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## Masked Venice Unveiled

The Venetian Art of Identity Construction

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# 1 Introduction

Vividly recalling my very first days in the lagoon city at the beginning of carnival season in February – astonished, captivated and struck with amazement by the overwhelmingly intense visual as well as artistic impressions of lavishly masked and sumptuously disguised Venetians blending into the unique architectural setting of "La Serenissima" – the time spent in this historical place would ignite a deep interest in the semiotics of masks and carnival as a social practice, a collectively shared event that originated from a long-standing tradition of a pleasure-seeking, libertine 'weltanschauung' within a strictly hierarchically organised society. Melting together with the surrounding space of the 'Queen of the Adriatic' where Orient and Occident seem to coalesce, it is during carnival season when the human face mysteriously hidden behind a mask interplays with a voluptuously disguised body, both thus becoming pure emotion, boldly mirroring a parallel reality that appears to be preserved by the ensemble of majestically rising edifices (Ackroyd, 2011 (2009):325).

In addition to this intense experience, it was one lastingly impressive scene of Stanley Kubrick's monumental film "Eyes Wide Shut" starring Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman, which would furthermore intensify my fascination with this type of art, struck by the sensation and sudden cognisance of how a veiled face and a merely naked body could concur. A face covered with a mask which worn by an otherwise completely nude human being would thus no longer elicit the impression of watching a person stripped bare of clothes move, but rather induce the startling sensation of finding oneself with a perfectly dressed individual that was yet but a generic representation of human form deprived of any identity.

Departing from these two different, though equally fierce perceptions generated over the course of my semester abroad in Venice, this thesis intends to explore the intrinsic mechanisms of masks as an emblematic signifier and carrier of socio-cultural meaning, a representation of life in the lagoon city that condenses in this craft, while illuminating the complex of identity construction erected upon the assumption of a deeply rooted, intrinsically given human essence besides inquiring the phenomenon of *communitas* from within the total dissolution of social structure during carnival. Placed within the context of heritage discourse and globalisation, thus drawing on the commodification of the lagoon city, an account on selling authenticity shall be provided, based on the decline of traditional mask producers who are against all odds fervently attempting to preserve and protect their unique craft from being commercialised in order to augment the influx of money generated by the tourism industry, serving the purposes of those who are in search of cheap souvenirs (Ghisi, 2013:15).

Once considered 'the sum of the (whole) universe', Venice can be read as a paradigm of European culture, a model city par excellence as its inherently artificial character would deride any notion of the natural, thereby becoming both, the most urban as well as the most fictive and surreal place (Ackroyd, 2011 (2009): 218).

Lastingly affected by the intensity of life in Venice where history was conserved in the architecturally conditioned premises of a social space wrapped up in the thick layers of the past which are all deeply instilled with meaning, my anthropological look would reveal the

bounded nature of its reality that seemed to culminate in the cultural and historical implications of the mask as an emblem of societal texture bound to a uniquely lived place. Under this gaze, the city should come to life, claiming a voice of its own, a supernatural body suspended in time. The analysis of masks adjacent to carnival in Venice must consequently be seen and understood as inherently contained by a living entity, rather than a mere place. As follows, the interactions unfolding between citizens, tourists as well as visitors and 'la Serenissima' become an epigram of socially construed and interpreted reality, anchored in a dense atmosphere of meaning both historical and societal, owing to its being encapsulated in the concrete space of the lagoon city. Here, all spheres of cultural being and social existence seem to be interconnected, inherently interwoven with the course of historical events that tinged the fabric of city life over the evolution of centuries long bygone.

## 2 The Tradition of Carnival

A triumphal liberation from social constraints, carnival, as illustrated by Goethe, is a "festivity the people give to themselves" ("Una festa che il popolo dà a se stesso" cited according to Sacco, 2014:5)), thus becoming a moment of abundance, equality and carelessness hereby reversing the public order for a predetermined period.

Originating from the Latin expression 'carne vale', hence 'farewell to meat' or 'a farewell to the flesh' folk etymologies hinted at the carefree spirit of the approaching festivities, whereas the Italian translation 'carnem levare', that is 'to remove meat' indicated the prohibition to eat meat during Lent (Sacco, 2014:6).

The social event of carnival, according to Bakhtin, has to be understood as a spectacle without stage as no dichotomous polarisation into actors and spectators takes place (1969:48). In contrast to a mere performance of a jointly shared act, carnival becomes a collectively lived moment of reversed reality, for the factual structure of society is suspended, hereby eliminating long-established social distances that rest upon an assumed hierarchy of intersubjectively negotiated 'categories of being'. As a consequence, carnival constructs a new ground for personal interaction and human relations, hence eliminating connotations of social rank and status while at the same time invoking an indeterminate, sensuous sphere unfolding between reality and play (Bakhtin, 1969:49). With these means the pathos of carnival rests upon the assumptions of a dynamically constituted world, subsequently allowing for a reversion of established order and rule, celebrating the fluidity and relativity of allegedly trans-fixed categories of socio-cultural existence. Stepping back from an absoluteness of thought, carnival enters a discursive field of definitory inbetweenness which claims a new form of 'Weltempfinden' – worldly sensation (id., p.58).

From their earliest beginnings, public festivities in Venice require an interpretation as a politically motivated act, initially promoted by doge Pietro Orseolo I (976-978) who led by the Ancient Roman dictum 'panem et circenses' targeted at thereupon reinforcing a sense of patriotism besides creating a spirit of competitiveness (Sacco, 2014:9). As both religion and state affairs rested and converged in the hands of the government, manifestations of a jointly shared social reality such as religious festivities or official celebrations ultimately became an issue of public state intervention concerned with a management of said feasts.

Venetian Carnival must be therefore read as a social act in part catering to the strictures of Catholic Rome – as Pope Gregor XIII. came to state: "I am Pope everywhere, except from Venice (Cited according to Ackroyd, 2011(2009):456)– for while the rest of the religious community sank into pious deference directly after Christmas, the lagoon city indulged in carnival forty days before Lent, frolicsomenly celebrating the pleasures of the flesh (Lovric, 2005:105). Reminiscent of both, an elegant ball and a county fair, the general atmosphere and collectively shared spirit prevailing in 'la Serenissima' during carnival, quoting from Johnson, "turned Venice into a stage and made everyone a performer" (2011:14).

Earliest records of the Venetian Carnival thereby revolve around the year 1094, as they found mention in the notes of medieval chroniclers who described the days before Lent (Horodowich, 2009:168). Made official by a decree edited by the Senate in 1296 which de-

clared the carnival period to begin on Saint Stephen's Day and then continuing to Shrove Tuesday, hereby turning the last day before Lent into a public holiday, the duration of the festivities was succinctly increased. In this way, they would finally last for over six months - starting in October which coincided with the opening of the theatre season - until their official end in 1797 publicly enforced with the arrival of Napoleon (Sacco, 2014:9f.).

According to Bressanello (2010), the recent survival of carnival, which goes back to the late 1970s, was primarily initiated by Venetians and civic associations who were intent on preserving this particularly Venetian tradition, before it got quickly transformed into a tourism event, with major international corporations intervening (Machan, 2009). Despite these recent developments that underscore and feed in a global tendency of relentless consumerism, the re-invention of Venetian carnival as a reminiscence of those formerly glorious centuries illustrates how life in the city on the water was characterised by an inexhaustible inventiveness concerning the unique ways of cladding existence in outstanding as well as meaningful form (Wellens, 2000:149).

The history and tradition of carnival in Venice has on that account to be understood as intrinsically interwoven with the wearing of masks which endowed with a vast array of meaning and unique forms of use succinctly became the protagonist of the festivities (Sacco, 2014:21). Tracing the origins of the Venetian masks, the earliest documents date back to a time as early as the 13<sup>th</sup> century when they were first mentioned officially in a law regulating their use. Uncertainty prevails however concerning the habit of wearing them even in everyday life, hence outside of carnival season. Until its official ban in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the period of donning masks as an 'ordinary' piece of attire could last for up to six months, consequently representing a feature of the societal structure of the city enacted, lived and reproduced by its residents (Johnson, 2011:14). An aristocratic republic, the highly stratified Venetian society was characterised by its unique social system that consisted of noblemen and the ordinary people while resting upon a democratically organised republic of merchants which primarily served as a political realm for the wealthy upper class.

