

Otherworlds Review #3: Masks

The Otherworlds Review

November 9, 2017

November 2017 · Sun in Scorpio · Full moon in Taurus

We might describe the lunar month leading to this moment, when the moon radiates in the company of the starry bull, as the time of the mask. Children disguise themselves as faeries and goblins and show up on doorsteps demanding tricks and treats; descendants paint skulls upon their faces in honor of the ancestors; faces are carved into fruit and left at thresholds as offerings for the restless tramping spirits; nocturnal mischief and masses are held in the streets. Masquerade, carnivalesque processions, fantasies and grotesqueries.

And also the death throes of empire persist. Toxic waters brewed from a century of industrial abuse continues to drown those lives left behind in poisons. Hellfire eviscerates vineyards and trailer parks. The accumulated capital and cheap commodities of thousands turns to ash and smoke blanketing entire regions in generational miasma. The apocalypse now takes the form of an interruptive cacophony settling back into an amnesiac status quo ever more nauseating, ever more dizzying, ever more malignant. The sun burns red in the hazy skyline – a rose tinted light falls on each selfie and the palette shifts on a collective moment in the timelines – and yet the carcinogens remain after the attention has shifted to next week’s unimaginable catastrophe. In all of this, the mask becomes more potent and necessary: to breathe, to venture into the world, to respond to each crisis.

The social crises necessitate the mask too. Our enemies use “less lethal” toxins and cameras against us, fill the streets with teargas and livestreamers. A slight error and a single picture can be weaponized, used to mobilize years of self-promotion and self-surveillance into a case or some other tragedy. We anonymize ourselves as harm reduction so that we can act regardless. To be known, named, doxxed, is to be captured. In the cybernetic swamp, the mask generates the possibility of action and evasion.

Masks have always been among the most powerful psychological and spiritual tools at our disposal. They figure into our rituals and our devotions, our revelry and our warfare. Even in the anthropomorphized iconographic age of classical antiquity we can locate the specific exceptions where the mask persisted as representation of the divine. In the case of ancient Greece, according to Vernant and Vidal-Naquet, three entities alone were primarily associated with masks:

The first is a power who is nothing but a mask, and who operates in and through it: Gorgo, the gorgon. The second is a goddess who is never herself represented by a mask

but in whose cult masks and disguises are particularly important: Artemis. The third is the deity whose relationship with the mask is so close that in the Greek pantheon he is known as the god of masks: Dionysos.

Gorgo demonstrates the apotropaic potential of the mask. The gorgon, whether depicted on a doorway or shield, neutralizes her enemy. “Exposed to the Gorgon’s gaze, man faces the powers of the beyond in their most radical and alien form, that of death, night, and nothingness.” The Gorgon disrupts the binaries of young-old, beautiful-ugly, masculine-feminine, human-beast, mortal-immortal. Her queer disruption adds force to our attacks, cloaks us in the protection afforded by her onlooking gaze. We strengthen our relation to monstrosity while the fascists call each other gay on the internet and debate about which class segment of ‘normal, white, americans’ they assimilate into. If we must be monsters, which kind will we choose to become?

Artemis stalks the liminal places, the zones in between, the shorelines and boundary-lands. Into her domain we venture wearing masks in initiatory ceremonies. This practice survived into christendom as pacts made under the moon at the crossroads with the dread-queen of witches. Her name continues to hold protective and guiding force for those crossing between identities and worlds. The mask continues its initiatory agreement with humanity; continues to reveal the mysteries which only become visible in carnivalesque co-mingling of extremes.

Dionysos, the god of the mask, is also the one who “exerts his powers, introducing the unpredictable dimension of the elsewhere into the very heart of daily life.” He is the stranger, the other, xenos perpetually arriving from beyond the sea. Like Gorgo, we encounter him face to face. Or as Euripides put it: “I saw him see me.” The mask functions as a focal point, an attempt to fix the elusive presence into time and space. The mask, the crown of flowers and vines, the pinecone-tipped spear, each a tool for achieving immediate contact with otherness, for becoming other ourselves.

What the mask rendered possible through what was brought to life when the actor donned it, was an eruption into the heart of public life of a dimension of existence totally alien to the quotidian world [...] Possession afforded access to a world of joy where the confining limitations of the human condition disappeared. [...] Dionysos introduces into the heart of human life an otherness so complete that it has the power, as does Gorgo, to propel its enemies toward horror, chaos, and death, just as it can also raise its devotees to a state of ecstasy, a full and joyous communion.

The state of emergency has become the norm. The outside has come in. Each day is painted with liminal stripes. Consensus reality is no longer consensed upon. To do more than survive we’ll need to don disguises into which all three functions – apotropaic, initiatory, communizing – are woven. There is no need for hope or despair, only for new masks.

