of silent era film renders these faces/expressions too complex and nuanced to be translated into dialogue.

In sound films, this kind of minute facial expression is key to the viewer's psychological connection to the screen. Filmmaker Barry Jenkins creates this connection through the close-up shot in which the camera is situated directly between two characters, allowing the audience to look and be looked at. In *Moonlight*, a teenage Chiron is approached by his mother, Paula, outside their apartment. Paula's drug-fueled emotional turbulence is contrasted with Chiron's steely façade as the camera cuts back and forth between them and the dialogue falls out of synchronization. Through minute physiognomy, Paula's expression goes from happy to distressed to meditative in a matter of seconds, while Chiron's face remains unchanged in a mix of confusion, fear, and shame (see fig. 1, 2, 3, 4). Jenkins captures these expressions by placing the viewer in the middle of the tense interaction so they experience it through the perspective of both Chiron and Paula; the dialogue, while relevant to the image, is not necessary to understand the emotions of the characters. These open faces create a connection with the viewer by looking past the diegesis and into the viewing space.

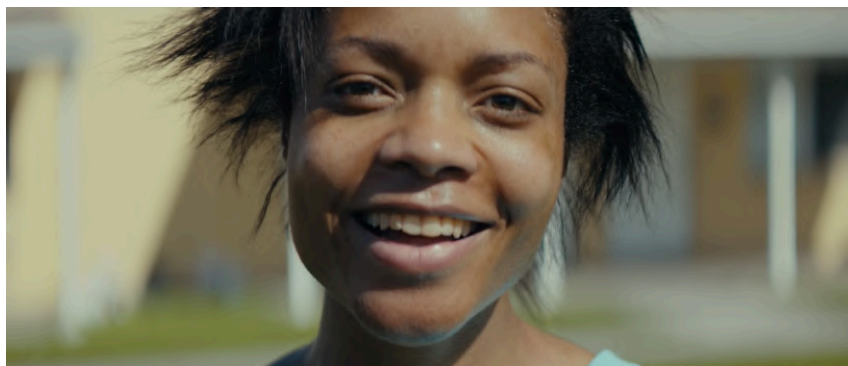


Figure 1.



Figure 2.



Figure 3.



Figure 4.

Obscured faces are those that are hidden from the viewer, either fully or in-part, thus rendering these faces less accessible to the spectator and forcing them to rely on other forms of communication such as speech or body language to fully understand and ascribe meaning to the obscured character. Examples of characters whose power lies in their obscured faces include Michael Myers, Darth Vader, HAL 9000, and the Wizard. The obscured face is a significantly different mode of identity in film. It eliminates the face's ability to express subtle meaning

thereby rendering the face illegible, the obscured face is no less iconic than the ubiquitous face. Their only differences lie in the ways that attributes or feelings are to be read by the spectator.

My definition of the obscured face is purposefully broad with the intention of encapsulating facial obscurity according to various levels of visibility. What exactly is an “obscured face”? A face that the viewer is unable to see, and thus, read? A face that is only partially shown? Where is the line drawn between a face that is obscured and a face that is ubiquitous? It seems to me that facial obscurity in cinema lies on a spectrum with ubiquitous faces becoming increasingly less visible through masks, lighting, or the entire removal of a character visually until they become obscured faces, unreadable to the audience. Faces in cinema also become less ubiquitous with the progression of time and the advancement of technology that dilute the face to the point of being an accessory. Expressive faces on film exist after the introduction of sound in, say, the classical Hollywood era, yet these faces differ from the ubiquitous faces of the silent-era in that they rely on film acting as opposed to theater acting. The expressivity and physicality of silent film actors situates them closer to stage performers than screen actors. This idea of obscurity existing on a spectrum goes against Kevin Lee’s concept of the “Spielberg face,” which is specific to the films of Steven Spielberg, and refers to the expressions of awe and realization worn by characters that are captured through the dolly shot. In his video essay, Lee states that expressive faces – not unlike those of the silent era – still exist today in the films of Spielberg and are vital to the creation of humanistic, empathetic films that have the power to connect with their viewers. Lee only uses Spielberg films for his analysis of the Spielberg face, and rightly so, but by limiting his research to one director, he fails to consider the pervasiveness (or lack thereof) of these cinematographic techniques in film. My spectrum of facial obscurity differs from Lee’s concept in that it encapsulates faces that are unable to express

themselves (obscured faces) in addition to those that can and must express themselves (ubiquitous faces).