Analysing the intrinsic mechanisms of the Venetian carnival, demands an all-encompassing approach which involves the social practice of the ritual as a constituent of societal formation. As per Bakhtin, carnival represents a total social event marked by a transformation of social structure into a realm of concretely existed reality, a performance of a reversed order of things in which all individuals participate intersubjectively (Bakhtin in Steigert, 1985). In this context, masks served to intensify and re-affirm the carnivalesque as they would, in contrast to a dogmatically fixed worldly order, "offer a universe that is open-ended and forever in flux" (Johnson, 2011:183). At the same time, carnival became an emblem and allegory of a ritually performed renewal of the social, political and religious community, an asseveration of a re-integrated public order (Ackroyd, 2011 (2009):380). The visual and artistic character of the Venetian carnival furthermore provided a space for free expression, based on social invention and cultural production that according to Steward went beyond a mere interpretation of shared reality (1997:22).

Combining masks and carnival, a second genesis of the world would be induced as their symbiotic relationship recreated the social fabric through a reversion of the factual and the mystic, the real and the irrational, thus moulding, compiling and constructing an additional realm of intersubjectively unfolding interaction (Wellens, 2000:10).

### 3 The Art of Venetian Masks

"In Venice, carnival of course meant masks, but masks did not always mean carnival" (2011:49), Johnson felicitously portrays the custom of disguise in the lagoon city where masks represented a commonly accepted item of clothing, a neither luxurious nor expensive accessory that formed part of the Venetian conventional everyday attire.

Originating from the medieval Latin term *màsca(m)*, uncertainty prevails pertaining to the etymology of the Italian *masca* which corresponds to a manifold array of meanings (Sacco, 2014:18). Whereas a first hypothesis establishes a connection with the pre-Indo-European *masca* translated as *fantasma* and thereby interpreted as the spectre, a second theory suggests a derivation that refers to the Ligurian and Piedmontese dialect, where it was associated with *striga*, according to Johnson "a hag who devoured men, poisoned children, and screeched like a bat", thus implying a capacity to bewitch and enchant (2011:56). In this context it found mention in the Edictum Rothari, a compilation of Lombard law issued in 643, stipulating "Si quis eam strigam, quod est masca, clamaverit", thus underscoring a diabolical connotation which can furthermore be found within the nexus between *masca* and the Greek *lamia*, that translates into voracious. A further meaning assumed is *larva*, initially denoting the souls of the deceased "coming back to earth to haunt the living" before gradually assuming the significance of the illusionary, the fictive (id., p.57). Speculations prevail that in full knowledge of these associations, Carl Linnaeus used the term *larva* in order to specify the wingless state of an insect, an allusion to the evolutionary state of a butterfly (Sacco, 2014:18). Following the etymological origins of both terms *larva* and *masca* accordingly reveals a noteworthy correspondence with the phantasmagoric, illuminating the direct link to the spirit world (Johnson, 2011:58).

Officially mentioned for the first time in 1268, some link the apparition of masks in Venice to the conquest of the Levant and the defeat of Constantinople in 1204, as a result of which masks, along with wood, wheat and spices, were returned to the lagoon city. However, little evidence persists that might credibly testify to a general emergence of the Venetian masks as well as the motives concerning its principle use at the very beginning (Johnson, 2011:55).

Tracing the semiotics of masks, its ubiquitous prevalence in human culture as a signifier of meaning, an artefact held to convey social relevance, a communicator of the divine, bears witness to its intrinsic value of reinforcing societal order while conferring structure to communities and societies, thus inducing social cohesion (Sacco, 2014:19). Of decisive ontocultural significance to people, an interpretation of masks as a purely aesthetic or artistic piece of adornment or clothing, thus construing them as of mere concrete, objective and solely representational value, would accordingly fall short of fully and adequately expounding their significance that is deeply rooted in society as a shared community. Striving towards a definitory conceptualisation of objects and for that reason pursuing the etymological origins of the Latin term 'obiectum' which derived from a past participle of 'obicere', thus 'counterposing', 'setting against', an intrinsically relational character of the 'object-state' is rendered obvious. In this way, a reference to masks as an object reveals an underlying, necessary interaction with a human counterpart, a relation of reciprocal exchange that constitutes an actuality and verity of its 'socio-objectional being' (Kohl, 2003:118). Based on this

assumption of a mutual interaction unfolding between subject and object, cultural practice evidences, yet testifies to a perception of things as bearers of meaning, for they become a signifier conveying an intention.

As the mask, in this way, operates as said communicator of meaning, it transgresses reality for it modifies, moreover even alters its wearer, who becomes detached from an existence lived while prior to that subduing a second socialisation, for the moment vested in anonymity (Krieger, Kutscher, 1960:21). Tracing the primal function of masks, Toscani underlines and hints at their assumed ability of increasing the magico-religious power of mankind, as the individual ceases to exist as a human being while becoming 'another', a 'homo religious' or 'zoon politikón' (1972:15). The origins of the mask can accordingly be rooted in primitive, cultic festivities that aimed at a ritually performed purgation associated with rebirth and regeneration (id., p.16). Disguising the evidently overt features of humanity, the mask allows for an establishment of direct connections with the numinous and sacred, transcending the spheres of the profane and extending reality into the realm of the divine, thus blurring the concrete lines of a worldly existence.

In this very context a clearly drawn distinction between ritually connotated masks – as prevalent in many African societies (Compare Kecskési/Vajda, 1997:11ff) – and their Venetian counterparts evidences a strongly differing purpose, for whereas masks are generally associated with the supernatural – that is with the divine – and thus primarily used as a tool for ritual performance in most societies, traditions as well as customs in the lagoon city determined another application besides employment whose terms shall be discussed later.

In its very essence, the mask becomes above all a representation of a secondary, divine visage which at the same time bears traits of the human and the animalesque, while portraying adumbrations of the heroic, the terrifying or the comic. Accordingly, these are converted to a set of features the individual is to put on in place of his own face (Calendoli, 1983:13), thus sometimes radically effacing what formerly constituted the wearer's personality. The transformation occurring hereby encompasses not only the exterior appearance of facial physiognomy, but furthermore affects an inner constitution of the individual, as it allows for as much as it conditions a thorough metamorphosis. Acutely aware of the intrinsic mechanisms of masquerade and masks as a *modus operandi*, Calendoli pointedly underlines the capacity to transform, rejecting the commonly shared belief of its purportedly concealing as well as ensconcing qualities (1983:13). At the same time, "a mask is pure confrontation" owing to its immobile features, its inescapable stare and its incomplete surface, as Johnson accentuates adroitly, hinting at its empty facade that by announcing an absence calls for being endowed with life (2011:59).

A piece of clothing, the aforementioned object-status of masks reveals their elemental particularity for according to Basu they exemplify "an ontological inbetweenness" (2017:6). Neither solely disguise nor purely art, the mask becomes an intermediary between disparate realities, marked by a double-consciousness which transcends the given as it straddles the social system as an assumedly immutable entity, offering a performative field of negotiating a novel identity (id., p.8). The inbetweenness of masks hereby opens an "interrogatory, interstitial space" (Bhabha, 1994:3) for through the act of covering and hiding the overt, it induces an anti-essentialism of pre-conceived figures or categories of thought by adding another layer of factual being, that is lived reality. On these terms they correspondingly be-

come a liminal substrate, an entity of transitory vagueness as the world is mirrored through the mask, both from within and from without, while at the same time being condensed on its surface. Speaking with Rea, the meaningful potential of masquerade consists not simply in metaphorical presentation (2017:104). On the contrary, they are rather endowed with a "productive capacity" that generates modes of interaction which are held in suspension, conferring the multiplicities of human thought and action. In this respect, the mask claims its own life, a concentrated expression of reality condensed while far from being a static surface, it dynamically reflects the world, vividly interacting with both its wearer and the immediate environment.

Differentiating between the different types of masks prevalent in Venice, they can be however classified into two main categories, the Carnival Masks and those belonging to the 'Commedia dell'Arte', whereas the origins and subsequent evolution of donning masks in public outside of carnival season must be understood as intrinsically linked to the hierarchical structure of Venetian society.

