

## An Essay on Interpreting Masks from a Social-Psychological Point of View.

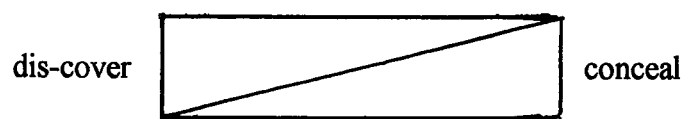
### **Preliminary Remarks:**

*Some of the visitors of the exhibition on „Masks and Texts“ occasionally expressed their reluctance to talk about impressions. It seemed to be more important to them to enjoy these impressions as such. - In writing this, I fully respect those feelings and I don't want to give an interpretation of special masks or texts. What I do want, however, is to shed some light on the multivarioussness or diversity of our experiences with masks, and by referring to FROMM's approach to social psychology I'm going to make some suggestions as to how these experiences could be understood psychologically.*

In connection with the process of creating and using masks within the frame of our intercultural project questions arose concerning two contradictory opinions about how those masks would effect communication.

- (1) The first position relates to the customary use of the word „mask“ in the sense of „masking“ or hiding or concealing the „true nature“ of the person wearing it. Many believe that a mask would just serve people to conceal their real character. Staying „under cover“ with a mask on, the individual would be able to live a normal, socially adjusted life not disturbing others and not being disturbed by them.
- (2) A second position relates to a special experience made during our direct work with masks and texts. It seemed to represent just the opposite: Not concealing what could be called the true nature is the primary effect of the mask but rather to dis-cover it. Dealing with masks would enable the individual to un-mask certain personality traits otherwise unknown to himself or, at least, being not available to his conscious ego. Therefore producing masks and using them for communicative purposes can be regarded as an important means of self-experience, which in the positive case will generate self-actualisation.

Considering these different observations, the question is how to explain these inconsistencies or even contradictions. What could be the real function of a mask: to hide, to conceal and disguise or rather to clarify, to reveal or demonstrate? - An examination will show very soon, that the answer cannot be a simple one because each position comprises its own evidence. So, each of them might be seen as an end point of a continuum. Therefore the contradiction does not really exist. I would like to call it a „conditioned inconsistency“. Both positions may be understood as being parts of the same dimension for which would best apply the name „expressive behaviour“.



In fact, the empirical positions of our participants experiences would probably be situated somewhere in between these extremes depending on different situations and on individual conditions and expressive types. it could be helpful, therefore, to describe some additional differentiation.



### **To Begin with: Some Semantic Considerations.**

What do we mean by speaking of „masks“? It seems to be useful to differentiate between (a) „mask“ in its psychological or communicative sense applied to expressive behaviour. This meaning is connected with the fact, that human beings are capable to behave in a purposeful way, to behave rather independently from a real inner condition. In order to achieve certain goals people are even capable to express something they do not really feel. Human beings are actually able to willingly create a false opinion about themselves in the minds of others as far as their true feelings are concerned. This can be accomplished by lying through mimes and gestures. So, it seems to make sense, even today, what the ancient poet Publilius Syrus said: „The heir is crying, but behind this mask he's laughing“.

On the other hand (b) the term „mask“ is also used in an objective sense as to signify that thing, that article made of paper, glue and paint. As something that can be touched by hands, can be put on my face in different ways, can be brought to different places, in short: can be handled as an object.

### **In Addition: An Analytical-social-psychological Point of View.**

According to his special psychoanalytical approach Erich Fromm<sup>1</sup> points out that human beings are used to repress their knowledge about what is real and true. He adds however that they are equipped with an unconscious knowledge of this truth. But, what does that mean in our respect? First of all - following Fromm - there is that truth about „passionate strivings“ underlying our concrete social behaviour depending on the other hand on the „social character“ that dominates society at a given time. As far as these strivings contain - predominantly unconscious - negative and destructive traits we are not easily ready to open them up to others. Instead we are in need of societal conventions and rituals, norms and lingual regulations in order to protect our social self to a certain degree against our inner self: Therefore we use everyday masks supporting our wish to hide those inadmissible truths about our real motivations and feelings thus becoming able to successfully communicate within a given conventional frame.

But - besides these conventions - individuals are also striving for authenticity and truth derived from a deep longing for humanity rooted in existential human needs. This, too, can be understood as a „passionate striving“. Fromm would call it a „productive“ or „biophile“ orientation, because it embraces passionate love toward all that is productive and full of life. Acting or behaving in correspondence with a biophile attitude, which contrary to those unconscious destructive motives is based on consciousness and volition, cannot be realised outside a favourable frame of reference. These positive circumstances are not self-evident, however, but have to be struggled for against outer obstacles as well as against our own cherished routines and habits. This is the point from where our project started out.

### **Individual Making of Masks in a Project.**

What I mean is the fact that the participants personally produced the masks which they were talking about and which they used on acting. This very fact is overlapping however with our former considerations. The mask in its physical existence has become an expression of an aspect of a living individual and has by this become a subject itself.

We feel that our project added an important gain of recognition, namely that each single mask that had been manufactured by one of the participants had become an expression of some

<sup>1</sup> Erich Fromm, Ges. Werke II, S 339-334



„inner truth“ of its creator. This experience was shared by almost all participants no matter what differences concerning language, culture, sex etc. existed. We thought that this was also an empirical prove of our working hypothesis that the knowledge about reality, repressed but not eliminated, would find its way out by means of the physical mask<sup>2</sup>. So the manual production of a mask indeed offers the possibility to make new, authentic and unsuspected self-experiences. Doing this the acting individual is able to do both to conceal as well as discover, to hide behind the mask and to open up towards others.