Each variation of the obscured face that I am interested in holds a specific purpose to its respective narrative, whether that is to dehumanize, build anticipation, or incite fear. The obscured face must be creative or unorthodox in order to express itself. In the case of the obscured face, genre matters, as the obscured face is mainly found in science-fiction, horror, or fantasy films because of their detachment from reality, but I will cover that in more depth later. In the following section of this essay, I propose that there are three central types of obscured faces in narrative cinema, each serving a distinct purpose within their respective narratives in the way that this dehumanization takes place: the invisible face (the “face” of a character without a human or anthropomorphic form), the masked face (a human face obscured by a mask or disguise), and the revealed face (the face of one who is initially obscured/unknown but later revealed to the audience).⁴

II. Three Faces of Obscurity

Any discussion regarding the value of the obscured face in its various states of visibility will be aided by an understanding of the significance of the face in narrative cinema and how the face has been and continues to be a vital tool for communication in film. The feeling and meaning of movies are accessed through the on-screen face, the subtleties of which are best

⁴My initial categorization of obscured faces also included the veiled face, however the veil too heavily associated with gaze theory and gender politics for the purpose of this essay, therefore I have decided to exclude it from my research. If I had the space in this essay, I would expand on the connection to postcolonial theorist's work on the veil in cinema: Gilane Tawadros and David A. Bailey. *Veil: Veiling, Representation and Contemporary Art*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003; Malek Alloula, Myrna Godzich, Wlad Godzich, and Barbara Harlow, “Women from the Outside: Obstacle and Transparency,” In *The Colonial Harem*, NED-New edition., 21: 7–16. University of Minnesota Press, 1986. <https://doi.org/10.5749/j.ctttth83.5>; Hamid Naficy, “Veiled Voice and Vision in Iranian Cinema: The Evolution of Rakhshan Banietemad’s Films,” *Social Research* 67, no. 2 (Summer 2000): 559–66.

revealed through the close-up, which Mary Ann Doane describes as “one of, if not *the* most recognizable units of cinematic discourse.”⁵ In conversation with film theorists Gilles Deleuze and Béla Balázs, Doane claims that the subjectivity and autonomy of the cinematic face allows it to exist outside time and space, creating an almost dissociative experience for the viewer the world of the film is only accessible through the face. In the context of my essay, the face is not so much a device for the viewer to differentiate characters from one another but rather *a map or a language*, something to be read.

Leaving the theater, the philosopher Roland Barthes once wrote, is like “coming out of hypnosis.”⁶ Impressed upon the spectator as they exit are not the words spoken by a certain character but rather the expression on their face as they utter those words. A furrowed brow, a widening of the eyes, or an upturn of the mouth carries as much, if not more power than any series of words can communicate, and the close-up has the power to reveal those subtleties. However, the close-up does not have the power to expose the obscured face. If the close-up is meant to make the minutiae of the human face more pronounced, is the close-up essentially meaningless to the obscured face? The close-up is incapable of producing a more perceptive reading of the obscured face; without a face, the close-up provides no more intimate a perspective if the surface it shows cannot be read. In the case of the invisible face, the close-up does not even allow for a magnified view of the face, for the face is removed from the image entirely. The features of the masked face can be augmented by the close-up, but the close-up cannot prompt a more profound examination of a static façade, it can only enlarge in this instance. In *Eyes Wide Shut* (Stanley Kubrick, 1999), Bill Harford (Tom Cruise) takes a taxi to party at an exclusive mansion, where a password is required and attendees must wear a mask and

⁵Mary Ann Doane, “The Close-Up: Scale and Detail in the Cinema,” *Differences* 14, no. 3 (January 1, 2003): 90, <https://doi.org/10.1215/10407391-14-3-89>.

⁶Roland Barthes and Richard Howard, *The Rustle of Language*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1984: 345.

a cloak to conceal their identity. Upon entering, Harford is led into a ballroom where roughly a hundred masked figures are taking part in a ritual. The film then cuts to a sequence of close-ups of various masked faces, none of which reveal anything of the person behind the mask. The detail of their masks is enlarged but the mask prevents a reading of the face underneath, rendering the close-up ineffective.

