Mask and Masking: Exploring the Offline Grotesque Face and Online Tech-Face

by Jharna Choudhury, M.A.
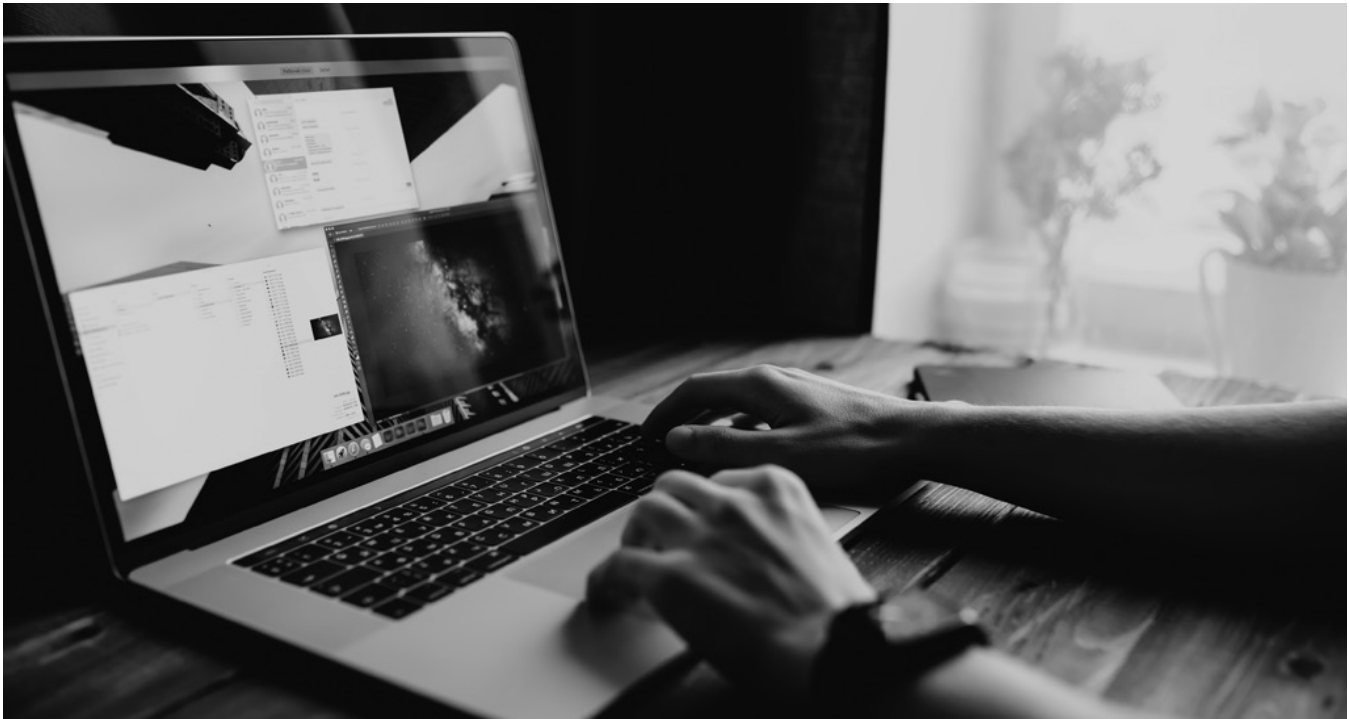
Abstract

The crisis of Covid-19 pandemic enforced a paradigm shift in understanding the corporeal, from a tangible subjectivity to a digitized version of the (post)human body. Primarily due to the high death rate across the world, owing to the virus, multiple infection control measures like isolation, wearing of masks, social distancing, temperature checks, increased online interactions have been taken; in the process, the discourse of human body has been reinvigorated through art and technology, with everyday creativity. This paper aims to highlight innovative aesthetic Covid-mask projects that allow an expansion of the concept of "grotesque" bodies in contemporary times (referring to Thomas Wright and Francesca Granata's concept of grotesque). It also deals with the body insecurities accentuated by virtual-meeting software (using Zoom application as a synecdoche of virtual conferencing), and masking of personalities, compromised for a digital self (Baldwin 2). Despite the destruction and halt caused by the pandemic, human bodies are not suspended as limited and vulnerable, but instead revived to a position where dialogic bodies still sustain. In both offline and online interfaces, the creatively grotesque and technologically projected human-face (here used as the tech-face), act as parallel developments of adaptability, changing perspectives of "seeing" (Reeve 1) and "being" a human body as fragmented, exaggerated and conditional.