Particularly popular from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, it was these theatre troupes, known as the 'Commedia', that enacting and performing intricately complex as much as convoluted stories travelled all over Italy. Characterised by their ample reserves of creative inventiveness, they lastingly shaped a new theatre tradition owing to a deliberate use of the mask as a tool to liberate the actors while fixing their characters (Belloni, 2002:37). The various characters of the Italian "Commedia dell'Arte", which in the 17<sup>th</sup> century was largely shaped and strongly influenced, partly even revolutionised by the great Venetian playwright Carlo Goldoni (Sacco, 2014:20), could as a result of that remain unchanged across the theatre world, for a specific name, attire and mask helped to establish a generic type which constituted an epitomised version of the figure, immediately recognisable despite altering plots and shifting roles (Johnson, 2011:67). In addition to that, Johnson illustrates how the mask served its generic purpose of establishing a certain degree of separation between role and performer as it aided to reinforce a distinct set of features attributed to a character while concealing the identity of the actor, thus keeping "a distance between the person and his persona" (2011:76). The "Commedia dell'Arte" accordingly derived its particularity from the spontaneous play of the actors rather than the plot, as they were above all held to amuse and entertain instead of "conveying emotional depth or development" (Johnson, 2011:70). A genesis of exaggerated typologies of human behaviour rooted in the enactment of complex roles partly derived from ancient Greek mythology - such as the melancholic, the phlegmatic, the choleric and the sanguine (Wellens, 2000:10) - 'la Commedia' gave rise to and featured an array of fixed characters. These encompassed figures such as 'Arlecchino', the prankster, 'Pantalone', the old Venetian merchant, or the 'Dottore', at times a lawyer, at others a medical doctor, which subsequently served as a mirror of society at that time. Of highly generic form, they would then find their way into Venetian Carnival, too (Wellens, 2000:10), that however furthermore knew and cured certain types of its own. In recent years reminiscent of an amalgamation between Orient and Occident and thus an allusion to the dense history of the former empire of the Republic of Venice, among the masks prevalent during carnival it was back then mainly the *baúta* and the *moretta* that as the most common ones represented an integral part of costume and disguise in the lagoon city. While a lack of clarity prevails concerning its etymological origins, some claiming it to stem from the Venetian exclamation "bau-bao" used to frighten children, the term *baúta* was most likely derived from the Ger-

man verb 'behüten' (to protect, to shield) (Reato, 1988:51). At the point of its emergence in the 18th century mainly worn by aristocrats, for – safely covered from curious gazes – they could according to Ghisi anonymously participate in the Carnival festivities without revealing their public authority (2013:21), the *baúta* gradually became the most prevalent accoutrement chosen to disguise and veil identity, hence finding its way into quotidian attire. Worn by men and women alike, the *baúta* was more than just a mask, moreover involving a whole outfit, thus giving "its wearer total anonymity" (Reato, 1988:51). In this respect, it featured a degree of uniformity for the mostly black, cape-like plaid called *tabarro* and the white mask referred to as *larva* or *volto* it involved, induced a sense of conformity among its wearers (Toscani, 1972:54). Covering the face, the *volto* (Italian: 'face') - both the most generical and typical among the variety of masks donned by the Venetians - was made of leather, thus perfectly fitting the wearer's head who would preserve it for a "lifetime of use" (Ghisi, 2013:22). Another peculiarity of the *baúta* consisted in the length of the period concerning its employment for in contrast to the other types of masks prevalent, according to Toscani, it already appeared on the first Sunday of October, then present until the 16<sup>th</sup> December and re-emerging ten days later in order to dictate the daily scenery until Ash Wednesday before gradually forming part of everyday attire worn all year long (1972:56). Untouchable by law, the *baúta* served as an ultimate protection against intrusion in one's privacy, so that a loss of the mask literally translated into 'losing face'. In contrast to the *baúta* the *moretta* however was exclusively worn by girls and ladies. A huge success in Venice, it was considered highly erotic and elicited Casanova to later write that "it was impossible to imagine a more interesting thing." (Casanova, vol. II, p.88). The *moretta* hereby consisted in a delicately small, mostly black velvet mask which was worn with a finely drawn little hat and accompanied by a carefully chosen attire besides suitable veils (Ghisi, 2013:29). That way it drew attention to both hair and attire of its wearer. Also called 'the mute', its particularity furthermore stemmed from the fact that in order to fix it in place, the wearer had to hold a small wooden piece between the teeth thus making it impossible to talk (Reato, 1988:57).

Another well-known figure, frequently associated with the vast array of Venetian costumes, was the 'Medico della Peste', the pest doctor, whose attire involved a clearly distinguishable mask (Reato, 1981:48). Invented in the 16<sup>th</sup> century by the French doctor Charles de Lormes, the mask was marked by bird-like features such as a long beak and small, round holes for the eyes that were covered with glass, thereby serving a purely pragmatic purpose of protecting the face (Maschere Veneziane e della Commedia dell'Arte, 2012). Filled with disinfecting odours and herbs, the air breathed was supposedly purified when running through aforementioned beak. In addition to that, the costume comprised a long tunica made of linen or waxed canvas, thus prohibiting an intrusion of bacteria, besides a hat with large pleats that was intended to cover both head and ears. A maritime city of immense international traffic, Venice was constantly exposed to a transmission of pathogens imported from foreign nations which subsequently facilitated the contraction of diseases and plagues such as the pest (Reato, 1981:48). Initially not directly connected to carnival, Reato points out how the costume of the pest doctor gradually found its way into it, morbidly playing with the notion of the deathly while - associated with the transitory – recalling the fleeting that becomes reversed during the frolic festivities (1981:48)

Apart from theatre and carnival, the significance as well as the meaning of masks worn as a common attire on a daily basis extended beyond these two social events, serving a variety of

further purposes other than disguise (Johnson, 2011:105). Correspondingly the art of Venetian disguise moreover involved a certain etiquette and social code. Its main purpose hereby was to render anonymous the overt, to hide the secret and to veil the private, thus fully dedicated to the art of discretion that was celebrated in 'la Serenissima' at all times. The moment Venetians started to incorporate the donning of masks into their quotidian life, this particular piece of accoutrement, speaking with Johnson, "substantially altered the texture of public life" (2011:105). Whereas masking in 1608 used to be limited to Lent, uncompromisingly surveyed by the authorities, besides furthermore being prohibited during mass, these constrictions stated by decree were succinctly altered. In this respect, Toscani points out how the wearing of masks was subjected to a centrally organised, normative system of regulation that was the responsibility of the so-called Council of Ten, one of the major governing bodies of the Republic of Venice (1972:61).

As the mask would promise to give a certain degree of anonymity, thus prompting an excuse for free conduct, the regulation of masks encompassed an act of legislating morality in a city renowned for its libertine, pleasure-seeking character (Sacco, 2014:27f.). An expression of this, both prostitution and gambling formed an integral part of the social reality, staunchly affecting the public by posing a threat to the protection and up-keeping of mores (Reato, 1981:8). Over the course of the centuries, masks accordingly remained a central issue of legislation which aimed at prohibiting certain abusive forms of use (such as men disguised as woman), thus partly banning them from daily life. At the same time however, these regulations assumed a prescriptive character, that would for example require women to enter theatre and opera houses but *in maschera*, otherwise denying them access (id., p.11).

Prone to be seduced by vice, the masked Venetian was able to move around and act anonymously in the casino, the so-called *Ridotto*, since huge sums of money won and lost could not be attributed to certain persons. The vice of the game hereby was so deeply inscribed into the subset of habits ferociously cured in 'la Serenissima' that the decree issued by the *Maggior Consiglio* in 1774 which stipulated the closing of the *Ridotto* soon after resulted in a relocation to the many cafés and taverns (Reato, 1981:11).

In a city of libertines, of merchants, of seafarers, the mask succinctly became an emblem of "the art of pretending" which according to Johnson purported a sphere of dissimulation, a subtle interplay with truth and pretence, of virtue and hypocrisy that in itself however assured the vision of a society erected upon the commonly shared ground of hiding and revealing (2011:93).

