

BETWEEN LIFE AND DEATH: ON THE ART OF MASK-MAKING

Elisa Segnini
Western University

64

The art of the mask carver lies in creating an inanimate object which can be imbued with life (Irvine 1994: 145).

The mask is generally understood as a theatrical or ritualistic object that hides and reveals. Yet the term “mask” also describes a form of portraiture that, as in the case of death masks, is the result of practices such as molding and casting. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth century, masks were used by physiognomists, phrenologists and criminal anthropologists as tools to study possible correspondences between physical features and moral characteristics, as well as by artists as tools for sculpture and portraiture. As Paul Vitry, curator of the Louvre, argued in an article published in 1903, a change occurred in European art at the beginning of the twentieth century as the mask ceased to be considered an intermediary step for building sculptures or an architectural detail and became an independent aesthetic object. Vitry examines the masks created by contemporary French and Belgian artists such as Rodin, Carriès, Bourdelle, De Rudder. Some of these masks, as in the case of De Rudder, play with the ambiguity between casting and molding; others, such as those of Carriès, simultaneously mimic death masks, gothic masks and the grotesque demon-masks of Japanese Noh.

While in art the mask became an independent sculpture, in European folklore it remained associated with carnival. In addition, interest in Asian theatrical performances such as the Javanese dances and the Japanese Noh, in which masks played an important role, triggered a reflection on the origins of western theatre and inspired thoughts about the ill-defined boundaries between ritual and performance.¹ The different uses of the mask as a theatrical, decorative, ritualistic object, as well as the

application of its use in physiognomic practices, merge in the visual and literary imagination at the beginning of the twentieth century, when the mask, through a process of cross-cultural syncretism, acquires a complex symbolic value. This analysis considers the theme of mask-making as illustrated in the work of James Ensor, in two plays by Fernand Crommelynck and Kido Okamoto, in a screenplay by Abel Gance and a series of sculptures by Auguste Rodin. I examine how, in all these works, the mask functions primarily as an aesthetic object, rather than as a theatrical prop, and argue that, as the theatrical potential is supplanted by an aesthetic function, the mask is associated with an act of violence and becomes a magical, ritualistic object that reflects the threshold of life and death.

Chinese and Japanese masks, masks of the Carnival tradition and of the *Commedia dell'Arte* are frequent motifs in the paintings of the Belgian artist James Ensor. Among numerous examples, some of the most prominent are *Chinoiserie* (1907), *Skeletons in the Studio* (1900), and *Le Grand Juge* (1898). Curiously, while masks in the tradition of the Belgian Carnival symbolize the renewal of life, in these paintings they are associated with images of death. Japanese and Chinese masks decorated Ensor's grandmother's boutique in Ostend, while Noh masks, along with Japanese prints, were exhibited in the *Compagnie Japonaise* in the Rue Royale in Brussels (Tricot 2008: 161). Like his contemporaries, Ensor did not hesitate to compare local and exotic masks, but instead of considering Eastern artifacts as means to explore the original function of European masks, he chose to draw a sharp line between the two. In a lecture given in 1937, he underlines the playful side of carnival masks and attributes a negative connotation to African and Asian artifacts, which are described as tokens of criminal and deathly actions:

Que dire des origines troubles, louches, cachées, du masque d'Afrique.
Que dire des péchés capitaux et des crimes couvés et commis sous le masque, couverts par le masque. Aux siècles d'esclavage, masque signifiait lâcheté, dissimulation, criminalité, crapulerie, égoïsme, exploitation, impunité, duperie, fuite, détraquement, cruauté, satanisme, morsures, griffes et féminités. Du masque au fard, il n'y a pas loin. Je condamne sans rémission le masque mal venu des enfers d'Afrique, d'Asie, d'Océanie, de Meurtricie, de Sommeille, de Cracozie....
Voyez, goûtez nos masques ostendais. Oui, ils évoluent aux quatre vents de l'esprit habillés de tendresse, corsés de jolieses, pourprés, azurés, nacrés, coquillés, huîtres, surmoulés, rayés, turbotés, barbus, stockfischés, schollés, gaminés, farcis de fantaisie, ils s'en donnent à cœur joie. Adorable mascarade, couleurs cinglantes, gammes et jardins d'amour, chants de bourdons, chocs de cristaux, cloches sur le peau. Oui, notre carnaval est chaud. (Tricot 2008: 162)²

The idea of the dual significance of the mask, as a familiar device symbolizing the renewal of life, and as a token of alterity associated with death and violence, can be found in Fernand Crommelynck's *Le Sculpteur des masques*. A verse version of this play was published in 1906 in the magazine *En Art*, but the Belgian dramatist chose to re-write it in prose after an encounter with Ensor in Ostend, in 1908. According to Bettina Knapp, Crommelynck had the occasion to observe several of Ensor's paint-

ings, including his *Entry of Christ in Brussels* (1888), which had a strong impact on his imagination (1978: 41). Knapp goes as far as calling Crommelynck's plays a "transposition" of Ensor's works, and enumerates several similarities between the styles of the two artists, among which the emphasis on the grotesque, the setting in undefined space and time, the lighting effects which, by falling on the masks, highlight the ambiguity between ornaments and theatrical props (41). She sees in the store of Crommelynck's mask-maker a recreation of Ensor's studio in Ostend, and argues that, for both Ensor and Crommelynck, the mask represents an instrument of caricature that underlines the hypocrisy of society, adding that, "as in the Japanese Noh," it separates "the inchoate from the formed, the unconscious from the conscious" (45). In addition, she quotes Ensor as he establishes a link between masks and power: "I have joyously shut myself up in the solitary domain where the mask holds sway, wholly made up of violence, light and brilliance" (Knapp 1978: 43).