Doane is, of course, recalling what Balázs contributed to our understanding of photogénie. The physiognomy of the face – the minute expressions or movements within the face – acts as a substitute for speech that according to Balázs can only be revealed through the close-up. In essence, the face says what words cannot. In his essay titled “The Face of Man,” Balázs discusses the concept of the “silent soliloquy” in relation to both sound and silent films.⁷ Faces and facial expressions have the ability to articulate themselves in a manner equitable to speech in order to convey or more eloquently communicate emotions that are too complex for words. *Wings* (William A. Wellman, 1927) features an example of this concept when small town girl, Mary Preston (Clara Bow) fears that Jack Powell, the man oblivious to her love, has gone off to war without saying goodbye. In a despondent, tearful state, Mary stares down at the photo of herself that she had intended to give to Jack to remember her by (see fig. 5). She then looks up sharply to the right of the camera where something off-screen fills her eyes with hope (see fig. 6, 7). After cutting to a long-shot of Jack getting into a car with his parents, the camera cuts back to Mary, whose hope transforms into relief, joy, and then hesitation, all using her facial expressions (see fig. 8, 9, 10). In this instance, the face goes through a rapid succession of emotions that could not be accurately conveyed in real-time using words, all in under 10 seconds.

⁷Béla Balázs. “The Creative Camera; The Close-Up; The Face of Man.” *Critical Visions in Film Theory: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, edited by Timothy Corrigan et al., Bedford/St. Martin's, 2011, 132.



Figure 5.



Figure 6.



Figure 7.



Figure 8.



Figure 9.



Figure 10.

The level of facial obscurity found in any given film is dependent on where said film lies on a spectrum of reality. For instance, documentary, biographical, and dramatic films are typically closer to reality than fantasy, science fiction, and horror films. Therefore it would be wise to conclude that an increase in reality or realistic qualities in narrative film generally correlates with a decrease in obscured faces. Documentary films often obscure faces that do not

consent to being shown on-screen through a blurring or pixelation of the face, or the entire omission of the person, leaving only the voice. The obscured face distorts reality by inhibiting realistic portrayals of humans or anthropomorphic characters; the removal of the face signals a detachment with reality, a deliberate disorientation.

The cinematic face is film-specific in that its movement is captured over time. What makes the obscured face film-specific is its ability to voice or reveal itself, which only a visual, time-based medium is capable of. The sound of a voice unaccompanied by the image of the speaker is insufficient, merely half of a whole. It is only when the spectator is able to visually pair that voice with the face of its source is the film complete and the spectator satisfied. By emphasizing the essential role of vision in understanding a film, I do not mean to discredit or downgrade the value of sound as a key component of the film experience. I am merely claiming that the film image, and more specifically the human faces shown within the image, are the primary way by which the viewer identifies with a film, thus the removal of the face creates a disconnect.

If genre and the aural elements of a film's meaning and specifically the presentness with which the viewer is asked to identify with it, then there is something unique in the absentness of the face. A key idea from sound theory will help us, ironically, to see the unseen. Michel Chion's concept of the *acousmêtre* functions as an exemplary framework by which to approach and deconstruct the obscured and revealed face. The *acousmêtre* refers to the nonvisualized voice in cinema that has yet to be personified, such as a voiceover or even an obscured face. The mystery of the *acousmêtre* comes from the inability to locate its source visually, thus it functions with "ubiquity, panopticism, omniscience, and omnipotence."⁸ In cinema, sound and image have a

⁸Michel Chion, "The *Acousmêtre*," *Critical Visions in Film Theory: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, edited by Timothy Corrigan et al., Bedford/St. Martin's, 2011, 163.

symbiotic relationship in which they are not reliant on one another but rather they complement each other; the image can exist without sound and vice versa. We are drawn by the invisibility of the acousmètre yet we long to see its anthropomorphization or personification, thus the visual inscription of the acousmètre is both feared and desired. As spectators and voyeurs, we are attracted to the obscured face in the same manner and for the same reasons that we are drawn to the acousmètre: we are both curious and hesitant towards the unknown. Norma Bates in *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960) is a classic example of an acousmatic presence who is only heard and never seen speaking. With roughly twenty minutes remaining in the film, the audience learns from the sheriff that Mrs. Bates has been dead since long before the events that occurred in the film. When Mrs. Bates is de-acousmatized, when her appearance is revealed, we see the image of her rotting corpse in a rocking chair in the basement of the Bates home (see fig. 11).



