Mask-making and Mask-wearing: Shifting Im/materialities in Ritual and Performative Contexts. An Introduction

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ABSTRACT

The introduction to the special issue of MARTOR dedicated to the European project "MASKS" provides a framework for understanding mask-making and mask-wearing as mutable, yet enduring material, embodied, relational, and performative processes. It argues that the contemporary significance of masks lies in their capacity to mediate between permanence and transformation, concealment and revelation, individual and collective identity, and inherited practice and reinvention.
The introduction integrates the volume's contributions into a four-part framework linking mask materiality and aesthetics, ritual embodiment and community, ethnographic experience, and contemporary artistic practice.
An interdisciplinary convergence of anthropology, ethnology, heritage studies, material culture, as well as creative ethnographies, visual and performance arts, the volume brings forth various analytical and creative formats (anthropological text, observational notes, dialogues etc.) to provide a diverse yet coherent account for how masks mediate relationships between bodies, objects, communities, and different orders of reality in the present day. Collectively, the eighteen contributions demonstrate how masks from particular local contexts actively participate in producing identities and social worlds rather than merely representing them.
The volume approaches masking as a process of representation, identification, othering, and ontological transformation, emphasizing the conditions through which identities, social relations, and forms of belonging are temporarily suspended, negotiated, or reconfigured. It further explores the heritage-making processes through which masks and associated knowledge are selected, authorized, transmitted, commodified, and re-signified by communities, craftspeople, institutions, and other heritage actors. Mask-making is presented as an embodied form of technical and cultural knowledge that articulates craftsmanship, local economies, professionalisation, and intergenerational transmission.

KEYWORDS

Masking; materiality; embodiment; heritagization; ritual masks.

Masks are one of those cultural objects whose historical persistence can hardly be explained solely by referencing their formal aspects or the functions they perform in specific ritual contexts (Pessahna 1940; Caro Baroja 2005; Gaignebet 1984, Vulcănescu 1970). Their distinctive nature lies precisely in their capacity to articulate relationships between bodies, objects, subjects and communities, whilst simultaneously facilitating shifts between different orders of reality. Present in religious practices and in secular, festive, artistic and performative ones alike, masks participate in processes of representation, identification, and *othering* and, in a significant manner, inhabit liminal spaces in which social, bodily and identity-related categories may be temporarily suspended, negotiated or transformed. From this perspective, interest in masks and masking is not limited to the study of their symbolic value (Pamfile 1997; Ghinoiu 1998; Marian 1990–1995) or to the reconstruction of their ritual contexts. Masks are at the same time material objects and relational agents, embedded in social, economic, political and affective networks of relationships (Broccolini and Ballacchino 2016), which, in turn, continually reshape the ways in which they are produced, circulated, used and interpreted. Their capacity to simultaneously reveal and conceal, to link the body with that which transcends it, and to produce other forms of presence makes masking a particularly fertile field for examining the processes through which societies construct and transform their categories of identity, otherness and belonging (Pollock 1995).

It is precisely against this backdrop that we have produced this special issue of MARTOR as part of the European MASKS project, which is dedicated to exploring contemporary transformations in masks and in the act of masking. The volume brings together contributions which examine the ways in which these objects and practices sit at the intersection of ritual and secularisation, heritage and commodification, tradition and innovation, craftsmanship and professionalisation, as well as between memory, contemporary creation and performance—all from diverse perspectives. Taken together, the articles enable a shift of focus from a conception of the mask as a finished object towards a view of masks as a process, practice and relationship, taking into account the trajectories they undergo in changing social contexts (Raposo 2023). The collected papers demonstrate, first and foremost, that the contemporary relevance of masks cannot be understood as a mere survival of traditional forms. On the contrary, their continuity arises through processes of adaptation, reinterpretation and transformation, in which inherited practices are subjected to new conditions of existence (Godinho 2010). The contributions focusing on ritual and festive contexts reveal how masks continue to play a role in the creation of specific temporalities, in the regulation of behaviour, and in the negotiation of social relations, whilst the ritualised practices themselves become subject to processes of change and reformulation (Creed 2011; Casimir, Nwakego and Umezinwa 2015). Masquerades and carnivals, (in both rural and urban contexts, emerge as spaces particularly revealing of the tensions between cultural continuity and transformation.