North Carolina jails, from a report at the end of October, recovering from blows made to the rigid and relentless walls of US prisons during the September 2016 prison strike, are levying bureaucratic retaliations against inmates. The “rebellious, conscious, and disruptive prisoners, as well as mentally disabled prisoners ... face many times the amount of months in isolation than they would have before.” Prison rebels, so unmasked as to be exclusively surveilled.

In a parallel and simultaneous universe, billionaires increased their combined global wealth last year to a record of \$6 trillion. “140 of the world’s top sports teams are owned by just 109

billionaires, with two-thirds of NBA and NFL teams owned by billionaires.” So few with so much that they clamor to own teams of athletes, collections of stolen art, stale museums. Last week, a certain billionaire took care to remind the black players whose team he owns that he “can’t have the inmates running the prison” when they refused to stand, hand over heart, for an anthem crafted for the plight of the robber baron. The millionaires beneath those billionaires, who aspire to that status, are the same in wine country, in the background of relief efforts, when effort is only exerted for their own. The millionaires who populate the san francisco bay area at thirty percent.

There are emblematic enemies who we pass on the street now. The enemy with the \$60 ventilator mask, the casually violent landlords and managers, proud boys of every tacky stripe. The wet-eyed, sappy bourgeois fundraiser class of enemies appears on front lines and news clips. Lamenting a precious commodity damaged here, silent about a prisoner forced to work saving property she will never access otherwise there... As the structures fall away, the old terms on which enemies were met go too. They burned to a crisp, blew away as ash. The landscape is scorched, new earth raw and exposed. The clarity of the emergency gives us new maps. Suddenly, there’s nobody in charge; suddenly, more things are up for grabs.

Eduardo Galeano said “the fog is the ski mask of the jungle.” During the first days of 1994, heartened and blessed rebels masked up, took cover in the misty jungle, among the mountains. When members of the indigenous autonomous militia and community of Zapatistas in Chiapas made their global debut, they had been at work long before their unveiling, of course. Developing and living their “extraordinary novel way of ‘subject construction.’” They chose no longer to react, but to ask and live the answer to their question: “My life, why should I want you if you are not dignified?” They worked to recover the deep historical and spiritual identity of rebellion and peaceful freedom (by any means necessary) which wove its way into and through the emerging armed indigenous population of the EZLN. “This was the recognition of the potential existence of a new civilizing matrix out of an indigenous worldview and in its interaction with the ‘rest of the world,’ a process that has begun to define a planetary revolutionary proposal.”

The knot of the shifting veil loosens from over the painful collective dysfunction of this reality. The masks of ego fall away from the sacred ones who seek not the top of the mountain, but to become the valley of the universe through affinity for freedom, through commitment to attack. New masks come into the hands of those with a readiness for shifting their construction of self to destruction of selves-separate. New affinity arises, “being singular plural,” existence beyond laws, commandments, borders. Always, a clear mirror is held up to the masked ones. And the reflection remains constant as long as the seed smolders.

There is a power in the nature of proximity. Nearness to a catastrophe, spacial closeness but material remoteness to the millions of dollars funneled directly back to the richest people from their rich counterparts in the corporate world of Managing Images. We were never unaware of them, but they might be blissfully miscalculating the madness of the desperate and righteous. The post-disaster situation bubbles power and violence to the top. In Haiti an earthquake in 2010 has left in its wake ongoing widespread corruption, cholera outbreak, and enthusiastic resistance to the regimes that scramble to replace chaos with disorder of another color. In October, a Haitian protester forecasted “The revolution has just started ... this is a warning because the next phase can be very violent.” Rebels the world over, the galaxy over, enter bravely into these new meetings with the next class of police and presidents. “My life, why should I want you if you are not dignified?”

There is fresh ground and what takes root now will thrive later. When the questions asked by western subjectivities are empty, there is no filling them with meaning, let them desiccate. There is a moment to move. Into the dense fogs, into the nights, into the deep beating heart breathing hot into the black mask, in the segregation cell, up from below. The galvanized commit to dignity, shedding every self from before and cloaking every future self in a revolutionary planetarity.

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The mask is one of the *materia magica* of our craft, the black clothing another. There are those who would have us abandon our ability to *act* in an anonymous mass, settling for mere personal concealment in the so-called “gray block.” Individual disguises may be tactically useful at times, but they are just that: individual rather than collective, tactical rather than strategic. Whether they are motivated by the mirage of a mass movement or just by fear of success, those who consistently talk shit on attack are the same aspiring politicians who build coalitions with leftists and liberals, who have entered the popular front once again, who worry about “optics.” Let them leave the black flags for us and wave the gray flag instead, half-white with surrender, a fitting compromise.