### **The Importance of Text and Dialogue.**

Of course, this self-experience is not the automatic result of working at a hobby. A certain attitude, defined by Erich Fromm as „the ability to see (or to perceive consciously) and to respond“<sup>3</sup> turned out to be an essential requirement. Therefore working with texts and dialogue was established as the second pillar of our project. Seeing the mask and consciously perceiving it was realised by writing, reflecting and presenting the text to the group. In addition the dialogue between two or more participants turned out to be important as well<sup>4</sup>. In this way the inner alien may only emerge from being repressed by means of direct understanding as part of the continuous process of communication between close partners, because only under these circumstances repression and defence can be given up. Thus, repressed contents would have a chance to become integrated into the self again, and by this enrich and support personal identity. This enrichment may be identified by individuals discovering the many valuable, maybe even essential feelings as belonging to themselves. It was again Erich Fromm, who gave us the following picture: „A blue glass looks blue, because it absorbs all other colours and does not allow them to pass. That means, we are calling a glass blue, because it just does not contain the blue colour. So it is not called after what it is holding but after what it is giving away.“<sup>5</sup>

In our case, dialogue may also take place between the active individual and his physical mask, because, by perceiving it consciously, it has become something like an opposite person. Both parts will interact. This was the way for most of the texts in our project to come into existence.

### **A Further Dimension: Distance - Proximity.**

It was a further experience in connection with our work with masks and texts that the interrelation between physical mask and the person who wears it is important as far as its inner and outer effects are concerned. - This, however, seems to be a very complicated matter. So, for example, it became very soon evident that the efforts made to create a „positive“ respectively „negative“ mask finally produced some confusion. In personal dialogue with the mask as well as with other participants concerning the own mask the general experience was that the „negative“ mask, which was planned to represent the „shady side“ of that personality, very often turned out to be seen as quite the reverse, because it seemed to be closer connected with the person and in so far more authentic or even „positive“ - and vice versa. Distance and proximity could be seen as endpoints of the same continuum, but within the frame of real communication they seem to underlie a more complicated structure. We felt that the observed irritations could be interpreted positively as a chance to correct self-deception.

<sup>2</sup> Erich Fromm, Ges. Werke II, S. 340: „Wenn wir behaupten, die Wahrheit werde verdrängt, dann gehen wir natürlich von der Voraussetzung aus, daß wir die Wahrheit wissen und dieses Wissen verdrängen; mit anderen Worten, daß wir über 'unbewußtes Wissen' verfügen.“

<sup>3</sup> Erich Fromm, Ges. Werke IX, S. 399

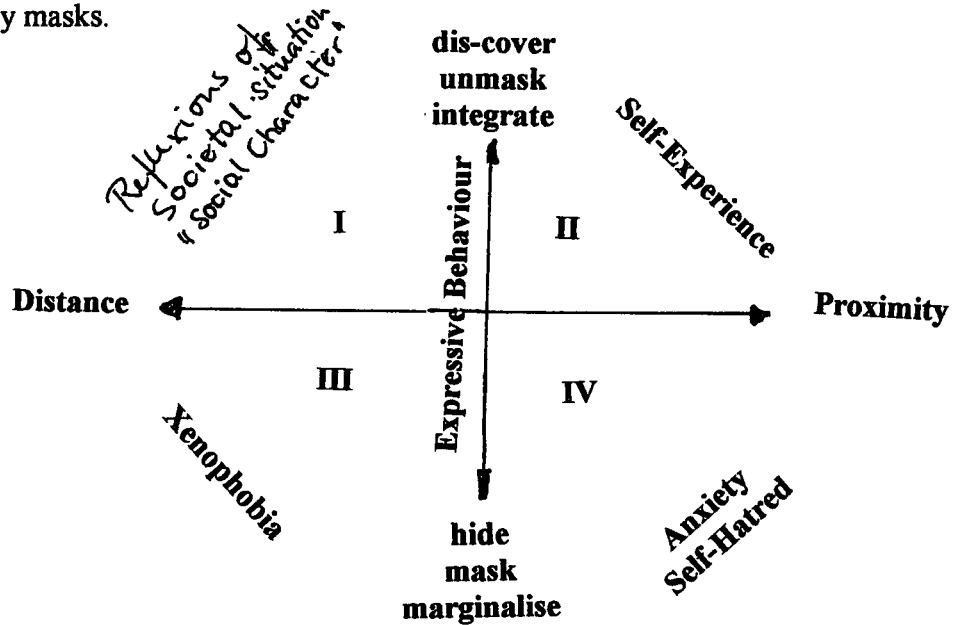
<sup>4</sup> Erich Fromm, Ges. Werke II, S. 332: „Nur durch den Prozeß lebendigen Aufeinander-Bezogeneins überwinden der andere und ich die Schranken unseres Getrenntseins, solange wir beide am Tanz des Lebens teilnehmen. Volle gegenseitige Identifikation kann jedoch nicht erreicht werden.“

<sup>5</sup> Erich Fromm, Ges. Werke II, S.333



### Schematic Conclusions.

The following scheme was primarily designed as a base for discussion of the effects in communicating by masks.



Of course, the matter itself is much more complicated and much research has to be done. Nevertheless we think that we could make a few suggestions as to the directions of further research (macro-structural and societal as well as micro-structural and individual or small-group oriented). Our interest of research is social-pedagogical and action-research. One special aspect would be that the level of communication between social-pedagogues and their clientele is generally the written and elaborated language of the middle class. Our experiences with masks and texts suggest to make a better use of the possibilities of approaching by the common work on masks and texts.

