# MASK, MIRROR, VESSEL...
# HYPOSTASES OF THE ARTISTIC TRANSMISSION

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*Abstract : Three metaphor-objects could define the traditional relationship between the performer and the audience: mask, mirror and vessel. They occasion an incursion in the history of culture and a survey on the mentality surrounding performers and mainly actors. Some remnants of the rituals related to the transmission of Art forms and their mystical references were and still are accompanying the direct artistic reception.*

*Keywords: actors, masks, mirror, vessel, intermediaries, presentation-representation*

Any study on traditional Art, from anywhere is accompanied by the description of a ritual, a set of norms and, sometimes is reduced to a symbolic projection. In numerous cultures the relating on living phenomena as plays, musical displays or feasts is almost always completed by non-artistic elements, playing the role of guide or establishing an exemplar pattern to be followed. Besides the „technical" messenger, viz. actor or performer, one can find other intermediary entities, which are often more thorough described than the event itself. In the pre-historical cultures, the frontiers among Art and healing rituals, for instance were more dynamic and less delineated. The ancient depictions of Art events are following a general model wherein the intermediary entities play a significant role, whether they have or not to deal with the artistic fact *per se*. We propose a brief incursion in that peculiar cultural time, where the actor was not just an actor, but also a special intermediary; to which occasion we shall pull out three of the symbols which are defining its supplementary role: the mask, the mirror and the vessel.

The intermediary, whether man, object or ritual had several functions: concealing, explanation, deviation, disguising, sublimation, reflection and, not the least, playing the role of bridge between receiver and collective memory. He or it stood at the border between the real and virtual world, namely a transcendental realm, where the non-initiated had no inconsequential access. The actor, in a broad sense is occupying a special place, put a special suit and is moving in an ad-hoc environment. The props items that are surrendering the display had the function to divert and to hide. These elements came from a time of magic rituals, which were, and still are more or less consciously evoked in every performance. The ritual dances and their accompanying ornaments have had once the role of communicators, not just between author and audience, but also between gods and men.

In many cultures the actors could behave and act in those ways, which are forbidden to the „normal" members of the society. The *Genus irritabile vatum*[1] many times profited and even forced such privileges. In almost every part of the Earth (Greece, Japan, Iran etc.) the

[1] *Genus irritabile vatum* (lat.) = The irritable race of poets. (Horace)



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actors mainly, but also some other categories of artists began to differ from the average people by clothing, masks, accessories[2]. All forms of spiritual display used special outfits and the select people often were isolated (physically or just symbolically). The traditional societies were, and still are adding more accentuated accessories to the performers, as special tattoos. Not only the ritual performances but the implicit disclosures of magic or healing powers are conditioned, especially in these communities, by the alteration of the normal sensorial perceptions too. Trans, delirium, swoon are sometimes artificially induced by the ingestion of substances, expected to detach them from the normal condition. Sometimes such amendment of normality granted credit for the authenticity of the illuminate's powers.

Often the mask (*persona*) continued to follow the actor offstage too. The attribute of mythical typology and the aura of accentuated personalities conferred to actors an exceptional status which led to both social isolation and indulgence. The periods of dances, feasts, carnivals, Saturnalia etc. etc. benefited also from relaxations of the average social norms. Then, all, or almost all was permitted. „Who breaks the (group) rules is habitually exposed to severe sanctions or, at least to public reprobation. But when the fight or the dance time arrives, other norms appear; the prohibited gestures and actions are now bringing glory and prestige, yet with the condition that they will be accomplished in the frame of some etiquette and only accompanied by ritual practices meant to sanctify or disguise them"[3]. The Christian epoch of the Roman Empire, and the early Middle Age were periods where the theatre was forbidden and the actors were prosecuted until being deprived of some civil rights[4]. Nevertheless, even in these very strict circumstances, there were still to be found forms of dramatic performance, especially by ambulant troupes. In the history there were some moments when the actors were adulated by the crowd and even had some powers. The actors and musicians were for the most anonymous, with few exceptions. In many regions occurred feasts more or less licit as the *Feast of Fulls* (tolerating blasphemies and disrespect for the High Clergy) or the *Soties* (short satirical plays, sometimes together with parades). The status of exception sometimes brought also advantages to the actors. In the 13th century, Louis IX the Saint, King of France permitted to ambulant actors or circus troupes („les montreurs des singes") to cross the bridge between Notre-Dame and the Saint Jacques district in Paris without paying as everyone else had to do; they had just to exhibit animals, to juggle, to guess fortune etc.