## 4 Masking Identity

Faultlessly disguised, the masks, gowns, dresses and costumes prevalent in Venice would, pursuant to Ghisi, liberate their wearers from any social constraints affiliated with a certain position held within the rigid system of hierarchically organised life in the lagoon city, owing to the sheer impossibility of identifying the person "behind" (2013:20). Blending in with the city's architectural structures – marked by the intriguing shapes of the buildings, the picturesque squares, the water swiftly reeling in the canals – the impeccably costumed Venetian could enjoy a degree of social freedom unparalleled at that time in Europe, for unrecognised by his fellow citizens, he or she remained "independent in one's deeds" as Charles Louis Montesquieu characterised life in 1728 (See Ghisi, 2013:31). The donning of masks subsequently transferred meaning "from who one is to how one behaves", while both, "protecting subjectivity and privatizing individual identity" (Steward, 1997:19). As a consequence, its wearer was (partly) liberated from the socio-cultural constraints imposed by the Venetian society, where codes of moral conduct placed considerable restrictions on its subjects that were held to serve the purposes of 'la Serenissima' in an all-encompassing, overarching manner (Ackroyd, 2011 (2009):108).

A subtle, delicately manoeuvred interplay of hiding and revealing, the act of disguising and wearing a mask hereby raises the question of identity formation apprehended and decoded on a broader onto-metaphysical level which encompasses the constitution of individual subjectivity attributed via a set of facial features recognised as distinctive of one person. Personal identity as a highly fluid, dynamic concept and construed as the yet largely persisting set of innermost character features, which are shaping and moulding a specific array of behaviours, attitudes and looks ascribed to an individual, accordingly requires an interpretative approach rooted in society as socio-psychological formative field. Combining "the intimate or personal world with the collective spaces of cultural forms and social relations" (Holland et al., 2003 (1998):5), it is by identities lived and performed that ways of being unfold, based on the central notion of human agency. However subjected to discursive powers, identities emerge from within specific formative practices while, as per Hall, corresponding to processes of (global) social change and evolution, thus arising in their historicity from the narrativization of the self (1996:4). In contrast to identification as a self-perpetuating act of constantly re-determining the contingent boundaries of selfhood, with this motivated by compensatory attempts to cope with the inconsistencies and imponderables of modern life, identity must be interpreted as cognitive traits that invoke the irreducibility of a coherent, unitary complex of personhood communicated via self-consciousness and self-reflection. These mechanisms allow for an objectification of the self, a positioning of one's own facticity within the conditions of a shared reality existed through relations of meaning (Alcoff, 2003:3). Speaking the "I", the individual enounces and proclaims its being-in-the-world, subsequently anchoring life in the manifold strata of a concrete, besides yet intendedly meaningful existence, projecting a version of individually moulded 'ontos' into the realms of being. At that point, a core feature defined as an intrinsic quality of identity reveals itself as deeply rooted in the human condition – an immutable, unchanging essence attached to individual life, inscribed into both body and mind alike. It is then by disguise, that these most basic

foundations of selfhood, these deeply rooted premises of individual life come to be challenged owing to the disruptive moment of detaching personhood from an individually lived body, moreover though from an individually exhibited face by means of masquerade.

Both visible but unrecognisable at the same time, the masked and disguised individual can be perceived without being 'seen', thus invoking the paradoxical dialectic of unveiling while hiding, of hiding but unveiling (Brusatin, 1985). In this manner, the donning of masks involves a reproduction of reality bound to a proliferation of individually exhibited faces that come along with roles enacted. Rendered "faceless", the mask operates in a dichotomous way, both borrowing and lending, taking and giving identity – thus, speaking with Pollock, trading individuality in for a blend of stereotypical features interpreted as subjectivity objectified, a mere character of a generic type (1995:582). Correspondingly, it oscillates between the subtle interplay of identity and non-identity, dynamically reinforcing the assumption of an inherently dialectical world order. As the mask in the first place accentuates human head and face alike while elevating both in the transgression of the quotidian, it furthermore simultaneously filters a human essence, the substrate of being in the condensed form of a worldly existence that comes to emanate from the surface of the crafted second visage (Lecoq, 1983:166). At the same time, it is only by masquerade and disguise that a deeper reality appears. A reversion of lived and existed identities takes place, as the mask becomes our real face (Schallück, 1977:30), extending the boundaries of factual being into the realms of the imaginative. No longer confined to a staunch, transfixed version of the own self, the mask operates in a liberating way, unlocking and therefore releasing the spheres of a contingent existence, as it allows for a projection of the "I" into constellations of reality previously nothing but envisioned and fantasised - thus even transgressing the purely imaginative for its projections inadvertently become part of reality. Wrapped in anonymity, the set of ascribed personality traits that assumedly constituted an individual's existence, seems to dissolve, get transformed by the mask, since the very same borrows from a unique array of newly arranged existential choices. It is then that the numinous value of masks comes to intervene. An adumbration of the ritually transformed substance of life, the masked face is henceforth rendered diaphanous, pellucid since it subsequently uncloses onto a field of interaction with the divine. In this respect, its cathartic value comes to be at stake. A surface of condensed meaning, the mask offers the possibility of transcending reality during rituals performed, owing to its purported similitude with the divine (Schneider-Lengyel, 1934:18). Man correspondingly approaches the supernatural by way of invoking his godlike potentials through the inventive act of giving himself a second face, thus recreating himself by extending the confines of his worldly existence into the spheres of the sacred (Toscani, 1972:19).

Broaching the issue of their historical genesis, an overview over the different types of masks prevalent and hereby characteristic of Venice reveals their intrinsic link to a whole array of attributes ascribed to a certain role embraced, thereby transcending the mere realm of physiognomy while extending into a hereof resulting social position. Subsequently endorsing a coherent character of the given array of different figures within the context of donning a mask, its choice must be considered not as solely moulding social identity, but even more as provoking a profound change of personality (Honigmann, 1977:270). Quoting Lévi-Strauss, the mask would become a "medium for men to enter interrelations with the [supernatural] world", a parallel universe obedient to as much as determined by the laws of contingency, an actualisation of my facticity as being-in-the-world (1961:19).

The art as much as practice of disguise and costume likewise conveys the impression of an intrinsic human desire to veil and to hide, a fascination with the obscure and unknown, while at the same time offering to release the temporarily limited enactment of social roles, thus extending a worldly existence into the realms of the imaginative, the figuratively envisioned (Sacco, 2014:22). Accordingly, a parallel reality seems to unfold as the personae chosen, adopted and interpreted appear to allow for a displacement of a metaphysical existence tied to ontological premises of a subject being, a transgression of a human condition fixed into a relentless set of rules that governed - and continue to do so - both body and mind (Foucault, 1979:35). Speaking with Crapanzano, costume and mask know to seduce with an elusively alluring promise to transform, thus invoking the possibility of the transgressive. As a result, they act as a social agent, that playfully creates a distance between realities lived and universes imagined (2004:125). Resting upon this duality of facticity and contingency, the mask itself reveals a dialectical ambiguity, for covering and hiding from the outside, it possesses an inner face which vividly interacts with the wearer, a contact zone, where clearly delineated spheres start to crumble, underlining the duplicity projected onto the 'real world' as inherently contained within itself.

In a broader sense, costume and disguise correspondingly involve a dispossession of the body whereas the masked face even sheds identity in order to release its wearer into the realm of the fantastic (Barrault, 1999 (1985):181). Both body and face acquire and adopt the rhythm of the masquerade which according to Hottier imposes its energy and dynamics onto the individual (1999 (1985):235) unfolding a ground of sublime, boundless interaction. Cognisant of its capacity to veil, the wearer of the mask enters a social field of anonymity, where the notion of individuality starts to crumble and dissolve, reversing subjectivity and objectivity as formerly constitutive of each other. Following this suspension of the idea of the individual as shaped through a binary opposition of 'self' and 'other', the self as a contained 'ontos', an existence of 'en-soi' and 'pour-soi' in order to quote from Sartre (2003 (1943):221f.), gets stripped bare of its assumedly most immovable besides incontestable features. The pleasure hereof taken consequently reveals a conscious, subtle interplay with reality, a performance that following Crapanzano "appear(s) to defy our assumption of a single, essentially cohesive [...] personality" as the subject succeeds in authentically merging categories of the self which transgress pre-given assumptions of personhood (2004:133). At the very same time, the visual as well as performative practice of disguise and masking invokes a societal transgression.