A second cross-cutting dimension of this volume concerns the heritage status of masks and the knowledge and skills associated with them. The so-called "heritage turn" has created new trajectories for objects and practices, which are now conceived simultaneously as cultural expressions, assets of memory, educational resources, museum exhibits, and elements with economic value. Vita Santoro, a contributor to this volume, has studied the processes of heritage designation and their discursive practices: authority in the construction of historicity, the certification of authenticity, cultural representation, and the consolidation of identity (Santoro, 17–84). The articles we are now publishing show how these processes involve a wide range of actors—communities, craftspeople, institutions, museums, associations and other heritage agents—and how the process of heritage-making is not one

of neutral conservation but rather a space for selection, negotiation, and the production of new meanings (Fienup-Riordan 1999; Kreps 2008; Stallaert 2016). Recovering, revitalising or safeguarding a mask also involves deciding which knowledge, practices, materials and memories should be passed on, and under what conditions. In this regard, the work carried out over many years by António Tiza (2013) is particularly interesting, as it has led to specific educational proposals.

In this context, the material and technical dimensions of mask-making take on particular significance. The transformations undergone by materials, techniques and methods of production allow us to trace the tensions between continuity and innovation and, at the same time, to gain an insight into the processes of transmission of knowledge involved. The mask-makers or craftspeople concerned cease to be secondary figures and become a central agent in these dynamics (Simões 2012, 107–12). Their work brings together embodied knowledge, technical skills, local economies, and new forms of professionalisation and entrepreneurship. The contributions in this volume therefore enable us to consider materiality not as a static property of masks, but as a dynamic field in which social relations, economic transformations and processes of cultural continuity and disruption are inscribed (Grimmes 1975; Shlossberg 2015). This focus on materiality inevitably leads us to consider the social trajectories of masks. Once removed from their ritual contexts, these objects can take on new lives as heritage artefacts, decorative items, tourist products, handcrafted goods or exhibition pieces. Commercialisation does not necessarily entail the disappearance of their previous meanings; rather, it can generate new layers of meaning and new relationships between producers, communities and consumers. Masks thus become part of economic and heritage circuits that help to redefine their value and status, revealing the extent to which the social life of these objects depends on the contexts in which they circulate.

Alongside these transformations, the volume also examines the resurgence of masks in the fields of contemporary art and the performing arts. The two contributions from these fields demonstrate that masking also serves as a critical framework through which key issues of the present can be explored. The reappropriation and recreation of masks from ethnological collections or from ritual traditions enables the establishing of complex relationships with the past and, at the same time, generates new discourses regarding the present. In these practices, a mask can function as an aesthetic resource, but also as an instrument of social and political critique, capable of sparking debates around identity, gender, class, belonging, power relations, memories of the colonial past, and the current environmental crisis, even becoming a means of resistance and protest. The contributions referred to above enable us to view masking as a practice of bodily and ontological transformation. The mask is not limited merely to covering a pre-existing face; rather, it alters the body's relationship with itself, with other bodies, and with the social space in which it acts. By altering the perspective and the conditions under which the subject appears, it can call forth other corporealities, other identities and other forms of presence (Emigh 2011). The masked body thus becomes a site of experimentation and the generation of possibilities, and the mask itself a process that allows us to explore the relationships between materiality, corporeality and performativity (Bouttiaux 2009, Emigh 2011; Gramigna 2026).

The articles in this special issue further enable us to address a question that is of particular relevance today: what happens to the materiality of the mask when it is transferred to new spaces of representation? The specific relationships that materials, textures, techniques and construction methods establish with bodies and with audiences do not disappear when the mask enters a museum, an exhibition, a stage or a digital environment. On the contrary, these shifts generate new forms of mediation and translation of the material

which compel us to reconsider how the sensory qualities of objects are experienced and conveyed in different performative and exhibition contexts (Panero García 2026, 180–8). Taken together, these approaches suggest that masks are not merely objects that represent identities, but actively participate in the creation and transformation of those identities. Their versatility in establishing relationships between the human and the non-human, between presence and absence, between concealment and revelation, and between the individual and the collective goes a long way towards explaining their enduring presence and their ability to adapt to diverse historical and cultural contexts. From rituals and festivals to museums, markets, craft workshops and contemporary artistic practices, masks continue to function as privileged devices for negotiating the boundaries between who we are and who we might become.