66 The violence inherent in the process of mask-making constitutes the main theme of Crommelynck's play. *Le Sculpteur des masques* is set in a small town in Flanders, against the background of carnival celebrations, and revolves around a mask-maker, Pascal, who lives with his wife Louison and her younger sister Magdeleine. He is described as a choleric, fear-inducing man, the thinness of whose figure is compared to the corpse of a dead animal, and whose enthusiasm for life and beauty is related to darker passions. Looking at the masks, the village coffin-maker underlines the connection between Pascal's profession and his own: "Je travaille pour la douleur et vous travaillez pour la joie, oui..." "Mais nous sommes voisins..." "Oui, et ceux qui viennent chez vous viendront aussi chez moi" (258).³ Pascal, who can bear no sadness around him, chases him away. He also forbids the doctor to stop in front of his door, claiming that his home is the realm of eternal carnival.

Pascal has "the expressive face of an actor," but we are told that, at times, his face becomes "totally expressionless" and his features freeze, transformed into a mask (253). The members of the community dislike him and look at his sculptures with suspicion because they recognize that they are modeled after their own features. In front of the masks, a young man, Cadot, recognizes the villagers one by one, associating the portraits with moral characteristics. Magdeleine quickly denies any resemblance, betraying an anxiety that there may be something indecent in this display of virtue and vice:⁴

...Cadot s'arrête devant les masques qui ornent les murs. Il rit si fort que Louison et Magdeleine se retournent.

CADOT: Oh! Oh! Celui-ci, c'est le potier du quai de la Main Noire!

MAGDELEINE: Mais non...

CADOT: C'est lui, oui. Celui-là était tellement saoul en suivant la procession qu'il éteignait son cierge avec le vent de son nez!

Devant un autre masque

Ici c'est la petite Pauline qui pleure quand je l'embrasse et qui dit 'Mon Dieu!...Mon Dieu!...' 'Et voici Ochs, le vieux Ochs, si avare qu'il a peur de ses deux mains...C'est lui! (247)⁵

Implicit in the narrative is the belief that it is possible to define abstract qualities, such as a person's character, faults and inclinations, on the basis of facial features. Pascal attributes to his art the status of a science for the precision with which it allows him to know the human soul, and does not hesitate to inform the doctor of the superiority of mask-making over medicine. He boasts: "Dites à vos malades que je les guérirai! Je leur montrerai des choses qu'ils n'ont jamais vues...Je leur montrerai des choses inventées par des hommes qui étaient des hommes—et la vie leur reviendra!" (253)⁶

The idea that physical features correspond to mental and moral qualities is but a short step away from the belief that, through an analysis of facial traits, we can predict what will likely be a person's future, a divinatory power that has always been associated with physiognomic portraits.⁷ In the tradition of Lavater, Pascal reproduces and interprets the features of man; yet he goes even further as he dreams of modifying and multiplying them, finding "legends and stories" for each of his masks, rewriting the villagers' lives with biographies of his own invention (39). In this light, his sculptures function as simulacra that efface the reality they were modeled after.⁸

67

Like a fairy tale ogre, Pascal is hungry for beautiful things, and he is willing to make use of violence and appropriation to realize his desires. With the excuse that he has a right to "Everything that is beautiful and alive" (44), he seduces the young Magdeleine. When the people in the village become aware of the adultery and react by either avoiding the house or by vandalizing it, he is repeatedly called a "sorcerer" and compared to Bluebeard, the fairy tale character who murders his wives.

After discovering the affair, Louison falls ill. Her conditions rapidly worsen, but she refuses to address the source of her grief, thereby torturing both her sister and husband with guilt. Pascal tells Magdeleine how, after helping Louison up after a fall, he held her face in his hands and imagined that it would leave on his flesh an imprint, "comme le visage de Jésus sur le linge de sainte Véronique" (301).⁹

His comparison of his wife's grieving features to Christ's miraculous effigy underlines Louison's role as a sacrificial victim, and marks the beginning of a process of reduction of the person to a fragmentary portrait that exposes her inner feelings. At the end of the second act, Pascal confesses to Magdeleine his hatred for Louison and his violent impulses against her: "Oh! Parfois, je la hais! J'ai envie de la détruire, d'être sur elle, à guetter sa mort, avec mes deux mains à son cou!" (293).¹⁰ Almost according to his wishes, Louison disappears from the stage in the third act, but her figure is substituted and multiplied by the masks secretly carved by her husband. When he is certain of his wife's imminent death, Pascal discloses the masks modeled after Louison and uses them to terrify Magdeleine, who draws back in fear. At the end of the first act, Pascal had pointed at Louison, collapsed on the floor after seeing him on his knees in front of her sister: "Mais c'est Louison!...C'est Louison! Je te dis que c'est elle!" (263).¹¹ In the third act, similar words are used by Pascal to indicate the masks scattered on the work bench: "C'est elle, il n'y a pas à dire non. C'est elle. Son visage de tristesse, son visage de silence!..C'est Louison, oui...Son visage de doute, de soupçon; son visage de douleur...C'est bien elle..." (307)¹²

Pascal's masks function as a series of simulacra that effectively substitute his wife. By multiplying her features, they assure her survival beyond death, yet by portraying her agony and reducing her to a fragment, they associate mask-making with an act of violence. This reduction is metonymically echoed by the images of decapitations in the carnival parade that takes place during Louison's agony (312-318).¹³ When Louison's death is announced, Pascal attempts to hide the effigies, but drunken revelers burst into the house, discover the artifacts and carry them away along with other masks. Since they depict Louison's agony and are disclosed at the moment of her death, these sculptures can be considered death masks. As they are worn by the revelers in the parade, a change of function takes place, as the death masks, from decorative objects, turn into theatrical props.