Fig. 11

If we were to borrow further here from psychoanalytic film theory, we might want to think about the desire, identification, and absence that happen when the spectator is not at risk of being “seen” by the characters on-screen. The act of looking and potentially being looked at by the characters on screen fuels a scopophilic desire within the spectator that neither the obscured face nor the acousmètre are able to as they are without faces. Where does the obscured face –

specifically the invisible and revealed face – exist if not in the image? In what way do they occupy time and space in the cinematic world? Like the acousmètre, the obscured face is omnipresent. Film is an audiovisual form, meaning it depends upon sight *and* sound to communicate with the spectator. Similar to the sense-perception of a visually impaired person, the facial obscuring of a character causes the spectator to rely on the only other sense required in the cinematic viewing experience: hearing. When our sense of sight is dulled or eliminated, our other senses are heightened. Whether through the voice of the obscured character themselves or testimonies from other characters, the spectator gathers aural knowledge of the unknown and unseen. Like the physiognomy of the face, the spectator must “read” the expressionistic qualities of the voice, including tone, cadence, and content. The spectator can come to empathize with, hate, question, etc. a character whose face is obscured through their voice or the opinions of other characters. Doane’s exploration of the absent voice, and the ways in which it is realized onscreen, precedes Chion’s concept of the acousmètre. In her essay, Doane discusses synchronization, off-screen voices, and the relationship between sound and image. “The absent voice reemerges in gestures and the contortions of the face—it is spread over the body of the actor.”⁹ Doane’s statement has led me to conclude that the face, body, and voice are variables that form an equation whereby any two can be combined to form a substitute for the third. Thus, the face and body speak where the voice cannot, the body and voice speak where the face cannot, and the voice and face speak where the body cannot. In the case of the obscured face, the body and voice communicate in place of the face. The face is valuable, but it is not essential.

⁹Mary Ann Doane, “The Voice in the Cinema: The Articulation of Body and Space,” *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: a Film Theory Reader*, edited by Philip Rosen, Columbia Univ. Press, 2008, 335.

III. Looking at a Masked Face

The unseen face in cinema materializes in two ways: through the absence of the body (acousmètre) and through first-person perspective. The invisible face differs slightly from the acousmètre in that the character is physically present in the film.¹⁰ *The Invisible Man* (James Whale, 1933) features a masked character, Griffin, voiced by Claude Rains, a prolific actor known for his performances in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939), *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz, 1943), and *Notorious* (1946). While Griffin is unidentifiable, Rains is easily recognizable by his voice. Stanley Kubrick's science-fiction epic, *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), tells the story of a group of astronauts on a mission aboard the Discovery, a spaceship controlled by supercomputer, HAL 9000. HAL is visually inscribed through number of interconnected, all-seeing red lenses, yet is primarily recognized by his voice. It is undoubtedly the voice of a human man, yet its gentle tone and calculated cadence that permeates the ship remind the audience that HAL is very much not a human. The aural anthropomorphization of HAL inscribes him as a man, another crew member aboard the ship, while the absence of a human form acousmatizes him. HAL exemplifies the acousmètre in his ability to be heard without being seen. Without a face or a body, the only way for HAL to be read is through his voice.

Interestingly, *Enter the Void* (2009) and other films shot from a first-person perspective are frequently overlooked examples of the acousmètre and are interesting for consideration here. These invisible faces occupy a physical space within the diegesis but remain absent from the film image. The camera is interacted with like a human, whose perspective is both the characters' and the spectators'. With a lack of on-screen presence, the voice acts as a stand-in to communicate information about the invisible face to the audience. Were it not for glimpses of hands or faces in

¹⁰According to Chion, the term "acousmètre" includes voice-overs and off-screen voices that are not inscribed in the film image.

mirrors, the invisible face of the first-person film may cease to exist in the image entirely; these bodies without faces are personified through the technology of the camera and sound apparatus.