Finally, this issue adopts a deliberately broad conception of the ways in which knowledge is produced. By welcoming testimonies, interviews and the voices of the craftspeople and workshop participants themselves, as well as by drawing on visual methodologies and creative ethnographies, it complements analytical approaches with the experiences and knowledge of those directly involved in the practices of making and using masks. This openness is consistent with the very nature of the object under study, for if masks are spaces where materialities, bodies, knowledge and communities converge, studying them must likewise take account of the plurality of voices and perspectives involved in their production and their multiple social lives.

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Although the contributions brought together in this issue share a number of cross-cutting themes, they are organised into five sections that reflect different approaches to masks and masking: the relationship between materiality and meaning; the processes of transmission and transformation; the ritual and performative dimensions of masks; and their capacity to produce forms of belonging, otherness and representation. This proposed division is not intended to create rigid compartments, but rather to highlight different perspectives from which to address a phenomenon whose complexity lies precisely in the intersection of material, social, symbolic and performative dimensions.

The first section, "The Aesthetics, Biographies and Imaginaries of the Mask," brings together texts that focus on the material, visual and sensory dimensions of masks, examining the processes of creation, transformation and circulation of their forms. The contributions demonstrate that the aesthetic dimension is not merely ornamental but plays an active role in the construction of meaning, in the revitalisation of traditions, and in the relationship between masks, their makers and their audiences.

This section is opened by Vita Santoro with a study of the practices of mask-making in the winter masking rituals of Basilicata, Italy. Her approach to the "cultural biographies" of objects allows us to trace the transformations of these masks through their materiality, their uses, and the knowledge embodied in their creation. Particular attention is paid to the figures of the mask-makers and to the knowledge of the hand, as well as to the processes of making, unmaking and reusing, understood as forms of creative negotiation between continuity and change. The mask-makers are portrayed as bricoleurs who draw on tradition not in order to reproduce it mechanically, but to affirm, transform and update it.

The notion of the "prefiguration" of facial features provides an analytical framework via which mask-making among Romanian artisans in Moldavia is examined by Marin Constantin. His work offers an insight into mask-making as an interpretative process in which imagining

and shaping a face also involves constructing characters, attributes and forms of representation. The artisans' recurring references to New Year celebrations and the "death of the Old Year" situate this activity within a ritual framework in which the mask is linked to processes of collective renewal and transformation.

Drawing on experience of the *Cocorícamo* of the Dominican Republic, Emelin Quevedo Márquez proposes a comparative exploration of zoomorphic masks crafted from complete bovine and equine skulls. This study shifts the focus towards the aesthetic pathways connecting the Americas and Europe, enabling us to observe the circulation, diversification and transformation of this particular type of mask across different local and temporal contexts.

Cristina Hurdubaia analyses the masks of the *Cucii* of Brănești (Romania) from the perspective of the social agency of the object. Her ethnographic study shows how material transformations—from organic elements to industrial wire and plastic—should not necessarily be interpreted as signs of a loss or deterioration of tradition. On the contrary, novel materials can generate new forms of participation, redistribute knowledge and prestige, and promote the continuity of the ritual. The mask thus emerges as an agent of cultural revitalisation, capable of simultaneously navigating the demands of local contexts and global stages.

The aesthetic and sensory transformations of Romanian winter masquerades are examined through the increasing scale, colourfulness, and visual impact of their masks and costumes. Adelina Dogaru Alexa shows how these material changes contribute to a broader shift towards spectacle, with the performance also extended beyond the immediate presence of performers and participants through new visual and sound media. The reworking, exaggeration, and reintroduction of older forms simultaneously respond to contemporary expectations and heighten the perceived archaism and continuity of the tradition. The study thus extends existing approaches to heritagisation by showing how this process is mediated not only through discourse, institutional regulation, and public representation, but also through the material transformation of ritual objects.

The meanings of the mask and the face are explored by Sorana-Cristina Man through a comparative reading of ancient Greek culture and Romanian folklore. Her analysis draws from the relationship between *prosopon*, the face, and the mask in Greek culture, in connection with the gaze and the possibility of being seen. In contrast to this conception, the study examines the masks associated with the spirits of the dead in Romanian folklore, such as the *Moși* and *Uncheși* of Nereju, raising the question of the different relationships that both traditions establish between mask, face, death and visibility.