On the one hand Pascal, in carving a mask of the dying Louison and giving it to the revelers to wear during the carnival celebrations, introduces death into the cheerful atmosphere of the Belgian Carnival. On the other, his increasing madness and exaltation lead him to believe that he has defied death through the power of creation. When Magdeleine hysterically announces her sister's death, Pascal remains calm and laughs, claiming that the effigies have acquired life and thereby completing the identification of Louison with her fragmentary portrait:

MAGDELEINE *paraît et disparaît*: Pascal! Morte, Pascal! Morte!

PASCAL, *très calme*: Tu dis ça, toi...mais je sais bien qu'elle est partie danser...[il rit].

Elle est partie avec Cador; je viens de la voir partir...Elle dansera toute la nuit...Je l'ai vue, je te dis, moi...Il ne faut pas rire... (320)¹⁴

Worn in the context of the Carnival dances, the same masks that have terrified Magdeleine acquire a comical, grotesque, connotation. Crommelynck's play, unlike Ensor's canvasses, has no explicit reference to the exotic artifacts that, in these years, were exciting the imagination of Belgian artists. Yet the awe for masks, their aesthetic as well as theatrical function, the ambivalence of tragic and comic traits and the important role of dance all call to mind a parallel with the Japanese Noh. As in the Japanese tradition, Crommelynck's masks stand close to the ones used in ritual dances and are handled carefully as objects endowed with power.¹⁵ Pascal dreams of writing a story for each of his masks also recalls the Japanese Noh, where masks are used to evoke characters divided into fixed categories and appearing in a number of plays. Ten years later, Yeats writes of a similar project in the preface to *Four Plays for Dancers*, a work strongly influenced by Noh: "I shall hope for a number of typical masks, each capable of use in several plays. The face of the speaker should be as much a work of art as the lines that he speaks or the costume that he wears....Perhaps in the end one would write plays for certain masks" (Yeats V). Moreover, the setting of Crommelynck's play during the carnival celebration and the idea of the mask as a liminal object at the threshold of life and death calls to mind folk performances such as Kagura, from which Noh derives. In these agrarian rites, which at the beginning of the century were still performed in rural Japan, the mask of a young woman or of

a child often represents a receptacle for a spirit (see Hoass 1982: 82-4).

The sense of awe for the mask as a vessel for the otherworldly is also evoked in the contemporary Kabuki play *Shuzen-ji Monogatari* ("The Mask Maker"), by Kido Okamoto.¹⁶ The play premiered in Tokyo in 1909 and was performed in Paris, in translation, in 1922. As Zoë Kincaid points out in the introduction to the English translation, *The Mask Maker* reflects the importance of masks in Japanese culture, where "craftsmen who carved masks have always been regarded with reverence" and where "the mask from ancient times has been regarded as divine, something belonging to the gods" (Kincaid 1928: 4). She notes that the reverence for the mask is represented in the Japanese Noh, where the actor "regards his mask-treasures as he would his life" and "bows respectfully before his mask when it is taken out of a lacquer box or brocade bag to be worn during a performance" (4).

Okamoto's drama is set in the Japanese village of Izu and tells the story of Yashao, a mask-maker who lives in the early period of the Shogunate. The play opens with the description of the artist's boutique, where the masks are "arranged on the shelves, and hung on the walls" (Kido 1).¹⁷ The mask-maker's daughters are helping with the work, just as Magdeleine and Louison do. Yashao's older daughter, Katsura, complains about her task and wishes that her father had a more honorable profession, while the younger, Kayede, proudly defends her father's trade.

The commander of the Japanese army, a great Shogun, is hiding from his enemies in a monastery close to the village. He has given to Yashao the task of carving a mask of himself to be handed down to future generations but, after months, Yashao is still dissatisfied with his work. Impatient with the delay, the Shogun comes to the artist's house and threatens him with death if he will not deliver the mask. Yashao excuses himself by arguing that the making of a mask requires time and special abilities. He explains: "I make masks, giving life to a rough block of wood, giving it the semblance of man, woman, angel, man-eating yasha, infusing into it the spirit of goodness, wickedness, righteousness, or unrighteousness. When the whole energy of mind and body is concentrated in both arms, and the spirit poured like water into the lifeless wood, the mask is shaped. The work is begun, but whether the power persists cannot be told" (7).

When the mask is taken out of the box, the Shogun and his helpers are favorably impressed by the resemblance, but Yashao repeats stubbornly that the mask reveals only an image of death:

YORIIYE: You are worthy to be called Yashao of Izu—I am more than satisfied!

YASHAO: Pardon Lord! Look at it closely—it is a mask of death!

GORO: Man, what do you mean?

YASHAO: During many years, I have made masks of the living! But here is the face of one dead!

GORO: I do not understand! I do not agree!

YASHAO: It is not the visage of a living man! The eyes are fixed in hatred, a wraith or ghost, as if cursing (10-11).

The Shogun does not pay attention to the warning; he is distracted by Yashao's elder daughter, who is impatient to leave her father's house and accepts to follow him.

After a brief romance, the monastery is attacked by the Shogun's opponents. In the attempt to save her beloved, Katsura wears her father's masks to impersonate him and encourages the enemies to strike her. Mortally wounded, she walks back to her father's house with the blood stained mask and begins to tell her story. "My lord was taking his bath, when the forces of Kamakura began the attack unexpectedly," she reports. "Our side were few in number, but fought desperately. I covered my face with this mask to deceive the enemy, and suffer death in my lord's stead. In the dim light, I ran to the court, weapon in hand, and cried out, 'Here is the grand shogun Yoriye!' Running out of the palace grounds, all followed me, thinking me to be Yoriye!" (24).