And in more contrived employment of the unseen face, we have the mask. The mask has become synonymous with concealment, re-identification, anonymity; a tool to disguise or reinvent. The masked face in cinema has multiple functions depending on the genre of the film in which the masked face exists. *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) and *Friday the 13th* (1980) mask characters in order to dehumanize them, whereas *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999), and *V for Vendetta* (2005) employ the mask as a means to conceal a characters' true identity by granting them an alternative identity. The masked face has the power to incite fear and curiosity in the spectator by hiding the face from view. Characters such as Darth Vader, Michael Myers, and Ghostface have become pop culture icons despite their lack of a visible human face. It is no coincidence that the majority of films and characters mentioned originate from the horror genre – masked antagonists in horror films are horrifying due to their ubiquitous yet alien appearances; familiar but foreign, human but not. Darth Vader's helmet is black, shiny, and hard – his tough and pristine exterior merely acts as a façade not only to intimidate other characters but to keep alive a frail, dying man. After being reduced by his mask, Vader is only able to express himself through his actions and voice.

Vader's first appearance in the *Star Wars* series signifies the introduction of a truly corrupt character with evil intentions, all without the face. At the beginning of the film after a frenzied shootout resulting in the apprehension of the Tantive IV by the Imperial Star Destroyer, Vader boards the newly captured spaceship to interrogate its owner, Rebellion leader Princess Leia. His entrance is accompanied by a sharp, orchestral crescendo that leads into a menacing combination of the bass drum, gong, and French horns to create a foreboding atmosphere. As he

walks towards the camera through the lingering gunsmoke, he stands out in all-black attire surrounded by white Stormtroopers aboard a white spaceship (fig. 12). The music fades to reveal Vader's heavy, artificial breathing, indicating that Vader is very much human despite his robotic appearance. He halts and assumes a hands-on-hips power pose before assessing the casualties, physically asserting his dominance without having uttered a word (fig. 13). When Vader *does* speak not long after his entrance, his voice is robotic with a very distinguished British accent, indicating a colonial mentality/superiority. Vader's visual presence precedes his aural presence, causing the audience to make conclusions about Vader before he has the chance to speak.



Figure 12.



Figure 13.

Chion argues that the visual inscription of the acousmètre leads to a loss of power and omnipresence, yet I believe as long as the character remains effaced or impenetrable as a result of their lack of face, their acousmatic authority remains intact. The masked face is a visualized

acousmètre – not an acousmètre that has been de-acousmatized– but a voice that has been realized. The inability to interpret or pinpoint a character as a result of their effacement creates an omniscience similar to that created by the acousmètre. Without the ability to read the face, the character’s voice remains disembodied (if it has a voice). In addition, their authority within their respective narrative prevails as a result of their masked face, allowing them to remain human while removing them of their most human attribute; their foreignness and lack of humanity incites fear in both the spectator and those within the diegesis, and it is this quality of being feared that translates into power.

Where the masked face is the personification of the disembodied voice, the revealed face is the de-acousmatization of the unseen voice. A classic example of the revealed face is the Wizard in *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939). Testimonies from Glinda and the Munchkins give the Wizard a mythical quality, a holiness that builds anticipation in the audience. Dorothy’s journey to the Emerald City and the Wizard relies on the invisibility of the Wizard’s face and the omniscience created as a result. Upon their arrival to the Emerald City, Dorothy and her newly-acquainted friends are met with a thundering voice and a masked face projected on clouds of smoke (see fig. 14). “The Great and Powerful Oz,” as he introduces himself, already knows why Dorothy is there, reinforcing his power and panopticism. When she returns to Emerald City upon the completion of her mission sanctioned by the Wizard, the Wizard orders her to leave and return the next day. Dorothy is desperate to get home. While her and her friends argue with the Wizard, her dog Toto wanders towards a green curtain, pulling it back to reveal the voice behind the mask. No longer the god-like figure, the Wizard is exposed as an aging man speaking into a booming microphone while operating a number of dials and wheels to manipulate his appearance (see fig. 15). With the de-acousmatization of the Wizard comes the

end of Dorothy's journey and the loss of optimism that she will ever return home. The spectator is equally disappointed by the Wizard's true identity, as his holiness is reduced to mortality.