Keywords: Grotesque, Mask, Post-human, Covid-19, Human Body

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Introduction

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the aspect of social compliance regarding facemasks has relatively improved; and art and tech designers can be seen to play an active role in making masks an extension of the "new" human-self and their incorporation of this accessory as an essential protective measure. A scholarly work on the 2009 pandemic of influenza A (H1N1) virus, summarized a lower level of compliance in facial mask usage, and encouraged scholars to look into the loophole, saying "Future research endeavours should investigate the influence of cultural and sociobehavioural factors (e.g. fear, stigma, altruism) on levels of compliance during a pandemic" (Cowling et al. 454). Consequently, this paper explores this line of thought, and articulates an understanding of the ecological, tech-convenient, culturally indigenous and mimesis factors that influence Coronavirus mask-art (with both grotesque and non-grotesque aesthetics). To quote, "the mask is a charismatic device *sui generis*; whether in its magical, ritual, religious, artistic, or socio-political conception and application...whether it is beautiful, placid, and sublime in form, structure, and appearance; or whether it is simply ugly, fierce-looking, horrendous, grotesque" (Ebong 1). The entire process of masking generates a double consciousness, a second face (Ebong 4; Grimes 509) in the theatrical and religious contexts, thereby encoding a polysemy in the nature of human body. However, in this paper, masking is not only a performance, but also a vehicle to convey the impulse of incognito solidarity and human-faced-resilience for a widespread disease problem. It is interesting how protective equipment like Covid-masks can be constructed artistically, as a means of voicing out trauma. The familiarity of surgical masks is suddenly replaced by grotesque aesthetics (use of hyperbolic body representations) and this generates the question "why"? Mask and masking have parallel developments in the pandemic situation, the two most important ones being the tangible grotesque mask-art and the intangible digitized masking in web interactions. This paper argues how both complement and expand our understanding of the human body and narrative capacity of the human face.

Creatively Grotesque Covid-Masks

Out of the different coverages of Coronavirus and debates concerning the "mask culture" around the world, BBC News covered the essence of the debate suggesting that "Why some people embrace masks while others shun them is not just about government directives and medical advice – it's also about culture and history, a debate over evidence, and even about personal liberties" (Wong). The masked body has become a central issue of discussion, a behavioral and social norm, especially in public places where social distancing is not possible. It is interesting that as health advisories issued during the pandemic shifted the attention towards the human face, varied artists added a constructive twist to this bleak situation. Besides the most common disposable surgical mask, N95 and FFP2 masks with filters, people also used cloth masks. The word "mask" in the Covid-19 world is intrinsically a polysemy, because people explored Corona mask-making and physiognomy with ordinary household items like vegetables, tissue paper, flowers, soft toys, CDs, brown bag, assorted plastic bottles, fishing nets, empty cigar packets, reused plastic, masks with zippers, etc. Such formulation of the "grotesque body" in facial texts is dialogic in the sense that it encodes open-endedness, part of the concept of grotesque. As explained in the book *Grotesque Revisited: Grotesque and Satire in the Post/Modern Literature of Central and Eastern Europe*:

> One of the essential features of the grotesque is a certain aesthetic, ontological, and axiological confusion that is formed from the union of opposing connections. The contradictory union of the grotesque is comprised of a plethora of incongruous, heterogeneous elements: real and fantastic, tragedy and comedy, adoration and insult, vitality and martyrdom, beauty and disgust, creation and destruction, honor and deception, and so forth. The grotesque encompasses and integrates many varied incoherent traditional forms of artistic expression such as satire, parable, irony, parody, caricature, burlesque, libel, feuilleton, artistic, deformation, poetics of turpitude, nonsense, humor of the absurd, and hyperbole (Kaleda 75).

Adding to this thorough-going definition, masks can be seen to be what Erving Goffman calls the "sign-vehicles" (Goffman 1), manifested in today's context, with the visibility of surgical masks, their overt presence, the color blue.

The disposable blue mask connotes immediate societal problems. Once heterogeneity and grotesque are added to this, we discover how certain covert problems like mental stress, economic disability and bodily abuses use the medium of mask-art to foreground individual crises.