As Katsura is finishing her story, a messenger arrives and announces that the Shogun has been assassinated. Kayede laments that her sister has sacrificed herself in vain. She desperately cries, "Father, she is dying!" But Yashao, like Pascal, laughs at death. Relieved, he comments: "I thought I was unskilled and clumsy. With death appearing on the mask, every time I carved—I now understand...the grand Shogun was doomed to end his life in this way. Providence only can foretell one's destiny, but his fate was revealed through my work" (26).

Just as in Crommelynck's play, Yashao's masks cease to be a static portrait only once, as they are worn and used as a form of disguise that is meant to betray, rather than reveal. Yet the masks' divinatory power is reaffirmed by the death of the person after whom they are modeled. At the moment of death, the masks are recognized as prophetic objects that, by portraying a person's features and expressions in all accuracy, are able to foretell their future. Like Pascal, Yashao at this point feels himself to be omnipotent: his works not only disclose and prefigure the moment of agony, but, by doing so, capture the essence of the person, acquire a magical connotation and transcend the threshold of life and death. The mask of the Shogun functions as proof of the ability that enables the artist to shape a second perfect mask: "You must endure a little longer," he tells his dying daughter, as he rushes for brushes and paper. "I must have the features of a dying woman! Endure a little longer, however it may pain you!" (26). The play closes with the mask-maker intent on drawing the features of the agonizing Katsura. The daughter who had most criticized Yashao's art becomes the source of inspiration for his masterpiece, a perfect mask that must be created in the moment between life and death, when it is possible to perceive and capture the essence of life.¹⁸

The central motif of Crommelynck's and Kido's plays—the mask as an object that reflects the moment between life and death—is treated in a similar manner in a contemporary screenplay by Abel Gance. *Masque d'horreur* is Abel Gance's first film. A few years later, he would become famous for directing silent classics such as *La Dixième Symphonie* (1918), *J'accuse* (1919), and *Napoleon* (1927). In 1912, the year in which he was working on *Masque d'horreur*, Gance had just secured funding to form his own production company. All we know about this work today comes from

an advertising brochure of the film's scenario and from a short story in Gance's personal archives.¹⁹ The film is irremediably lost; we can, however, still look at the poster, which, under the names of Gance as a director and of Edouard De Max as the main actor, consists of a drawing of an artist busy carving a mask in an atelier filled with clay faces. The scenario begins by praising De Max for his expressive gestures and "the mobility of his mask,"²⁰ thus identifying, as in Crommelynck's play, a contrast between the sculptor's changeable features and the static portraits he creates. It then moves to the plot of the play, introducing Ermont, a sculptor who dedicated his life to realizing a *masque d'horreur* which aspires to capture the intensity of agony. Like Crommelynck's and Okamoto's mask-makers, Ermont is a violent, choleric man and suffers from a nervous illness.

When a famous sculptor arrives in town, Ermont proudly shows him his masterpiece, yet the celebrity complains that the work is lifeless and in need of a living model. Ermont, too poor to pay somebody to pose for him, breaks the mask in a fit of rage and happens to see his gesture reflected in the mirror. Exalted, he begins to carve his own features, pinching and biting himself to underline the expression of anguish. In addition, he cuts himself and smears the lamp with blood to create a suggestive atmosphere. Yet the work does not yet reflect true horror. Suddenly, he is inspired by an idea:

Il va s'empoisonner et, tandis que le poison agira, il travaillera. Il boit ce poison et la glace nous reflète sa figure, à chaque instant plus have et crispée; il travaille hagard; exultant ... le masque avance, c'est le summum de l'horreur...Le masque devient fantasmatiquement ressemblant sous cette lumière rouge!!! L'œuvre géniale est achevée.²¹

Having captured the true expression of agony, the sculptor dies embracing his work. Henri Fescourt claims that this bizarre scenario made sense in its visual realization, where the immobility of the mask contrasted sharply with the convulsions of the sculptor's face (166). The contrast between a static portrait and the pathos of expression brings about a parallel with Crommelynck and Kido's plays. Ermont is a mask-maker who, just like Pascal and Yashao, strives to endow his lifeless mask with a spirit, and to do so he must carve it on the threshold between life and death. "I must have the features of a dying woman!" Yashao exclaimed while looking at his dying daughter (Kido 26). "Un modèle, vivant, mais moi!...oui moi...je serais ce modèle," thinks Ermont.²²

In 1913, Gance published a short story on the same theme.²³ Surprisingly, this version is even closer to Okamoto's *The Mask-Maker*: instead of poisoning himself, Ermont models in clay the face of his dying child while he is being suffocated. Ermont is here nicknamed "*L'homme au masques*," and described as a pale, sick man, always on the look-out for anguished grimaces that he reproduces in innumerable sculptures. His friends and colleagues, puzzled by this obsession, have abandoned him, but, like Pascal and Yashao, he is adored by his wife and son. His ambition remains the same as in the scenario: the creation of a sublime *masque d'horreur*, "la synthèse,

la réalisation parfaite en un seul masque de toute cette souffrance qui vivait dans les mille ébauches de son atelier” (14).²⁴

In the throes of a fever caused by cerebral anemia, Ermont works on portraying his own features and, as in the scenario, brings the result of his work to a famous sculptor. The feedback, here too, is negative. In a fit of rage, Ermont shatters his masterpiece in front of his wife and son, and, fascinated by the fear induced by his gesture, drags his child into the light so as to sketch him, ordering: “Recommence ta peur!...recommence ta peur!” (15).²⁵ His work is interrupted by his wife, who leads him to bed to prevent a second seizure.