The second section, "Embodying the Mask: Ritual, Representation and Community," shifts the focus from the mask as an object to its relationship with the body, ritual action and communal experience. The contributions brought together here show that the meaning of a mask is largely produced at the moment of its activation: when it is worn, when it enters into a relationship with other bodies, when it traverses a ritual space, or when it becomes part of a particular community organisation. The mask is therefore understood as a form of embodiment and as a device capable of producing community.

Cătălin Alexa examines the presence of masks in the documented history of the Romanian *Călușș* ritual, challenging the notion of a consistent and invariable use of ritual masks in this complex ritual. His diachronic approach raises a fundamental issue for studies of masking: the need to distinguish between historical forms of practice and later reconstructions. The latter can tend to become benchmarks of authenticity.

An ethnomusicological perspective on the *Vijanera of Silió* in Cantabria is offered by Susana Moreno Fernández, who explores its continuities and adaptations. Her analysis broadens the emphasis traditionally placed on the visual aspects of the ritual to incorporate the soundscape

as a constitutive dimension of the festive experience. The *Vijanera* emerges as a community practice in which rituality, local identity and heritage-making are closely intertwined.

The experience of a masquerade in the performances of the *Armagh Rhymers*, a group linked to the *Mummers* tradition of Northern Ireland, is presented by Caroline Joy Tatem. Her study links the liminality inherent in the masked performance with its capacity to produce shared experiences and forms of *communitas*. In the context of a society affected by sectarian division, play, interaction with the audience, and the transformation made possible by the mask take on a particular significance as mechanisms for healing and for the creation of positive social memories.

María Pilar Panero García examines the *Zangarrón de Montamarta* from an ethnographic perspective, reconstructing both the materiality of the character and its place within the complex ritual framework of the celebration. The analysis of the masked figure as an ambivalent *daimon* allows for an exploration of the relationships between playful violence, fertility, regeneration and social cohesion, while the episode of the Eucharistic communion and the *parallel* communion offers a reflection on the historical transformations and on the contemporary reinterpretations of the symbolic efficacy of the rite.

Elena Freire Paz and Marta Veiga Izaguirre study the makers and wearers of masks in the 21st century Galician *Entroido*, focusing on the continuities and transformations of these rural traditions in a context marked by touristification. Their contribution brings to the fore the material knowledge and processes of transmission that underpin the masks and their accessories, as well as the adaptations they are undergoing in a post-industrial and hyper-connected society.

Adrian Stoicescu analyses the transformation of the notion of authenticity in the contemporary performance of the Romanian *Bear Dance*, using the "Ursul lui Gavrilă din Asău" [Gavrilă from Asău's Bear] group as a case study. Drawing on a corpus of Facebook posts and using tools from digital ethnography and discourse analysis, the author demonstrates how authenticity is shifting from material practice and inherited ritual forms towards discursive, relational, and affective processes. In this context, the masked body continues to occupy a central place from a visual perspective, but authenticity is increasingly produced through interaction with audiences, narrative continuity, participation, and the dynamics of circulation and recognition in digital spaces. The article thus presents authenticity as a dynamic and distributed effect that is constantly being negotiated between the performance and its various audiences.

The third section, "Notes," brings together approaches that pay particular attention to the ethnographic experience and to the specific ways in which masked traditions are lived, represented, and negotiated by their participants. The very nature of the works gathered here allows the mask to be approached not merely as an object of analysis, but as part of situated practices in which the researcher shares spaces, experiences and processes of interpretation with the communities under study.

Ana Pascu follows the *Crai* of the Jiu Valley (Romania), showing how a popular religious performance linked to the celebration of Christmas has incorporated masked characters borrowed from other traditional forms of carol singing. The work provides an insight into the processes through which a practice acquires a specific identity-forming value and how masks are integrated into new ritual configurations.