The commonality between the folk art of mask making and the heterogeneous artistic expressions of Covid-mask is that both emerge from the masses. The question of availability of materials in the isolation of home is also a concern, one met by people exploring the capability of quotidian or ordinary materials available in many homes. An instance of folk mask created from household organic objects are the face masks of the inhabitants of the Majuli Island in Assam, India, where indigenous substances likes clay, cow dung, cloth strips, bamboo framework, and dyes made from vegetables are used by the mask-makers to craft mythical faces. The restrictions imposed on people's mobility due to social distancing norms, generated imaginations in the indoor Covid mask-making process, and encouraged tangible grotesque face-masks and soft sculptures. One of the prominent artists to do so is the Iceland based textile designer ÝrJóhannsdóttir, aka Ýrúrarí, who likewise uses local supplies, like the Majuli *khanikars* (*mask-makers*). This artist explores the three-dimensional version of the human body, visibly the muscular organ tongue, as a knitwear mask, an exaggerated mobile yarn-sculpture. This process of upcycling (reusing waste and unwanted materials in a creative manner) is similar to the folk art of mask-making because it is eco-friendly. Ýrúrarí is a surrealist, who expresses the emotion of fear in her masks in order to generate a feeling of repulsion, usual to the aesthetics of grotesque, a sentiment that in this case is also emblematic of social distancing. Thomas Wright, in his book *A History of Caricature and Grotesque*, mentions a similar kind of grotesque body with the tongue lolling out (like Ýrúrarí's art), in the church of Stanford-upon-Avon. He explains that such art "was calculated especially to produce its effect upon the middle and lower classes, and mediaeval art was, perhaps more than anything else, suited to mediaeval society, for it belonged to the mass and not to the individual" (148). Wright furthermore suggests that such depictions deliver "inner meanings through outward forms" (149). In the contemporary scenario as well, the hy-

perbolic Ýrúrarí knit-tongues are face-arts, which archives the stay-at-home restriction, while the contemplation of body distortions project the psychological conflicts of a sudden indoor mode of living. The grotesque art is a sheer reminder of disease and Ýrúrarí's dialogic body both converses about and conveys it.

Similarly, San Francisco artist Daniel Baskin provides a new extension of Covid-mask art. Baskin "launched the Relaying Risk Face project—masks that do not interfere with face recognition technology (for example, unlocking smartphones)" (Shatokhina), by creating look-alike-masks, tech-faces, with prints of the lower face region of the user, giving the effect of face-on-face, or the illusion of a second-face. While it is important to note how masks "are sometimes treated as sculpture by art historians and aesthetic anthropologists, such treatments ignore the illusion of "wearableness" which separates mask from sculpture" (Grimes 508-509). In the case of Covid-masks, Baskin considers the wearableness and everyday use, especially the effectiveness of not hindering the technological advancement of cell phones' biometric software application and unique recognition of faces during the pandemic. Instead of being disabled by the virus, this innovation from Baskin's product company 'Maskalike' is realistic in nature. Its grotesqueness lies in the ability to wear somebody else's face (an allusion to the "faceless men" cult of the popular *Game of Thrones* narrative), apart from the skin-on-skin illusion given by the mask. This technological adaptability of Covid-mask can be grouped into what Sandra Reeve calls the "environmental body" in the book *Nine Ways of Seeing the Body*: "a co-creating, immanent body, a body constantly becoming within a changing environment, where body and the spaces in between bodies are considered to be equally dynamic" (35).

Health organizations have pointed out that the human mouth acts as an orifice source of contagion in the Coronavirus infected society. It is a zone of sensitivity, and it is advised that this body boundary be masked. A third innovation in this regard can be categorized as the face-hugger mask. One such mask is crafted by James Body (featured in My Modern Met store) with fifty-nine part leather scraps; another mask-art is needle felted in technique, led by the

Portugal artist Cristina Rodo. They depict an alien creature, parasitoid organism, with creeping legs, hugging their faces, and this facial claustrophobia signifies the everyday bodily inconvenience and subjugation caused by the virus. Adhering to the characteristic of grotesque mentioned above and delineated in *Grotesque Revisited*, there is a co-existence of creation and destruction in their art. They dwell on the idea of an attack by a symbolic alien creature, invading the normal lifestyle. The fourth artist who created offline modes of grotesque-masks that embody the psychological perspectives, instincts, adaptability, emotions and imaginations during the pandemic is the Cree/Weenusk based artist Dolores Gull. Her indigenous plague doctor's mask resembles the preserved beaked mask, exhibited in the Berlin-centered German Historical Museum or Deutsches Historisches Museum, which provides the following context:

> To protect themselves from highly contagious diseases doctors wore protective hoods like the plague mask from our permanent exhibition. The face was completely covered by a cotton velvet mask and the wearer breathed through two small holes in the 'beak', which held herbs or sponges soaked in vinegar. These were believed to filter the air and repel disease. Glass lenses covered the eyes to ward off the patient's gaze, in case the illness spread by eye-contact. The plague mask was coated with a layer of wax on the inside and came with a cloak-like leather costume to cover the entire body, forming a protective suit comparable to those used today in the isolation wards of modern hospitals (Deutsches Historisches Museum).