At night, Ermont is tormented by visions of multiple masks with his son's terrified features. “Le chef- d'œuvre attend...Chut! J'y vais...j'y vais...” (15),²⁶ he whispers as he heads to the room of the child. After carrying his son to the atelier, he begins to cover his feet in clay and, kissing him and joking, continues to bury the rest of the body. As the child understands his father's intention, he begins to scream and

72 Ermont, fascinated by the expression of anguish, presses a lump of clay on his throat and stops to admire the spectacle:

La figure du martyr se violace et se contracte horriblement. Il veut crier...le son s'arrête...Un rictus d'agonie lui tord le faciès...L'argile fait son œuvre de mort. Ermont, les traits révoltés, s'arrête, buvant l'horreur dans toute sa plénitude... (15)²⁷

Inspired and inebriated, Ermont resumes work on the sketch begun on the previous night, but is again interrupted by his wife, whom he hears banging on the door. He hastens to cover the child's face with clay, then opens the door and observes her amused as she searches in vain for her son. “Tu ne comprends donc rien. Ja vais te le montrer” (15)²⁸, he finally explains and lifts up the clay. While the woman, grasping what happened, screams and collapses on the floor, Ermont, like Yashao portraying his dying daughter, laughs and continues to work at his sketch, drawings his study close to the child's face to check the faithfulness to the model. As in Crommelynck and Okamoto, the ambition to create a masterpiece transcends the love for his family, and, as in these plays, the perfect mask can only be obtained by capturing the elusive moment between life and death.

A few years earlier a “real” mask-maker, the French sculptor Jean Carriès, had begun a series of masks which would eventually be reproduced on the *Porte Monumentale* commissioned by Winnaretta Singer. As testified by the numerous severed heads and death masks that appear throughout his work, Carriès was fascinated by sculptural fragments (Simièr 2007: 99). He had been able to observe Japanese artifacts at the Exposition Universale in 1878 (Bellanger 2007: 59; Papet 2007: 69), and this craft had inspired him to create decorative masks that allude both to Oriental and death imagery. These references are detectable in the titles given to his masks, such as “Masque chinois barbu,” “Masque chinois,” “Masque dir Race jaune,” as well as the numerous “Masques d'horreur.”²⁹ It is perhaps not a coincidence that, a few years later, around the same time in which Gance was producing *Masque d'horreur*, a friend of Carriès,

the sculptor Auguste Rodin, was working on other *masques d'horreur* modeled on the features of a Japanese dancer.

Rodin was fascinated by the use of sandstone in Japanese craft, and after seeing Carriès works in the 1880s, he thought of re-shaping several of his own sculptures (such his “Tête de la Douleur” and his “Tête de Balzac”) into this material (Garnier, 2007:15). During his visit to Marseille’s Colonial exhibition in 1900, Rodin discovered the Japanese theatre through the performances of Sada Yacco. In 1906, at the same Colonial exhibition, he met the dancer Hanako, who was performing with the Arayama Company under the direction of Loïe Fuller.³⁰ He befriended her and convinced her to pose for a series of sketches, masks and decorative heads, on which he worked from 1907 to 1911. In the same years, he acquired several Japanese items for his private collection, among which four Japanese masks; one of them was an authentic theatrical prop, while the others three consisted in grotesque sculptures specifically created for export (see Blanchetière 2008: 104; Garnier 2007: 82).

Like Sada Yacco, Hanako had been able to adapt her performances to the Western taste; her repertoire consisted of comedies and tragedies inspired by Kabuki and Japanese folk theatre, simplified to allow the audience to follow the play without understanding the dialogue (Savarese 1988: 63). As Sawada illustrates in a biography of the actress, these performances were particularly appreciated because they enacted all the clichés that the public associated with Japanese art; for example, most plays ended with the killing of the main character or with her suicide.³¹ Knowing that the public was mainly interested in Hanako’s hara-kiri scenes, Fuller had written for her a piece entitled “The Martyr;” the violent ending and the audience’s reaction to it are described in an article published in 1906 in *L’Illustration*:

A sensational drama last Saturday evening at 9:30 p.m. in the presence of Paris’s best audience. Madame Hanako committed suicide by disemboweling herself. But it was suicide. An emulation of Sada Yacco, Hanako is a tiny Japanese gifted with a graceful form, lively eyes, a rebellious nose, feline movements. The comedy in which she displays her varied talents as a saucy flirt, a mime, a dancer, turns into a tragedy when Osodé (the heroine’s name) the prey of gloomy sorrow, suddenly changes her behavior: she takes hold of a knife and she slowly thrusts it into her flesh, her eyes convulse, her nostrils palpitate, her face pales and blood spreads over her white tunic. She then collapses to the floor and dies. It is almost...too realistic. At least for those audience members whose nerves are too weak to tolerate such a performance. (“Death of Osodé,” *L’Illustration*, November 3, 1906)³²