Departing from a socio-cultural code of accepted dress interpreted as the threshold of a society restricted by the margins of hierarchy, power and control, a condensed regime of sacred societal order culminating in quotidian attire comes to be at stake, that becomes endangered by the anonymity of costume and mask. In effect, the pre-set, seemingly incontestable nexus of master and slave locked into society and taken as a basic ordering principle starts to crumble under the equalising anonymity of the mask, thus resulting in a temporary dissolution of social strata while furthermore exceeding the three implicit facticities of human existence, namely age, status and sex (Brusatin, 1985) by negating them.

Attributing indexical value to the face, Cicero in 'Orator' refers to it as "the image of the soul" ("Nam ut imago est animi vultus, sic indices oculi", 60), a verbalisation that implies its eminent importance within the field of personality construction. An "unclothed condition", the face represents the medium for social interaction and communication, a display of emotions,

feelings and attitudes overtly worn in public space (Honigmann, 1977:277). As an effect, masking the face equals the act of disjoining identity, since veiled from the public, the interlocutor addressed will display but an immutable set of facial features, a generic adumbration, a mere sketch of human traits. Deprived of the own face – interpreted as an expressive surface conveying personhood and identity – the individual behind the mask becomes but a generic portrait of facial features displayed by the motionless surface of a visage crafted. The barely complete expunction and deletion of precisely attributable identity accordingly raises the question of unique personhood and individuality ascribed to every human being. The subtle (inter)play with identity veiled by the choice of a particular costume by these means offers a deep insight into the modalities and parameters of an ontology which roots individuals in a clearly delineated human existence. Departing from the assumption of the body as an entity enlivened within a set of social expectations and conventions, a subsequent regime of power structures exercised on the (meta)physical being in time and space unfolds (Compare Foucault, 2001 (1976)). Consciously choosing a certain dress and costume, the act of masquerade and disguise reveals a deeply rooted human desire to escape these restrictions by transcending the realm of the given while surpassing the existential premises which tie life to its facticity as inhabited reality. “En outre le visage vivant c’est le masque”, Kantor stipulates, reversing the order of actuality proclaimed in an assumedly rational world (1999 (1985):219). In that respect, the donning of masks brings along two consequences since it displaces the individual from its former social role, inducing an absolution from the societal expectations bound to a certain position and thus conceiving of a secondary personhood while it moreover allows for a thereof resulting identification with the greater communitarian structure.

‘Man is double’, Durkheim famously proclaimed in his epochal oeuvre “*Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*” (1979 (1912):23), hinting at a twofold socialisation of the self which exists both personally and societally. Donning a mask, this equation seems to crumble, calling for an extension into a third dimension, an additional point of reference that lends room to a performance of the imaginative. Escaping the ascribed, fixed social position attributed to an individual within a shared community, the donning of masks can function as a liberating process, an absolution from societal constraints, as the real self comes into being, reborn through an overcoming of earthly restrictions (Sacco, 2014:32).

The symbolism and semiotics of masks in Venice then however claim an approach that likewise takes into consideration the costumes worn, thus departing from an interpretation that recognises the immediate as much as intrinsic connection between both. Whereas the donning of masks invokes an analysis concerned with the indexical value conferred to the face, it is in disguise that the body as a paradigmatic image of individuality comes to be at stake. Departing from Mary Douglas’ dictum, that “the social body constrains the way the physical body is perceived” (1973:93), costume and disguise in Venice align with the manifold decrees passed that targeted at a regulation of otherwise freely lived bodies. In its most fundamental occurrence and expression a category of the self, the corporeality prevailing in Venice was largely one owned by the state which targeted at a complete control of the aforementioned. Largely rendered unrecognisable by costume, the identificatory process would run counter to any individual features ascribable, while at the same time underscoring an intrinsically given belongingness to the Venetian society. Due to disguise, bodily categories of young and old, male and female started to dissolve, leaving but an organic entity of

living matter that was juxtaposed by the rule of the Venetian Republic. Veiling both body and face, personal identity got radically transformed into an existence that was a mere expression of an existence mediated via the mask as an emblematic allusion to the sacred order of the 'Serenissima'.

## 5 The Look – Seeing Life

As the mask and costume imprison both, face and body, all direct interaction is limited to the eyes, the look exchanged which coming from within reveals the most basic human emotions. In this respect, “le masque tend à l’excès” for according to Krejca it intensifies the mystery of life emanating from the look owing to a mere concentration of human interaction to a pair of eyes that behold the world (1999 (1985):206).

While it is by the mask that identity is (partly) removed, it is by the look that personhood, the instant of essentialised human being, is bestowed in a most peculiar way. Both an ocular penetration and visual inquiry into the Other's being-in-the-world, the look unfolds an inter-subjectively negotiated position of selfhood, while a mere existence of in-itself and by-itself (Sartre, 2003 (1943):222) recognises its extension into the spheres of the imaginative of the world as rendered obvious through the Other (Crapanzano, 2004:6).

Perfectly disguised by the sumptuous costumes especially worn during carnival season in Venice, the individuals vanish behind a layer of elegantly draped cloth, delightfully blending in with the architectonic setting of the lagoon city while adopting theatrical gestures of a majestically demonstrated posture. It is then the mutually exchanged look which ties them to the world as a place of shared human existence. Crossing glances, a silent dialogue unfolds, voicelessly communicating a being-in-the-world erected upon the premises of inter-subjectively unfolding personhood.

Exploring the reciprocally effectuated constitution of identity and subjectivity, Sartre with these means develops a dialectical approach that features a mutual subject-object-ness mediated by the look. He hereby invokes a being-in-the-world which is rendered an actual facticity through a purported awareness of my existence within and through the Other. "The Other's look", according to Sartre however, "hides his eyes" in a way that "he seems to go in front of them" (2003 (1943): 258). The mask as a generic variation of a plain surface bearing two slits intended as openings for a pair of eyes and thus imitating a most essentialised form of facial representation, consequently results in a reduction of mutual interaction solely established through the look. At the same time, a minimum of "faciality" as formulated by Gombrich (1967:148ff.) is rendered obvious through the mask that leaves but a hole for the eyes, thus featuring a compression of otherwise highly complex facial characteristics to a schematic image which (nonetheless) still induces the axiom of similitude reminding of a human appearance (Toscani, 1972:155).

Following Deleuze and Guattari, the graphic sketch underlying the concept of a mask can be termed "system white wall and black hole" (2005 (1987):167) which modified by Boehm would get expanded, thus becoming "two black holes" (2014:23). These holes are then however not to be seen as mere slits arranged on surfaces painted and thus mere forms carved into another texture, but entities of transition that synthesise a connection of formerly separate realms, hence creating a passageway and channel for information communicated while surmounting an initially assumed separation between inside and outside. Whereas the outer layer of the mask, the rigid, numb and inflexible shell remains a static representation of physiognomic adumbration, impenetrably shielding its wearer from the outer world, those

aforementioned holes intended for the eyes allow for an interaction that culminates in the look thrown and glances shed, hereby enacting life.

At the same time hiding the individual and concealing his or her identity, the mask both powerfully as well as animatedly engages with its wearer, since it exclusively comes to life through a symbiotic, reciprocal interaction with the person behind. The agility and spiritedness of the mask must be for that reason understood as intrinsically linked to the corporeality of the wearer, communicated via his or her (f)actual incarnation as a being-in-flesh (Sartre, 2003 (1943):342ff.). A transitional object between human face and ritually transformed reality (Boehm, 2014:23), the mask condenses direct interaction to the look conveyed through the two cuts, accordingly endowing the motionless shell of the fixed second visage with life. As a consequence, entering the field of mutual interaction thereby rendered possible, the mask becomes enlivened, filled with an essential spirit, for it is made human. Inextricably, withal mysteriously hidden behind the unforgivingly immutable and rigidly transfixed mask, the disguised individual vanishes and leaves room for the eyes to talk. Speaking with Benjamin, it is in the look that portends an expectation of being returned, owing to a subject lending itself to an experience of the world which rests upon the manifold epiphanies of a shared reality (1991:646).