The abnormality as condition for accessing metaphysic inspiration was not just the exclusive attribute of art performers. Obscure wires connected to the deep prehistory have perpetuated the relationship between anomaly and the other world, as the sensorial integrity and the opening to social normality would jeopardize the communication with the divine inspiration. An extreme representation of this can be seen in Borges' *Brodie's Report*:

"Each male child born is subjected to careful examination; if certain stigmata (which have not been revealed to me) are seen, the boy becomes king of the Yahoos. Immediately

[2] **Vito Pandolfi**: *The History of the Universal Theatre*, Vol. I, Ed. Meridiane, 1971, pp. 54 and following
[3] **Roger Caillois:** *Man and Sacre* (Romanian translation) Ed. Nemira, 1997, p. 187
[4] **Jennifer Wise & Walker Craig**: *The Broadview Anthology of Drama: Plays from the Western Theatre*, Vol. 1, Broadview Press, Toronto, 2003, p. 184



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upon his elevation he is gelded, blinded with a fiery stick, and his hands and feet are cut off, so that the world will not distract him from wisdom".

The sensorial obstruction as a condition to receive illumination explains also the social mutilation, viz. the hermits' reclusion from the world. Some remaining of the identification of the infirmity with a mystical status continued during the European Middle Age and later. The midgets and deformed people had a privileged status at the Court of the King of Spain; they had any permission, even to blasphemy or to insult the King. They were called „*gracioso*", meaning „who received the grace of God". An astonishing archaic remanence maintained on the lyric stages a unique character in the European social patterns: the *castrati*. A real mutilation, hard to explain today, created these emasculated singers, which existed even until the 19th century. They replaced the forbidden feminine voice. The absolute interdiction for the women to go on stage was quasi-universal: in the traditional Japanese *Noh* theatre, in the Greek Antiquity and following, in Europe until the modern times. Such rules are recalling a former reflex to protect the sacred spaces from the impurity of the women. The masks and the transvestites already pointed up the symbolic rejection of the natural; a real mutilation reinforced an atavism. It confirms the perception of the stage as a mystical place, which confers to artists the special power to seize those messages hidden to the average human gentry. The castrated were the first stars, in the contemporary sense of the term and continued to sing, and to be the audience's idols even after the women received the permission to go on stage too. This phenomenon symbolically provided the sacrifice of mutilation in the sacred space of the stage, where other rules were governing. The lure for the castrated in the 18$^{th}$ century, victims of a practice yet incompatible with the civilization of time, is proving the psychological dimension of the threshold between stage and average world.

The man wearing a mask is no more a man, nor an interlocutor: he becomes a symbol of an exemplary fragment of the humanity. *Persona*, for Carl Gustav Jung, is a "social archetype". The present-day individual looks for the projection of the ego in the ancestral collectivity. The masks lasted many centuries, from the beginning of the early "goat songs" in Hellas and their equivalents in the Eastern culture (e.g. *nu-o* masks in China or *gi-gaku* masks in Japan), from the healing dances of the Northern Shamans until the pagan remainders of the pre-historical feasts of the solstices which can be found by the Christmas period in some regions in Romania. The masked man retrieved the exception of his condition, lacking identity and responsibility. The artist had to be different, in order to be worth for accessing the realm of the goods and had to look different, so that anyone could be aware of this. The mask sealed the non-human compound of the artistic performance. It did not disappear from particular cultural displays as the *Noh* Theatre (Japan) and still persists in many social rituals keeping the mark of syncretism, in the behaviours and garments of the contemporary public space actors. When the consensus and representativeness are lost, the mask returns to just a piece of cardboard.

Another object wich, similarly with the mask does not present, but represents is the mirror. The difference lies in the fact that the mask symbolises the essence of a collectivity while the mirror represents the apparent shape of the onlooker. Both mask and mirror (*persona* and *speculum*) are symbolizing the transformation of the person in a representative of the collective unconscious.