Rodin was fascinated by Hanako’s ability to mimic agony, and repeatedly invited the actress to pose in his atelier. He was not interested in her dancing, but in capturing in a static portrait her mobile expression, in particular the glance of suffering that that she was able to act out in her performances. The obsession with the actress’s range of expressions resulted in 53 sculptures in clay, bronze and glass paste.³³ While some of these works are three-dimensional, others are hollow and illustrate grotesque expressions evocative of the Japanese masks of Rodin’s collection. From Hanako’s

memoirs, we know that Rodin was working mainly on two types of masks, which he named “Head of death” and “Meditating woman” (Sawada 45). He reproduced the latter, which he considered his best attempt, several times in glass paste and laid it on a pillow in his atelier in the *Palais Biron*, beside his mask of Camille Claudel.³⁴ This kind of installation is similar to the treatment reserved for death masks, but the eyes of Hanako are open, suggesting a look that crosses the threshold of life and death, breaching into the unknown.³⁵

Pascal and Yashao attribute to their art the status of a science for the precision with which it enables them to isolate and observe features; they base their power on the conviction that a person’s future is not only revealed, but actively determined by the traits that, as artists, they have the ability to shape. Ermont suffers of a similar complex of omnipotence and likewise believes that a person’s inner essence can be revealed by a portrait, associating the revealing moment with the threshold of life and death. Rodin shares a similar fascination with the expression of agony and,
74 by casting himself in the role of the mask maker, evokes the same theme found in Crommelycnk, Okamoto and Gance.

In all these stories, the protagonist is a violent, fanatic artist who considers art more highly than life, while another character is first portrayed, and then substituted by a fragmentary image that continues to evoke the violence through which it was produced. The women whose features are frequently portrayed and effectively substituted by the masks constitute an explicit or implicit threat to the sculptor’s creativity. Pascal’s wife stands between him and Madeleine; Yashao’s daughter challenges her father’s authority; Ermont’s wife repeatedly prevents him from creating a masterpiece. The artist’s talent is associated with madness and degeneration, and the process of mask making can be seen as an act of revenge that is a response to a perceived threat. Yet the same characters who constitute an obstacle to the artists’ creativity are also the means through which their masterpiece can be achieved, since the “perfect mask” is modeled after their features.

These plots are reminiscent of the theme explored by Edgar Allan Poe in “The Oval Portrait,” a story in which a painting takes on the appearance of life at the expense of its model. However, this pattern is further complicated by the fact that the final product, as a death mask, does not represent life, but rather the threshold of life and death. Being three-dimensional, the mask surpasses in faithfulness the painted portrait; in addition, it can potentially be worn, and is more likely to take on a ritualistic value.

On the one hand, these works echo the mystical thread present in the physiognomic tradition, the ideas that an accurate portrait can function as a divinatory object and that agony brings out the original, truest features of the subject—Lavater himself, after all, was fascinated by death masks and argued that human expression changed considerably at the moment of death.³⁶ On the other, the focus of the mask maker is not so much the depiction of permanent features, but the mobility of the face, the specific expression and look associated with agony.

Throughout these stories, artists and models live in two different worlds and are

unable to communicate and to understand one another. The masks represent mainly female models as seen by male artists,³⁷ and can thus be defined as portrayals of alterity. This symbolic value is further complicated in Rodin's sculptures, in which Hanako's oriental features are depicted by a Western artist. At the same time, these sculptures aim to represent what awaits all of us in death, the ultimate state of alterity, a condition that can only be represented by means of a gaze that looks into the unknown. By capturing the transition between life and death in a static portrait, the mask-maker experiences a sensation of omnipotence and acquires the features of a sorcerer, while the mask assumes a magical, ritualistic connotation.

WORKS CITED

- Blanchetière, François. "Hanako, La mort dans les yeux." *Masques. De Carpeux à Picasso*. Paris: Hazan, 2008. 104-109. Print.
- _____. "Un jeu de regards: Rodin et Hanako." *Rodin: Le Rêve Japonais*. Paris: Musée Rodin, 2007. 125-133. Print.
- Caroli, Flavio. *L'anima e il volto: ritratto e fisiognomica da Leonardo a Bacon*. Milano: Electa, 1998. Print.
- Carriès, Jean, and Amélie Simier. *Jean Carriès (1855-1894): La matière de l'étrange: 11 octobre 2007-27 janvier 2008*. Paris: Petit Palais, Musée des beaux-arts de la ville de Paris, 2007. Print.
- Crommelynck, Fernand. "Le Sculpteur des Masques." *Théâtre*. I. Paris: Gallimard, 1967. Print.
- _____, Alain Piette, and Bert Cardullo. *The Theater of Fernand Crommelynck: Eight Plays*. Selinsgrove, PA: Susquehanna UP, 1998. Print.
- Fescourt, Henri. *La Foi et les Montagnes*. Paris: Photo-Cinéma, 1959. Print.
- Foley, Kathy. "Hanako and the European Imagination." *Asian Theatre Journal* 5.1 (1988): 76-85. Web. 10 May 2009.
- Gance, Abel. "Le masque d'horreur" (1913). *L'impossible* 5 (1971): 14-16.
- _____. "Masque d'horreur," Scenario. Gance's Archives, BnF.
- Garnier, Bénédicte. "Une collection de rêve." *Rodin: Le Rêve Japonais*. Paris: Musée Rodin, 2007. 11-85. Print.
- Hoaas, Solrun. "Noh Masks: The Legacy of Possession." *The Drama Review: Tdr*. 26.4 (1982): 82-86. Print.
- Icart, Roger. *Abel Gance ou Le Prométhée Foudroyé*. Lausanne: L'Age d'homme, 1982. Print.
- Irvine, Gregory. "Japanese Masks: Ritual and Drama." *Masks. The Art of Expression*.

Ed. John Mack. London: British Museum P, 1994. 130-150. Print.

Jenkins, Ian. "Face Value: The Mask in Greece and Rome." *Masks. The Art of Expression*. Ed. John Mack. London: British Museum P, 1994. 150-167. Print

Kincaid, Zoë. Introduction. *The Mask-Maker*. By Kido Okamoto. London and New York : Samuel French, 1928. III-V. Print.