Figure 14.



Figure 15.

Many film characters exist in more than one category of facial obscurity, including the ones previously mentioned. Darth Vader is an example of a masked face whose identity is then revealed at the conclusion of the *Star Wars* trilogy, at which point his black helmet has become so prominent in popular culture that its removal is essentially a corruption of his identity. “The mask does not hide the face, it *is* the face.”¹¹ In the *Halloween* series, Michael Myers' austere white mask is essential to the audience's identification of his character, and the film's premise relies on both the characters and the audience not knowing Myers' visual appearance. Masked or invisible faces can become revealed faces once their mask is taken off or their voice is de-acousmatized. The categories of obscured faces are not rigid, but allow for some crossover that can only occur with a visual, time-based medium like film.

The decrease in facial visibility in film and digital media in the late 20th and early 21st centuries correlates with a desire for anonymity and a declining emphasis on the face as a

¹¹Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987, 115.

communication device. As a result, the ubiquitous face of the silent film era has become obsolete. While the faces of silent film were accessible and transparent, many of the cinematic faces today are invisible, masked, or otherwise elusive to reflect a world in which identity and appearance are undermined by hypervisibility. The obscured face is indicative of a world in which having a human face is no longer compulsory or essential in order to participate in digital media, whether that be film and television, YouTube videos, music, or social media.

The face serves as a vital tool for information and conversation with the power to overcome language, class, and cultural barriers. “The face [acts] as a visible threshold to the domain of communication, and ultimately to a practice of ethics.”¹² In a modern world where face-to-face interactions are being traded for face-to-screen interactions via text messaging and social media, the face may appear less important than ever, however advancements in technology and a need for increasingly resilient forms of security have transformed the face into a valuable asset. Facial recognition technologies – or *biometrics* – have been fully integrated into daily life to the point of passivity.¹³ Just as swiping credit cards is being phased out in favor of inserting the more secure EMV chips, technology companies such as Apple, Samsung, and Huawei have mass marketed facial recognition technology to access smart phones in lieu of the now archaic password. Social media platforms including Facebook and Snapchat have acquired face

¹²Jennifer González, “The Face and the Public: Race, Secrecy, and Digital Art Practice,” *Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies* 24, no. 1 (2009): 55, <https://doi.org/10.1215/02705346-2008-014>.

¹³For more information regarding biometrics, I offer these readings: Ruud Bolle and Sharath Pankanti, *Biometrics, Personal Identification in Networked Society: Personal Identification in Networked Society*, Edited by Anil K. Jain, Norwell, MA, USA: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1998; Kelly Gates, *Our Biometric Future: Facial Recognition Technology and the Culture of Surveillance*, NYU Press, 2011, <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/11103>; Mathew Kabatoff and John Daugman, “Pattern Recognition: Biometrics, Identity and the State—An Interview with John Daugman,” *BioSocieties* 3, no. 1 (March 2008): 81–86. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1745855208005966>; Lisa S. Nelson, *America Identified: Biometric Technology and Society*, MIT Press, 2011, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5hhdbdr>; S. Prabhakar, S. Pankanti, and A. K. Jain, “Biometric Recognition: Security and Privacy Concerns,” *IEEE Security Privacy* 99, no. 2 (March 2003): 33–42, <https://doi.org/10.1109/MSECP.2003.1193209>; Whither Biometrics Committee, National Research Council Staff, Joseph N. Pato, Computer Science and Telecommunications Board Staff, Division on Engineering and Physical Sciences Staff, and Lynette I. Millett, *Biometric Recognition: Challenges and Opportunities*, Washington, D.C., United States: National Academies Press, 2010, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ucsc/detail.action?docID=3378701>.

recognition abilities in an effort to expand their capabilities. The ability to hide or alter one's identity on the internet and social media, while beneficial in some sense, presents an unexplored set of ethical questions that relate to privacy, surveillance, and security. Advanced surveillance systems in Britain and China use facial recognition technology to monitor citizens in schools, sporting events, workplaces, and in public places to prevent crime. The United States is no different, where mass surveillance has become the norm in a post-9/11 world. In an era of increased technology and hypervisibility, power and authority come from anonymity; suddenly, to obscure the face is a political act of resistance.

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