An interaction reduced to looks exchanged, masks raise the fundamental question of 'lived bodies', a perception of the Other as a human being, a concrete existence inhabited by an individual, experienced on the shared grounds of facticities enlivened (Sartre, 2003 (1943):259). Prior to identity, it seems, comes life. Life construed as an essence captured in a human body, an existence preceding its contingencies. Whereas the mask needs an actual human being, a life lived in order to see itself animated, the notion of concrete, individually ascribable identity as a distinct reality remains nebulous, concealed by the motionless features of the second face. Hidden behind a mask, the essence of life proves to exceed the limits of personal identity, for stripped bare of performatively enacted selfhood expressed by the face, mere existence prevails, that as a substrate of humanness comes to flow from the eyes. As the mask condenses direct, intersubjectively unfolding interaction to the look, it roots individual freedom in a universal present contained by the Other who according to Sartre reflects 'my existence' through a dialectical constitution of subject-object-ness transcended (2003 (1943):267ff.). To this effect, it is along with the donning of masks that life seems to become elevated in the transgression of worldly confines.

## 6 Veiling vs. Dissolving Social Structure

The rigid, fixed and stratified social structure of Venetian society which got solidified at the end of the fourteenth century must be, according to Horodowich, understood as a result of historic events brought about by the Genoese Wars in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> century at the end of which the so-called 'new families' were admitted to the Great Council, the highest political body, hence causing a fundamental and lasting shift in the structure of the ruling class at the expense of the 'old houses' (2009:117). Social and political life was marked by an impenetrable hierarchy of set classes, rendering mobility between non-nobles and nobles practically impossible and thus perpetuating a societal structure which would dictate the rhythm of interaction until the arrival of Napoleon and the fall of the Republic of Venice in 1797. These socio-political circumstances represent amongst others a decisive element for understanding the intrinsic mechanisms determining the conditions of wearing masks out of carnival season.

Life in Venice was subjected to a thorough regulation of every social sphere by state decree, while an enforced adherence and compliance to these laws resided with the official authorities who rigidly and uncompromisingly supervised as much as controlled public order. In effect, 'la Serenissima' expected its citizens to lend themselves to the greater cause of life in the lagoon city, to such an extent that anonymity became a virtue (Honour, 2000 (1996):25). Demonstrations of reverence were to be directed at the city of Venice itself, as no single person should rise above his or her actual status of a Venetian citizen, thus primarily joining the ranks of the collective personality that for the sake of social coherence had to be put first. Perceiving themselves as the "chosen people", as underlined by Ackroyd, the dedication of the Venetians to their city state was reinforced in the 16<sup>th</sup> century when after a row of territorial fights and subsequent losses the "Venice-Myth" arose, following a restitution of these lands (2011(2009):119). Thereupon convinced of the uniqueness of 'la Serenissima', her citizens considered it their duty to serve the state, fully lending themselves to its purported maintenance and hence submitting to the public authorities and ruling classes (id., p.108)

At the same moment – and plotted against the manifold curtailments and restraints conferred upon the citizens of the lagoon city – the constitution of a Venetian society which was largely characterised by its hedonistic, sensual interpretation of everyday life comes to be at stake. Sexual liberty represented a key attitude which was interpreted as a licence to lustfully and unrestrictedly moving across given class differences, whereby both mask and costume allowed for an anonymous transgression of societal strata. The shared body practices of disguise correspondingly induced a distinct form of collective socialisation by means of using the costumes as a symbolic representation and conveyor of Venetian (cultural) reality, a "potentiality (...) realized and actualized through a variety of socially regulated activities" (Turner, 1984 (2004): 24). In that way, masquerade and disguise equally acted as a valve for social tension, giving life an iconic form of ritually performed worldliness which interplayed with the unique architectural setting.

Referring to the "urban reality" of Venice as constituted by the narrow streets, the open squares and the fondamentas seaming the canals – while always being surrounded by water – Ghisi portrays how the architectonical structure of the city would determine life in a dis-

tinctive way (2013:33). Transport in the lagoon city amounted -and still continues to do so- to its most basic form of walking, for given the number of bridges, small passageways and the uneven pavements any other way of swaying all over the city found its natural limits in the surrounding environment per se. Thereupon exposed to public space, the communicative element brought along with the actuality of moving over 'la Serenissima' could at times impair and tarnish basic privacy, as the "constant need to 'socialise', to keep up appearances" dictated the rhythm of Venetian reality (id., 2013:33). Intent on preserving anonymity, the mask was perceived as a necessity in order to escape the topologically induced density of everyday life, a result of its particular architecture targeted at using space adequately. As an effect, the globally unique urban in addition to architectonic setting of the lagoon city purported, entailed and reinforced the emergence of a sensuously organised sociality which by itself mutually interplayed with an atmospheric creation of space (Göbel, 2015:169). Constructing of spatial atmosphere as a "modus operandi", its intrinsic mechanisms must be understood as bearing on the recognition of a shared everyday life within an architectonic order of (syn)aesthetic experience, hence impacting every human body suspended within time and space. Göbel hereby illustrate how urban space as a jointly inhabited place condenses phenomena and syndromes of the sensuous while at the same time rendering them visible (2015:170) due to a genesis of uniquely patterned practices that determine a specific dimension of city life. The dense as well as inimitable setting of the city on the water consequently induces an intimate interaction between human being and geographical besides architectural space that involves the thorough experience of sensuous impressions, reproducing a social field of mutual constitution.

In this respect, Venice requires an interpretative approach as shown by Ackroyd, who imagines the city as a row of intertwined stages that dynamically flow into each other, representing the whole scenery as a reminder of a theatrical setting, a constantly changing 'tableau vivant' (2011 (2009):193). Since its earliest beginnings, 'la Serenissima' was a place, where enacting life belonged to a daily reality, irrevocably induced by an interplay of citizens and the textural fabric of the lagoon city, as the architectural amalgamation of different edificial styles (See Ruskin, 1851) invited, partly even alluringly seduced people into an interaction with Venice which was back then considered the stage of the world par excellence.

Correspondingly, space becomes a mentally shared entity, loaded with meaning where the performed and embodied knowledge of its constituting parameters forms a field of mutual exchange. Of reciprocal influence, both space and human beings give rise to a societal setting, a genuinely social product, as pointed out by Lefebvre, that plays into constructing a jointly inhabited reality which calls for the decoding of its substantiality (1991(1974):27). It is hereby essential to understand how by disguising and donning masks, the Venetian society interacted with the space of the city perceived as an 'animate' organism responding to its own laws of growth and change, a 'living' entity by itself, thus appropriating it (Ackroyd, 2011(2009):315). Of architectural uniqueness, the urban density of Venice demands a reading which induces the study of space as a generic mode of existing within a specific time frame, taken as the rhythmic determinant concerning the intersubjectively unfolding social relations of production and reproduction (Lefebvre, 1991(1974):32). Departing from an architectural (cl)aim that was directed at an amalgamation of past and present, the different layers of time should – contained by the edificial substance – blend into an endless stream of 'consciousness' as reality inhabited, thus dissolving the meta-structure of events suspended

in a chronological succession of instants. In a most intriguing manner, Ackroyd on that front points towards a dissolution of time, stressing how it was rendered lucid and diaphanous, hence permeable for history (2011 (2009): 288). As illustrated by Lefebvre, "social space 'incorporates' social actions" (1991 (1974): 33), hence serving as a containing entity that embraces the configuration of all happenings. The pace of life in Venice was hereby marked by a general 'rallentando', a deceleration of life, due to an architecture that refuses precipitation, rendering any haste a venture doomed to fail. Speaking with Ackroyd, the architectural units accordingly acquire symbolic value through the lived traditions of place performed (2011:329), subsequently feeding into a circular movement that underlines a mutually constitutive formation of society and space.

At the same time, the donning of masks as a commonly shared practice invoked the notion of a lived social imagery, a way of jointly making sense of reality, as Crapanzano describes it, a normative image that permeates and pervades lived expectations (2004:7).