Following a similar line of thought Gull reconstructed a Covid-mask, the famous *medico della peste* mask, with the grotesque bird-beak and over-coat fully covering the body, erstwhile popular as a seventeenth century plague protection for doctors, a PPE prototype. Gull gives an indigenous and floral touch to her bodice and overall appearance. The grotesqueness of the original plague doctors, with a hint of the death mask, is erased in Gull's conception, which incorporates only the mimesis of the mask framework. The bird-beaked mask is not only a delineation of the return of the fatal plague situation, but also a performance. However,

this rendition is not wholly grotesque in nature, because it limits the grotesque to only one location, the face; the rest of the anatomy is accentuated as feminine in attractively colored fabric. One definition of "mask," suggested in the book *The Mask Handbook: A Practical Guide* explains:

> The word has both positive and negative meanings. As a noun, the interpretation covers a host of artefacts [sic] with a range of uses, from the utilitarian such as the mask that protects, like sunglasses or a welder's helmet, to the theatrical. [...] But as a verb, the negative aspect comes to the fore, suggesting concealment or deceit, either of the face or person, or of emotions or intentions (Wilsher 11-12).

Missing from this definition is also its import as a symbolic apparition of the virus-led society. The plague doctor new-mask is a cyclical fashion accessory as well, which finds mention in the book *Experimental Fashion: Performance Art, Carnival and the Grotesque Body*. "Carnivalised time" (Granata 103) is a reference to Bakhtin's work that "argued that cyclical time played an extremely important role within the carnival and the culture of folk humour and was opposed to official time, which was characterised by an apparent stability and pretensions to eternity" (Granata 103). Viewed in this way, Covid-masks are not only representative masks, but also tools of humor, embraced as a fashion in "becoming". They are subjected to recycling. They also lack perpetuity of usage.

Body Embodiments and Tech-face
ower region of the face generated other problems, and one such is put forth by the hearing-impaired community, who largely rely on lip reading / speechreading as a means of communication. Because of the lack of window on the mask, certain impediments and disadvantages arose, especially inside medical institutions. Anissa Mekrabech, a French leather designer, introduced the idea of a clear mask, or mask with a sheer window for the lips, an innovation that resolves the mask-problem for many people. This non-grotesque mask (one that does not generate the common response of repulsion or disgust, as opposed to the grotesque aesthetics discussed in *Grotesque Revisited*) is commendable as adaptability art that embraces the tech-face of Covid-mask

projects. It also overturns the usage of theatrical masks, which liberates the audience's minds from the real world to a fantastic realm (of death, other world, and underworld), while the Covid-mask rather shifts our attention to the actuality of the human bodies and ordains new mechanisms to sustain in a practical world. This dichotomy adds to the conceptualization of the term "mask" as polysemantic.

Considering the wider discourse of mask, the issue of masking human faces is also significant, as another shift in video communication has occurred due to the Coronavirus pandemic, one with a stronger impact on human health and changing perspectives: of looking at (online) human bodies. The "work-from-home" or remote work lifestyle has instigated new and varied body etiquettes (e.g., how to regulate a work space inside a domestic space or how to dress for the audience). Multiple challenges have also been recorded, the first being the new fragmented identity of the self: as a face possessing "the disposition of 'zooming in' with a focus on the minutoise in digitally-mediated self-presentation and self appropriation" (Baldwin 1), rather than on a complete full-size body. This hyper-visibility of the facial region in online video conferencing modes tends to become a body-problem, as platforms like Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Cisco Webex, Facebook, Snapchat and GoToMeeting, make people body-conscious. These technologies open to us the micro-details of our faces, and with this self-reflection "contemporary subjects are becoming phenomenologists of their own identities" (Baldwin 2). Sandra Reeve remarks that a phenomenological body "engages with notions of body-mind" (Reeve 14). Like artworks of past, Parmigianino's painting *Self-portrait in a Convex Mirror* or Roy Lichtenstein's *Girl in Mirror*, the Coronavirus situation encouraged the image of the "self", in this case a digital embodiment of the quarantined body, with the possibilities of appropriations, filters and edits, thereby highlighting the grotesque proportions of the body which needs to be "fixed".