Knapp, Bettina L. *Fernand Crommelynck*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1978. Print.

Martzel, Gérard. "Fêtes rituelles et danses masquées de l'ancien Japon," *Le Masque. Du Rite au Théâtre*. Paris: Editions du centre national de la recherche scientifique, 1985. 71-79. Print.

Lavater, Johann C. *Essai sur la physiognomie, destiné à faire connoître l'homme et à le faire aimer; par Jean-Gaspard Lavater*. III. La Haye: 1781. Web.

Okamoto, Kido. *The Mask-Maker*. Trans. Hanso Tarao. London and New York: Samuel French, 1928. Print.

76

Papet, Édouard. "Décidément, je vais me lancer là-dedans." *La matière de l'étrange, Jean Carriès (1855-1894)*. Paris: Caudun, 2007. 69-91. Print.

Piette, Alain, and Bert Cardullo. *The Crommelynck Mystery: The Life and Work of a Belgian Playwright*. Selinsgrove, PA: Susquehanna UP, 1997. Print.

Rodler, Lucia. *Il corpo specchio dell'anima: teoria e storia della fisiognomica*. Milano: B. Mondadori, 2000. Print.

Savarese, Nicola and Richard Fowler. "A Portrait of Hanako." *Asian Theatre Journal* 5.1 (1988): 63-75. Print.

Sawada, Suketaro. *Little Hanako*. Nagoya: Chunichi Pub, 1984. Print.

Simier, Amélie. "C'est moi dans le rêve." *La Matière de l'Étrange, Jean Carriès (1855-1894)*. Paris: Caudun, 2007. 93-107. Print.

Smith, Susan H. *Masks in Modern Drama*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1984. Print.

Tricot, Xavier. "James Ensor, Prince des Masques." *Masques. De Carpeux à Picasso*. Paris: Hazan, 2008. Print.

_____. "Skelette beim Betrachten von Chinoiserien." *James Ensor. Belgien um 1900*. Ed. Lydia Schoonbaert, Dorine Cardyn-Oomen, Herwig Todts. München: Hirmer, 1989. Print.

Vitry, Paul. "Masques." *Art et Décoration* XIV (1903): 345-354. Print.

Yeats, William Butler. *Four Plays for Dancers*. 1865-1939. London: Macmillan, 1921. Print.

NOTES

1. In this period, plenty of connections were drawn between the cultures of ancient Greece and Japan.

Still today, some scholars argue that the mask in Greek tragedy functioned in an analogous way as in Noh theatre (Jenkins 1994: 157).

2. "What can we say of the murky, shady, hidden origins of the African mask. What can we say of the capital sins and of the crimes brooded upon and committed under the mask, covered by the mask. During centuries of slavery, the mask meant cowardice, concealment, criminality, debauchery, egoism, exploitation, impunity, deception, flight, perversion, cruelty, satanism, mawlings, claws and femininity. It is a short step from the mask to make up. I condemn unequivocally the mask which unfortunately came from the hell of Africa, Asia, Oceania, Murdeland, Dreamland, from Cracozie. ...Come, enjoy our local masks. Yes, they develop in all directions of the mind, dressed in tenderness, seasoned with beauty, crimson, azure, pearly, shell-like, oystery, over molded, striped, bearded, full of dried cod and turbot, childishly playful, filled with imagination, they enjoy themselves without restraint. Adorable masquerade of bold colors, scales and gardens of love, songs of the bumblebee, crystal shocks, veils for the skin. Indeed, our carnival is warm." (My translation. The text is quoted in Tricot 2008: 162.)
3. "I work for sorrow, and you work for joy, yes...but we are neighbors...yes, and those who come to you will also be coming to me" (42). All parenthetical references, unless otherwise stated, refer to Piette and Cardullo 1997.
4. Piette and Cardullo see Pascal's masks as "a reflection of the villager's dark souls, which he matches away from their bodies" (1997: 19).
5. *Suddenly Cador stops in front of the masks, which are hanging on the walls. He laughs so loudly that Loison and Mageleine turn around.*
 CADOR: Oh! This one is the potter who lives on the river bank!
 MAGDELEINE: No, it's not...
 CADOR: It's him all right. He was so drunk when he followed the procession that he kept blowing out his candle with his own breath! [*In front of another mask*]. Here's little Pauline who cries when I hug her and says: "My Lord! My Lord!..." It's her all right.. And there's Ochs, old Ochs, who's such a miser that he's afraid of his own hands!...it's him! (38).
6. "Tell your patients that I shall cure them! I'll show them things they've never seen before!...I'll show them things that men have invented, real men! And life will come back to them!" (40).
7. The western physiognomic tradition, from Aristotle to Della Porta, shares a conviction that the study of human features may be useful to predict the future. Della Porta devotes particular attention to this argument in the treatise *De humana physiognomia* (1586). For more details, see Caroli (1998: 116), or Rodler (2000).
8. As Susan H. Smith points out in *Masks in Modern Drama*, the Christian tradition carries the notion that man was shaped after God's image. Therefore the human face is an emblem of the divine, and the reshaping of the face restages the act of Satan, who tried to usurp the place of God (1984: 139).
9. "...like the face of Jesus on Saint Veronica's veil" (60).
10. "Sometimes I hate her! I feel like destroying her, like keeping my hands around her neck, waiting for her to die!" (57).
11. "It's Louison!...it's Louison!...I tell you it's her!" (178).
12. PASCAL: "It's her, no mistake about it. It's her. Her face wrapped in sadness, her face wrapped in silence...It's Louison, all right...Her face full of doubt and suspicion; her face filled with pain.. it's her, all right" (63).
13. "Le chène est pour le copeau / ma tête est pour le bourreau..." (312); "Venaient alors les assassins / qui portaient comme des saints / leur triste tête coupée / entre leur mains..." (318).
14. MAGDELEINE: [*Appears, then disappears*]. Pascal!...Dead...Pascal!...She's dead!
 PASCAL: [*Very calm*]. You just say that, but I know that she went to the dance...[*He laughs*]. She went

with Cadore; I just saw her leaving...She'll dance all night...I saw her, I tell you, I did...Don't laugh... (68).