A coherent contextualisation of Venetian carnival however demands an understanding that aims at rooting this cultural expression in the public reality of a society which was largely determined by hedonistic motives and its frivolous interpretation of personal interaction. Marked by its languishingly frivolous pace of a pleasure-seeking society, the mask guaranteed its wearer a degree of anonymity pursued for it assured a concealing of identity (Johnson, 2011:175). The rhythm of everyday life was consequently marked by an attitude of 'laissez-faire' as the Venetians would light-heartedly indulge in the manifold, alluring carnalities offered by the inexhaustible pleasure industry (Steward, 1996:61). As it follows, Venice was renowned for its permissiveness, catering diversions to every taste and thus earning a reputation for licentiousness (id., p.59).

The suspension as well as (partial) dissolution of social class structure during carnival as an effect of identity hidden behind a mask - correspondingly covering class differences under the veil of anonymity - moreover allows for an interpretative approach which invokes the concept of liminality as largely coined and formulated by Victor Turner (2005 (1969):95). Originating from the Latin word *limes*, which could be translated as 'wall' or 'border', liminality in his understanding describes a state of being-in-between, a threshold - especially evident in ritual performances - that separates distinct statuses within the self-perpetuating and repetitive reproduction of society. Departing from a concept of reaffirming societal structure via the cyclical repetition of socially relevant events reinforced during the performance of rites, traditions or customs, liminality refers to the moment of total dissolution concerning the aforementioned transfixed and set frame of social structure, merging into a phase referred to by Turner as *communitas*. Stripping society of its ordering principles of class or hierarchy, a new super-structure imposes itself onto the community, thereby reversing pre-given, solidified assumptions which determine intersubjective interaction, while purporting a realm of equal encounter between individuals of formerly distinct social descent. An arena of hierarchical as much as societal suspense, the "inter-structural situation" purports a moment of internal disjunction, a symbolic field of "hovering timelessly in between" (Crapanzano, 2004:61). In order to fully grasp the intrinsic meaning of carnival performed, it is primordial to recognise its ritual character. Originally a festivity of the soil and agrarian cults of regeneration, carnival is primarily to be seen as a pagan ritual, that became reinforced in the Middle Ages. Converging with a broad range of diverse feasts, the particularity of carnival consists in a constant dualism between the ceremonially performed serious and

its comic inversion, whereby its ritualistic elements stem from a recurrent enactment as it is tied to the course of the year. In this context, the moment of 'surmounting' interpreted as an expression of worldly relief is reinforced through the use of masks for the 'second face' itself becomes liminal, a frontier separating disparate realities and thus acting as a transgressor transgressed (Reato, 1988:9).

Meticulously disguised with respect to the different traditional characters that are distinctive of Venice carnival, the act of wearing both costume and mask helped to render any recognition of the person impossible, dissolving identity under the veil of anonymity. As a result, societal structure began to crumble, releasing its subjects into a realm of aforementioned *communitas*, an anti-structure, where class, status or prosperity would no longer primarily govern the encounters between citizens of the lagoon city. Everyday life could be transcended due to a flight into anonymity, thus disenthraling the social substrate from set rules of conduct while offering a sensuous realm of the spontaneous. The wearing of the masks and carnival accordingly served as a valve, releasing tension from the hierarchically structured Venetian society, for the perpetual re-enactment of the liminal *communitas* absolved people from etiquette, perceived as mechanisms of control and disciplinary techniques exercised on the individual and his body as described by Foucault in his work *Discipline and Punish* (1979). In such a way, deceit and sincerity, reality and imagination, power and submission constituted the ambiguous character of 'la Serenissima', where the rule of the overt was turned into a subtle play of hide and seek which separated the mundane from the elevated, ritualised being during carnival season.

In a most perplexing, yet intriguing way however, a reversion of Turner's paradigm takes place during the enactment of the Venetian carnival in modern times. Unified in their struggle against mass tourism, carnival serves as an event that intensifies social cohesion, 'le lien social' as termed by Durkheim, that serves within a shared society as a point of reference for "l'idée qu'elle se fait d'elle-même" (1979 (1912):604). Owing to the creation of an impenetrable anti-structure through disguise and masquerade, it sets them apart from foreigners while performatively enlivening a shared *communitas* based on the overtly visible traits of ostensibly worn belongingness.

Largely invisible within the masses of tourists that inundate the city all over the year, the Venetian population steps into 'being' during the ten days of carnival, claiming space as their habitat and ground, jointly enacting the architectural setting of "la Serenissima" and thus, in the concertedly performed tradition of carnival, reclaiming visibility. Impenetrable for the tourist as an outsider, the ritually performed carnival reinforces the social narrative, a numinous dynamic that is re-established through repetitive events (Count, 1973: 310). The introduction of a re-invented Venetian carnival in the early 80ies of the last century correspondingly allowed for a both heightened and deepened identification of Venetians with their city, thus setting them apart from the masses of tourists while turning public space into a commonly enacted theatrical play (Wellens, 2000:150). At the same time, the performance of carnival must be conceived of as a collective reanimation of a past long bygone, an act of remembering its unique history of defying the rule of other authorities such as for example Catholic Vatican, the Ottomans or the Holy Roman Empire.

Impenetrable for the tourist and foreigner, it is the Venetians, who by recognising the individual behind the mask, possess the essential knowledge to unveil, to render lucid what the

mask hides, thereby encountering each other on a secondary field of shared community that stretches beyond the overtly visible, the immediately perceivable. An ancillary socialisation if effectuated, which after a primary decomposition of shared reality promotes a re-integration that unifies all citizens of 'la Serenissima' in their jointly endured influx of tourists and visitors. The re-invented, modern version of Venetian carnival accordingly turns into a moment of intense social integration, owing to the creation of an anti-structure that operating as a phenomenon of 'touristic' relief allows for an elevated sense of community clearly setting locals and foreigners apart and thus restoring the equilibrium of a jointly lived reality.

## 7 The Age of Commodification – Selling Authenticity

Immediately associated with Venice, the mask as a signifier and symbol of carnival, represents one of the most popular souvenirs with an innumerable amount of small shops selling cheap replica of different form, colour and size to the ignorant tourist who once back at home will proudly share his holiday memories and impressions gathered during his stay in the lagoon city, hereby rendering and creating his or her own narrative of the 'Queen of the Adriatic'. Plotted against the relentless commodification of Venice as an internationally chosen tourist destination, the excessive accumulation of souvenirs consequently raises the issue of authenticity. In a place where many different crafts such as glass manufacture and silk production originated (Crouzet-Pavan, 2002:181), where international commerce formed a society of merchants, in a city where a particular culture of arts, crafts, social etiquette as much as of an ordinary, everyday life developed, at all times strongly influenced by a global exchange of goods due to its significance as a nation of seafarers – despite an ever faster, self-perpetuating globalisation – an unparalleled lifestyle could be preserved until the very day, still visible and tangible when wandering all over the island. Charming and seducing its visitors with its breath-taking architecture, Venice acted as a model for numerous replicas, copies and imitations all over the world while having even served as the namesake for Venezuela, derived from 'Veneziola/Venezuela', hence 'little Venice' (Toso Fei, 2015:75). Correspondingly, the desire for souvenirs continues to create a market of cheap replica targeted at satisfying the tourists' demands who intent on purchasing their own small piece of the lagoon city prefer the inexpensive miniature imitations to the original version of the traditional craft such as the delicately designed masks or the carefully sewn dresses and costumes composed by local artists. Driven by the principle of 'more is more is better', the tourist unwilling to spend a higher sum in order to support the local craftsmen unconsciously sustains a parallel market of mostly Chinese and thus non-Venetian replicas that threaten to overflow and as a consequence eradicate the world-renowned crafts. (Somma, 2015)

In a broader context, the mask as a signifier associated with Venetian carnival and its long-standing, historical tradition, becomes an economic commodity, hereby touching upon the phenomenon of consumerism, an expression of capitalism as a devouring machinery which takes pleasure in eliminating the original essence of what used to constitute a set of cultural knowledge and traditions meticulously preserved and cured for future generations. Conscious of the centuries-old narrative of the lagoon city, the knowledge of historical facts involving all aspects of life, a raised awareness and comprehension of Venetian culture, among others represented by costumes and masks, would be needed for the sake of translating into a deeper appreciation of its particular crafts, a capacity to personally relate to these cultural expressions which Bourdieu in his eminent oeuvre "Distinction" pointedly termed "cultural capital" (1984 (1979)).