Iuliana Dumitru offers an ethnographic and autoethnographic approach to the *Fuga Lolelor* [The Run of the *Lole*] as practised in Cincu (Romania). Drawing on field observations and her dialogue with mask-maker Uwe Constantin Boghian, the text illuminates the relationships between the ritual, the community and its preservation

as heritage. The contribution pays particular attention to the tensions between transmission, reflexivity and lived experience, showing how a sense of belonging is renewed and renegotiated through ritual practice and through the participation of both the local community and of former locals returning from the diaspora to take part.

The cinematic reinterpretation of masks in the Christmas folk traditions of the Carpathians as embodied in the works of Sergei Parajanov and Ivan Mykolaichuk is analysed by Kira Sadoja. The article accounts for how masks can cease to function as mere representations of a folkloric practice and instead become cinematic devices capable of expressing liminal experiences, subjective crises, and forms of communication that transcend the possibilities of everyday language. The comparison between the two filmmakers also reveals different ways of translating ritual logic into the narrative, symbolic and aesthetic language of cinema.

The fourth section, "Dialogues," deliberately broadens the range of voices and formats within the volume. In contrast to the conventional academic article, these contributions introduce alternative approaches to mask and performance, fostering dialogue between those who produce and those who experience these practices, thus allowing the subject of study to be approached from perspectives closer to creation and the performative experience.

Irina Apan presents an interview with Yuliya Tsukerman, a puppeteer and mask-maker who works across theatre, film and the digital sphere. The conversation offers an insight into the creative processes involved and the relationship between masks, emotion, characters and the online audience's perception, drawing on Tsukerman's project "Transmissions from the Ancient Forest."

Through a double-voiced self-ethnography, Georgiana Vlahbei and Alina Tofan of the Plastic Art Performance collective reflect on the embodied experiences on the two sides of the mask. In viewing masks as technologies for *becoming Other*, they trace agency–performativity relations and material ecologies of production. They thus position masks as narrative and political objects that critique anthropogenic ecological disruption and catalyse social transformation.

Finally, the work that concludes this journal issue emerges from a different format: a Visual Micro-essay (the fifth and final section) offering insights into two researchers' immersion in the Green Man ritual. This concluding visual narrative foregrounds the process of producing ethnological meaning about masks through the mobilization of documentary photography as artistic and aesthetic practice.

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Taken together, the five sections trace a journey that extends from materiality to embodiment, from ethnographic experience to dialogue with contemporary creation. This is not, however, a linear journey, as the issues raised in each section re-emerge and are transformed in the others. Materiality refers to ritual; ritual fosters community; community participates in processes of heritage formation; heritage generates new forms of representation; and these, in turn, can return the masks to new spaces of artistic and performative experimentation. This cyclical relationship between different levels of analysis (scales) and their contexts constitutes one of the major threads that run through the volume. Therefore, rather than presenting a homogeneous image of the mask, the contributions gathered here highlight its essentially relational and mutable nature. Masks change in terms of materials, makers, bodies, spaces and audiences; their functions and the discourses that accompany them also change. Yet in each of these transformations, their capacity to mediate between worlds, to make certain identities visible whilst concealing others, to produce forms of belonging and

otherness, and to open up spaces for bodily, social and aesthetic experimentation persists. It is within this productive tension between permanence and transformation that the collection of texts we present is situated.

The contributions in this issue demonstrate, in short, that the contemporary nature of masks lies not solely in their enduring presence, but in their capacity to shift. Between memory and creation, between ritual and performance, between heritage and the market, between technique and artistic experimentation, masks continue to generate new forms of relationship, representation and belonging. This volume aims to explore these transformations without reducing them to a dichotomy between tradition and modernity; it focuses instead on the processes through which these two dimensions intertwine and give rise to new materialities, new practices and new meanings. It is within this space of transition—between bodies and objects, between past and present, between heritage and reinvention—that we situate the contributions presented here.

We, the editors of this special issue, would like to thank the authors, the reviewers and the *Martor* team for their excellent work, characterised by unflagging patience and dedication. We would also like to express our delight that authors from outside the MASKS project consortium have contributed, broadening the scope of research into our area of study and, in addition, bringing in other regions including Northern Ireland, Ukraine, the Dominican Republic, and Galicia and Cantabria in Spain, which demonstrates just how vast and beautiful the culture of the mask is. We wish to convey our enthusiasm to the academic community and, of course, to all those who, in one way or another, celebrate (with) masks.

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