15. See Martzel: "Ces masques qui ont une vie quasi indépendante de l'acteur, conservent, pensons-nous, quelque chose de l'objet sacré des antiques cérémonies qui permettaient au danseur, en recélant la puissance divine, d'incarner des dieux ou des démons dont la danse, au milieu du village rassemblé, avait un pouvoir magique" (1985: 73).
16. A short comparison between the two plays, based on the use of death masks on stage, is introduced by Susan Harris Smith in *Masks in Modern Drama*.
17. All parenthetical references, unless otherwise stated, refer to Okamoto (trans. Tarao) 1928.
18. It is unlikely that Crommelynck knew Okamoto's work, since the play was performed in France only in 1927, in a production by Firmin Gémier. Okamoto was often in Paris, but we do not know whether he had the occasion to see Crommelynck's play, since it remained on stage only for a few days. Instead we can explain the features common to each play by referring to a shared sensibility that was developing in the period, when Western artists were fascinated by Japanese art and when Japanese artists themselves were beginning to reflect on their tradition through the influence of the West. In this sense it is significant that, in the *mise-en-scène* of Okamoto's play in 1927, Gémier chose to base the second act on a village festival based on dance and mime in which we can recognize a return to a more traditional type of kabuki, but also a parallel with the Carnival dances that play a relevant role in Crommelynck's play.
19. I am grateful to Clarisse Gance for granting me the permission to consult the screenplay and the short story, held in Gance's personal archives in the BnF. A summary of the scenario is also found in Icart 1982: 49.
20. "L'art nouveau des expressions muettes lui convient à merveille, de par le beauté de son jeu et la rareté de son masque si mobile, si passionné, si parlant" (Gance, *Masque d'horreur*, scenario).
21. "He is going to poison himself, and, while the poison takes its effect, he will work. He drinks the poison and the mirror reflects his figure, as it becomes ever more haggard and strained; he works with abandon; exulting...the mask gains shape, it is the apogee of horror...The mask becomes fantastically true to life under the red light!!! The great work is completed." (All parenthetical references, unless otherwise stated, refer to Gance's advertising scenario. Translations are my own.)
22. "A living model...myself!...yes, myself...I will be that model."
23. Originally written in 1911, this text, published in the magazine *Le Miroir*, already contains the most important traits of scenario used in 1912. In 1971, Gance's story was published again in the magazine *L'impossible*.
24. "The synthesis, the perfect realization, in one mask, of the suffering that lives in the thousand studies of his atelier" (14). Unless otherwise stated, parenthetical references refer to the story as published in *L'impossible* (1971: 14-16). All translations are my own.
25. "Start afresh your fear!.. start afresh your fear!" (15)
26. "The masterpiece is waiting for me...wait...Shh! I am going...I am going..." (15).
27. "The martyr's figure turns purple and contracts horribly. He wants to scream...the sound ceases...a grimace of agony twists his features...the clay does its deadly work. Ermont, with contorted features, stops, drinks in the horror in all its plenitude..." (15).
28. "You don't understand a thing. I will show him to you" (15).
29. A few of these masks can be found in Vitry's article, or in the catalogue of the exhibition recently dedicated to the artist, edited by Simière (2008).
30. Fuller made Hanako the company's main actor, thus casting aside a fundamental convention of

Kabuki theatre, in which women are categorically absent from the stage.

31. For more details on this aesthetics of suicide, see Foley (2009: 81).
32. The article is quoted in Savarese (1988: 68) and in Blanchetière (2007: 129).
33. The masks were created between 1907 and 1912.
34. See Blanchetière 2008 *passim*.
35. Blanchetière compares the glaze of Hanako's fixed gaze to the petrifying gaze of the Gorgon (2008: 109).
36. In his *Physiognomyc Fragments*, Lavater writes at length about human features at the moment of death, for him the threshold to another existence and the instance in which the soul can be read more clearly on human features. He argues that this clearness is always linked to a state of rest, to the *absence* of expression: "Chacun de nous, me fuis-je dit souvent, n'aurait-il pas une physionomie primitive, dont l'origine & l'essence fussent divines? Cette physionomie fondamentale ne serait pas-elle troublée, & pour ainsi dire submergée par le flux & le reflux des événements & des passions? & ne se rétablirait-elle pas successivement dans le calme de la mort, telle qu'une eau trouble s'éclaircit, quand elle cesse d'être agitée?...De même aussi j'ai été dans le cas d'assister des mourants; j'en ai vu dont le visage m'avait toujours paru ignoble, n'expriment ni élévation d'esprit, ni grandeur de caractère. Peu d'heures, & chez les uns seulement peu d'instant avant la mort, leurs physionomie s'ennoblissent à vue d'œil. Coloris, dessin, expression, tout était changé. Une aurore céleste commençait à poindre! Une autre existence approchait!"(Lavater III. 160).
37. Gance's story constitutes an exception, as the mask is that of a little child, but the violence against the child is simultaneously a violence against his mother.