As debated by Fillitz and Saris, "the authenticity of material culture has to be approached from a double perspective" (2013:10), involving both artwork and artefact as means for individual collections on one hand while prescinding from the authentic commodity targeted at mass consumption on the other. The ubiquitously prevalent notion of 'authenticity' and the inflationary deployment of the term as already stated by Rössner and Uhl (2012:9) hereby call for a deeper reflection on the intrinsic premises of an ideology that encompasses a "so-

cial and personal genuineness (to the authorization of specific objects)" (Fillitz and Saris, 2013:5). The modern search for authenticity has consequently taken an all-encompassing stance, departing from a valued connection between inner-state and external expression as already formulated by Rousseau and Hegel (id, p.4). Speaking of 'authenticities' and thus - by invoking a plurality of what is supposed to culminate in unity, originality and singularity – questioning its intrinsic premises, Rössner and Uhl furthermore allude to the power relations pervading a term nowadays used to induce a notion of genuineness in a world that appears to stage reality following imperatives of the spectacular (2012:10).

At the centre of literary, historical and artistic tradition, Venice has been theorised about as an ontological entity and living organism rather than a mere place, thus becoming a spectacle performed, an allegory of the phantasmagorical turned into a "strange combination of play and purgatory, of life and death, of desire and disease" (Urry, 2004:206). In public discourse considered one of the most impressive places to "see before you die", Venice resulted a place dying itself, whereby masks involving the complex of carnival as publicly performed event can partly be interpreted as the iconic representation of this tendency, an expression of a world interpreted in terms of a consumer culture (Settis, 2014:46). Turning objects into commodities, global consumer capitalism removed, as illustrated by Warnier, any specific socio-cultural context, hence expressing any state by its exchange value (1994). It is by singularising these commodities that they acquire a status of authenticity, while furthermore, according to Cornet, redounding to satisfy the criterion of general aesthetic values besides being crafted and created with respect to a specific style of a given society (1975:52). As its very antidote, the development of global mass consumerism threatens what Appadurai calls the knowledge about the commodity which encompasses both its mode of production as well as the appropriate form of consumption (Appadurai, 1995:41ff.).

Suspended between the return to culturally specific forms of social life and a dire commodification of these, carnival as a re-invented tradition underscores its ambivalent character, whereby its function, speaking with Hobsbawm, nowadays is "technical rather than ideological" (1983:3). At its beginning an act of remembering, re-enlivening the social fabric of what once constituted and characterised life of a libertine Venetian society in the 18th century, the aforestated commercialisation of Venetian Carnival strikingly illustrates the mechanisms of a sell-out of the city that causes great damage to its substance as a place inhabited by people.

Inextricably tied to each other, both 'Carnevale' and the Venetian masks become an emblematic representation of the ruthless sell-out of the lagoon city, the commodification of a unique, historically grown socio-cultural ensemble which threatens to vanish, relinquishing its particular character while succinctly suffering from a collective amnesia that affects the jointly lived memory of the past (Settis, 2014:4). As per Gentz and Kramer, the configuration of the Venetian cultural system unfolding within "the complex interplay of social experience and the discursive construction of its reception" (2006:3) comes to be at stake, owing to the massive influx of tourists who stay but for a couple of nights at best, hereby altering the meta-structure of the social fabric, the texture of what had once been the essence of quotidian life in 'la Serenissima'.

The cheap souvenirs of Venice accordingly result an epitomised depiction of modern society and its accelerated time. In such a manner they become a symbolic representation that viv-

idly illustrates the constitution of a civilisation where the main and primary mode of existence seems to consist in an advanced consumption of objects and things, a ruthless commodification thereby even stretching to furthermore entail immaterial goods of spiritual and intellectual value (compare Settis, 2014:44).

Whereas people from all over the world had persistently returned to Venice intent on admiring the city with their own eyes (Urry, 2004:206), it was with the advent of mass tourism in the 20th century that the lagoon city itself was turned into a commodity, gradually facing a slow death of its own.

The question of authenticity subsequently elicited against the backdrop of said consumerist tendencies that threaten to commodify the social fabric of 'la Serenissima' besides its purported multiplication in the shape of replicas traceable all over the world (Compare Settis, 2014:62) invokes the notion of the feint, while juxtaposing the concept of the simulacrum. "Solo il simulacro è vero", Settis cites Baudrillard (2014:81), thereby rejecting any assumption of the true, while questioning the value of the authentic that vanishes under layers of a voracious consumer culture emblematic of mass tourism. Venice then becomes an allegory of modern times, a representation of our Zeitgeist that in its essence celebrates the epiphanies of a relentless commodification.

## 8 Conclusion

Time seems to come to a sudden halt, a standstill, a pause - Carnival suspending the notions of a shared temporality that inhabits a place, for with one stroke of putting on the various costumes - some of them representations of the figures cited in "La Commedia dell'Arte", others allusions to a by-gone era of opulent frivolity - and hereby re-enacting social structure through a revival of the long-standing Venetian tradition, the past resurrects, is brought to life, reminiscent of a city which once used to constitute an empire ahead of its time. A reminder of these days, the mask unfolds its charming spell until the very day, delicately playing with a deeply rooted human fascination with the arcane, the clandestine, the covert, while jocosely offering its wearer a parallel universe of unrestricted liberties hidden behind a generic representation of a consciously chosen, seductively impenetrable character, hence constituting a license to free conduct. Vested in indistinctness and obscurity, thus preserving privacy in the lagoon city, the reversion of societal structure and hierarchy back then allowed for a unique social environment, a Venice incognito, where owing to the liminal setting of social rank suspended, its "ritualized 'anonymity'" (Johnson, 2011:128) unfolded the realms of the imaginative, blurring "the line between reality and make-believe" (id., p.183). Through the donning of a mask, its wearer surpasses his own facticity in the conversion of life existed into an imagined identity projected, inextricably proved true, authentic, factual. Speaking in the subjunctive mode of contingencies realised and the whimsical, the capricious rendered overt, the mask interweaves the factitive with the imaginative, thus extending notions of the transfixed into the ontological spheres of the conjectural and the yet-to-be. An ambiguous mirror, the mask projects its image onto an outer world while at the same time creating its simulacrum from within, thus becoming an entity which both divides and integrates, a portal and gateway to another worldliness, a further universe secretly hidden behind.

Accordingly, the mask continues to cast its magic spell to the recent day of our times, satisfying the human desire of changing, the need for veiling and uncovering identity. An interplay of facticities lived and contingencies realised, as well as seduced by the idea of being and becoming, following Johnson, "the collective identity" of human existence is rendered obvious and accentuated, thus equalling a metamorphosis of societal structure into an otherwise seemingly utopian community that blatantly promotes liberty and equality (2011:183). The mask as a cultural artefact hereby reinforces social cohesion. In that respect, it becomes an expression of the commonly shared practice of meaningfully interpreting reality, while conferring the premises of a factual world to a fictive realm. Correspondingly a deconstruction of the given takes place, unfolding a secondary universe the city of Venice as a lived space was willing to host.

A complacency of time and place enforced by "la Serenissima" which induced as well as encouraged the development of a social imagery whose ontological structure would far exceed reality as a pre-given entity. As a result, the epistemology of Venice was founded on the liminal, anchoring significance in the indexical realm of the imaginative, thus allowing for a societal superstructure imposed by the dissolution of social hierarchy due to a shared existence behind the mask. Confounding face and mask, the hereof arising ambivalence of reality taken as an objectively given entity invokes the dialectical interplay of dissimulation and disso-

lution which in the never fully realised decoding constitutes the fabrics of social, intersubjective interaction, thusly a dense texture endowed with and wrapped into meaning. Behind the mask, a staging of reality, a theatrical 'mise-en-scène' dismantles and unwinds the absoluteness of a worldly existence, itself suggestive of a show, shedding adumbrations of the speculative which proves an essential trait of giving meaning to life. It is then through the dialectical interplay between reality and fiction induced by costume and mask that the contingent of the imaginary unlocks life – an invitation to the fantastic 'la Serenissima' is eager to propose.

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