Have they forgotten Spain, the uncontrollables of the Iron Column, our eternal shame when supposed anarchists became ministers in the republican State? Our battle-standard is black for the Dead, for our refusal of surrender, for our refusal of politics. We are more than autonomous, more than self-managed, we antinomians bring the destruction of all Law. *That* is what the black flag embodies and carries with it.

There is a secret pact between the generations of the past and that of our own. For we have been expected upon this earth. For it has been given us to know, just like every generation before us, a weak messianic power, on which the past has a claim. This claim is not to be settled lightly.

There have always been two currents within anarchism: when accused of participating in the Haymarket bombing, Louis Lingg was perfectly candid that his apartment was full of bombs, simply clarifying that he had not made the ones thrown at Haymarket.

I am in favor of using force. I have told Captain Schaack, and I stand by it, “if you cannonade us, we shall dynamite you.” You laugh! Perhaps you think, “you’ll throw no more bombs;” but let me assure you I die happy on the gallows, so confident am I that the hundreds and thousands to whom I have spoken will remember my words; and when you shall have hanged us, then – mark my words – they will do the bombthrowing! In this hope do I say to you: I despise you. I despise your order, your laws, your force-propped authority. Hang me for it!

Committing jailbreak-suicide by means of a blasting cap, he inscribed “hoch die anarchie!” in his own blood on the cell wall.

Our current has always been the minority, but its black flame burns bright and pure, emitting refreshing air instead of suffocating smoke. August Spies, too, spoke prophecy before he ascended: “We are the birds of the coming storm.” A mob of crows attacking the eagle, a whirlwind of black wings and beaks and talons, a conspiracy of ravens. Some say that “color coordination is not conspiracy.” We say that it is, in both the colloquial and the original senses of the word: our black masks allow us to breathe together.

One of the first black blocs in north america was in san francisco in 1992, against the 500 year commemoration of columbus. Our lineage demands that our presence upon this stolen continent be anti-colonial, not just in rhetoric, but as a spiritual orientation. We must reject the insidious logic of our enemies, embracing the irrational and ecstatic core of our tradition, our magic, our holy communion. Those who decry the black bloc as “ritual” and “tradition” reveal their euro-centric enlightenment biases, for it is precisely the ritual and the tradition that are our source of strength. All that said, the outward appearances may very well change. But the inner essence must become ever more dangerous, more distilled, more beautiful.

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The Black Mask

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The black mask is the most visible symbol of the anarchist. Its existence is known to the novice even before he is contacted, but its ritual symbolism is unknown to him until his initiation.

At the time of the initiation, a time unrecognized until it has happened, the novice finds himself alone with a bag. He has found himself here by a strange and forgotten path, a series of subtle maneuvers and unmemorable gestures. In truth, he has been brought here, led along by an unshakable sense of discomfort with the social game. There are ways this discomfort is manifested: talking about it, doing it differently, doing it wrong, sometimes refusing to do it at all. And these little refusals, with the scorn they earn from most and the interest they elicit in others, draw him into a band. The band has its own social games, its bad manners and inverted fashions, its parodies of social norms. It is when he has tired of these, when he contemplates with a similar sense of cynicism the macrocosm and microcosm; the verse, inverse, reverse, and perverse; the loyal subjects and the loyal opposition; it is then that he turns from the company and finds himself alone. Alone, that is, but for the bag.

Novice and bag are alone in a place. The place is a room, or it is a car, or a patch of earth or some other spot. The bag is unremarkable but familiar, and seems to vaguely offer relief of the present circumstance. The novice opens the bag with an anticipation diluted by cynicism: he half expects to find some secret message, and half to uncover nothing of interest. In the bag there is a small bundle of cloth, neatly folded, black as night. He withdraws it and he recognizes it as the mask of the anarchist.

He feels almost as if he could laugh. Faced with the fabric, he wonders that he has never before contemplated why the black mask is the face of anarchy. He has worn the mask before, thinking only of the practical imperative of anonymity. Now it has come to him as a strange answer to his question, not at all what he was looking for, but an answer nonetheless. The mask is a gift given by no one and carrying, like all gifts, its silent question. The anonymity it offers is not the cold anonymity of social nicety, but a warm embrace from something that cares about him not at all. It is not the nicest gift. It does not affirm. All it offers is a reminder to relax because, to the universe, he is nothing but a kink of its unfolding. With a deep sigh and a feeling strangely like being tickled, he accepts the gift.

As he walks back from the place where he was alone to the place where the group is, his steps seem only the fulfillment of inevitability, as if pulled by no force other than time’s weird passage.

The initiate does not speak of the ritual. The mark of the initiation may be witnessed in how he wears the social mask (a bit less rigid, a little less important, as if seeking to amuse and be amused). He can still feel, with a certain sadness, its weight, and remember, with a certain nostalgia, how

it disappeared into the black cotton. But he hears someone calling, and, recognizing an invitation to pass the time, he joins in.

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