The pandemic has largely affected how we think about our online bodies (as represented and witnessed on screen) and if it is possible to "download human consciousness" (Hayles 1) in a world relying excessively on virtual realities and live streaming for conveying both knowledge and

personae. The stay-at-home restraint and the constant need for video conferencing in order to resume work, clarified the enhancement of technology in our daily lives and how it can affect human bodies. One such composition during the Coronavirus lockdown is what is popularly called the "Zoom-face" with fatigue induced by the Zoom application. This Zoom-face is a tech-face, a technologically exhausted body-part, and sometimes a grotesque face, which "can be unnerving...a person's enlarged face in your space... this large appearance and prolonged eye contact can register as intimidation" (Wiederhold 437), threatening the organic body. Applied to this context, such virtual realities act as "informational pathways connecting the organic body to its prosthetic extensions" (Hayles 2). It extends how the "posthuman view thinks of the body as the original prosthesis we all learn to manipulate, so that extending or replacing the body with other prostheses becomes a continuation of a process that began before we were born" (Hayles 3). Web interactions create an online extension of the human face, a prosthesis of kind, sometimes non-synchronous and this problematizes the question of which is the pure body or source body in case of virtual embodiment.

Indeed, the lockdown has shifted worldwide attention to the human face now, standing as an embodiment of virtual texts, expressing social cues. The corporeal or the tangible is displaced in the process with a more fluid and collapsible human form online. In parallel, the process of masking produced anonymous identities offline. A video conferencing application like Zoom provides a mirror which heightens self-objectification and self-body surveillance. To put it in another way, when we are constantly looking at ourselves there is "the internalization of an observer's perspective on one's own body" (Bailey et al 81), like a third party instigating doubt about facial proportions, size, color, acne, pigmentation, thereby causing anxiety. This can branch out to three directions: "avoidance (attempts to elude threats to one's body by disengaging in potential body image threat situations), appearance fixing (efforts to change one's outer appearance by means of concealment or methods to correct features perceived to be flawed), and positive rational acceptance (mental and behavioral activities that emphasize the use of positive self-care and rational self-

talk)" (Bailey et al 82). This entire process is a bodily confrontation, which most people want to mask by the use of virtual avatars. People want to edit their faces in a virtual space, which creates a constant demand for updated applications and filter lens. Comic stickers, background effects, are supposedly "improved" qualities in an application, which certainly distract our attention from the bodily insecurities. What we see on-screen is a template of our real face, a hyperbolic tech-face, a masked face, which temporarily moderates our doubtful body image, but co-creates the need for a new-body.

This online experience turns somatic with a range of body ambiguities, like present/absent, active/dormant, visible/invisible, fragmented/complete, enhanced/blurred, edited/non-edited bodies in visual communications. Another significant technological body assembled during the quarantined period is the invading body, often termed as "zoom bombing", a prank attempt and a crime scenario. To refer India's *Delhi Policy Group* report:

> In March 2020, a new verb was created – 'Zoom bombing' – referring to the practice of uninvited users crashing into conversations and making threatening or obscene calls. In April, 2020 the Indian Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT-IN) issued advisories that multiple vulnerabilities have been reported in video conferencing applications which could allow an attacker to obtain sensitive information on the targeted system. This followed media reports that 500,000 Zoom accounts had been sold on the dark web anonymously (Ghosh).

The invading party "used to broadcast pornographic images or threaten the people inside them" (Griffin), says The Independent, thus testifying a situation which needs policing. Bodies are thus "used" as objects of menace, and these transgressive societal problems of a life in home-isolation cannot go unobserved.

Conclusion

Mask and masking reflect bodily appropriations and coping techniques of the Covid-19 pandemic society. The offline grotesque half-mask is a focal point where experimental fashion, utility, imagination, design and the overarching death-trope meet. The online tech-face on the other hand opens ways of comprehending technological projects in relation to human body problems, mostly self-perceptions and security issues. What the Coronavirus infection does to the human body is not limited to a Covid-19-positive pathological body, but extends to the societal repercussions of domestic violence, depression, fear, anxiety, claustrophobia, and fluid digital identities. The "grotesque" aesthetics is one such upshot, subsequently highlighted as an expanding genre. Bodies during Covid-19 situation are contagious and ugly, beautified (by designer facial masks), exaggerated (by grotesque masks), or fragmented and enhanced (as a result of online video communication facial enhancements). Mask and masking techniques also communicate essential international issues such as disability studies intersecting with posthumanism and the already existing environmental pandemic of the planet. It opens avenues of "seeing" the body as contextual and cultural, ecological and environmental, subject and object and most importantly as a phenomenological body (Reeve 1). What we arrive at is that the discourse of the human body is an open system and the Covid-19 pandemic highlights the human-face as the nexus of interaction (both offline and web), a densely inscribed body-part, capable of signifying dynamic social changes.

About the Author

Jharna Choudhury is a Ph.D. student from the Department of English, Tezpur University, Assam, India. She is currently working on the representation of grotesque bodies in contemporary fiction.

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