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Initially, *Speculum* signified "visibility", "transparency" and "place destined to look". Later it designated the object mirror, which overturns the sense: it does not permit the eyes to pass through, but returns the regard. The term gets also the figurate meaning of image, icon, face, symbolically returning to a frame whereby you see. The ancient *speculum* was, actually, a special mirror through which the antiques studied the stars, and therefore it ends to receive the attribute of intermediary between sky and earth. Hence, the term *speculatio* is a projection in the ideas' world, an intermediary between different categories, implying freedom of reasoning but also ambiguity of interpretation. Another word for an intellectual action coming from a similar source is "to consider": *sidus* meant constellation, star. "Speculation" and "Consideration" are both coming from the study of stars reflected in mirrors. The mirror – reflective surface and as well gate between worlds – underlies a notably rich symbolism[5].

The mirror is present in every form of the human imaginary: from the cosmological myths, until superstitions; from rituals, to domestic taboos. In the Far East, in the Japanese tradition, the mirror links man to truth and purity. The solar mirror of the *Amaterasu*[6] Goddess pulls out the Divine Light from the cavern and reflects it over the world. *Yama*, the Indo-Buddhist sovereign of the Death Empire, used a Karma mirror for judging. In China, the Qin dynasty was told to possess a magic mirror to be shown the Truth, and the Taoism considered the octagonal mirror as an intermediary between the square mirror of the earth and the round mirror of the sky. This concept conferred magical powers to the mirror and, consequently, it created widespread domestic habits all around the country. The mirror is the multiplication of the sacred image in the *Veda* and divine mediator for the Siberian Shamans[7].

Interestingly enough, when going westwards the mirror begins to get trouble attributes: from go-between Deity and mankind it turns into an obstruction and an instrument of delusion. For the antique Greeks, the physical reflection is only an indirect access to knowledge. Plato compared the human soul with a mirror, considering that the real forms are just images (masks) of a superior reality. The Christian tradition treats the mirror alike the mask: a banished instrument, tool of vanity, which is hiding the true essence of the human person. The heart of the believer is the unique (right) mirror to reflect God's true image, hidden by other earthly means of reflection. The mirror became the symbol of vanity and frivolity, linking men and especially women to the ephemeral side of things. The visual imagery in Middle Age and Renaissance often exposes the theme of the woman looking in the mirror, while Death or a demon is standing close. It is remarkable the painting of Hans Baldung Grien (c.1484-1545), *Death and Love*, representing a young woman looking in the mirror, surrounded by allegoric characters, among which the Death, holding a clepsydra above the woman's head. The same theme is treated by Hieronymus Bosch (1450-1516) too, in rather same epoch (about 1500); just that in Bosch's painting a hidden demon is present near the woman's mirror. For the mentality of those times, the mirror was related to two deadly sins: pride (*superbia*) paired with the demon Lucifer and lust (*luxuria*) attached to the demon Asmodeus.

[5] **Jean Chevalier, Alain Gheerbrant**: *Dictionary of symbols* (Rom. translation) Ed. Artemis, 1995, pag. 369

[6] Lit. „the shining of the sky" (Jap.)

[7] **Veronica Gaspar**: *Enchantment – Exorcism (Incântare/Descântare). An essay on the perception of music and magic in the social imaginary*, Ed. Libra, 2004, pp. 11-12



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Descending in the minor practice, the shards of mirror are part of the clothing of some Siberian Shamans and, probably this might be the origin of the custom of the Russian population in North-eastern Moldova to decorate the walls of the houses with mirror debris. There are beliefs universally spread, from the remote villages in the Eastern Europe until the South-Eastern Asia considering that one can harm a man if the water which reflects him is troubled. A bad sign is seen almost everywhere when a mirror is broken. In the Romanian mythology the mirror is close to (and sometimes inter-changeable with) the water. In the "mirror waters" the young girls are supposed to see the future husband's face (in a special year time and after a specific incantation)…

The mask and the mirror – artist and audience are symbolizing the erratic frontier between individuals and their projection in the community mental. The mask – as concretization of the abnormal condition of the actor and the mirror – as gate between existence and essence are in the same time embodying the de-personalization and the metamorphosis from living man to representative. The harlequin, the doll, the „shadow-duty man" (*kage-mu-sha*) passed from the ancestral status, endowed with grace, to become the representative of a more or less numerous community. For the performer from today or yesterday, the real task was, and still is just the role to play conformingly and to reflect just the right image.

*Kagemusha* (影武者), wrongly translated „Shadow Warrior" is a 1980 film by Akira Kurosawa. It is about an ordinary thief who happens to resemble to a grand aristocrat. The latter dies, a fact that the family must hide for political and military reasons. So, the thief is hired to play the role of a grand senior. His duty is to be an image, a depersonalized mask, a shadow. The plot follows the process of the gradual identification of the shadow-man with his role, a psychological drama in the middle of the real historical drama of the wars between the Japanese grand families in the 16th century.

An artist is supposed to reflect emotions (fear, sadness, revolt, curiosity, exhilaration) and to be the magic mirror to reflect as well a whole community as any individual person from the audience. All the more, the performer of words, gestures or sounds is the main link between the audience and what this is expecting to hear or to see. In other words, the traditional performer, as shown by almost all mythologies or ancient references on art, is supposed to accomplish the role of messenger. The personal contributions, if any, are allowed only if they can be taken as results of some occult or mystical revelation. Especially in the Middle East and the North-Eastern Africa, the performer is seen as just a recipient to pour the inspiration in. A poem of Rumi[8] is eloquently illustrating this perception: "We are (just) the flute; the music comes from Thee, my Lord"[9].

A peculiar musical-choreographic phenomenon, which occurred from the end of the 18th century in Bessarabia, and extended in the neighbour area, Moldova, Northern Transylvania, Ukraine and Poland was the *klezmer*, a mix of songs and dances initially hold by bands of Ashkenazy Jewish fiddlers. The term "klezmer" is a Hebrew composed word: *kli*, meaning "tool" or "utensil" and *zemer*, meaning "to make music"; leading to *k'li zemer* [ כְּלִי

[8] Jalāl ad-Dīn Muhammad Rūmī was a 13th-century Persian poet, jurist, Islamic scholar, theologian, and Sufi mystic

[9] **Jean Chevalier, Alain Gheerbrant**: *op. cit.* Vol. II, p. 58



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זֶמֶר], literally "vessels of song". These "vessels for music" created a specific way to play, to sing, to dance and to melt any musical influence they could find from the local tradition. In the same way as the Western artists' bands, who endured restrictions and persecution during the Middle Age, these fiddlers have attracted the opprobrium of the Jewish religious leaders, exactly because the profound laic compound of their art and also because the mixture with the musical "impurities" borrowed from the non-Jewish cultures. The heretical "vessels" were not open just for the tradition, which was supposed to come from a divine inspiration; instead they took influences from Russians, Hungarian and, especially, Romanian. Starting from the 19th century, they added also Western style music in fashion to their repertoire. The *klezmer* musicians were adapted for any circumstances: from religious events in the Mosaic community until popular celebrations, parties, baptisms or weddings, no matter the ethnicity or the religion of the employer. At the beginning of the 20th century not only the music, but also the composition of the bands became mixed, accepting Gypsy, Russian and Romanian members of those formations that remained uncovered by the massive Jewish emigration to America. The exaggerate adaptability of the artists of this genre led to its decline and, finally extinction. The causes are multiple and enough complex: from the wide-spreading of the radio until the penetration of the classical Western-style music, which conquered the most part of the Jewish musicians[10]. The *klezmer* is persisting today in the United States and Canada, employing professional musicians and, little by little, they return back to the initial Yiddish musical culture, acting almost exclusively in the American Jewish communities.

One cannot affirm that the transmission in the contemporary art is totally exempt of ritual remnants. In the same way, it is hard to believe that the ancient performers were not motivated by the affirmation of their own personality. The strengthening of the cultures and their subsequent specialization led to the detachment of art forms from the initial mystic-magic conglomerate. The analogies, symbolism and behaviour changed progressively, allowing just sporadically a glimpse to the ancient value systems. Still, from time to time some lost behaviours rise to the surface, informing especially the artist-audience relationship. The contemporary rock stars, for instance are creating a ritualized symbiosis with the audience and even their personal life reaches and even exceeds the average social norms. One can ask if a star could arrive at the highest level of popularity if he would be a happy married man, without any vice and living a well-ordered life. That might happen only if he would find a special inspiration; that sends to the finding of a source of lighting inaccessible to the average mankind. Among the allegoric objects symbolizing the relationship performer-audience, the mask and the mirror can be found hidden under different shapes. Only the artist-vessel, meaning a neutral intermediary, without personal reactions still exists just as a metaphor, or as a wish-dream of the authors….

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