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## THE FLOATING FACE: GARBO, PHOTOGRAPHY AND DEATH MASKS

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### **Abstract**

A number of writers have noted the influence of Ernst Benckard's 1927 book of death masks, *Das Ewige Antlitz*, on Modernist artists and writers of the interwar period. This article links it specifically to the emergence in the late 1920s of a very particular way of photographing people, which I term "the floating face" and which is epitomised in publicity portraits of Greta Garbo. It is suggested that this photographic convention is linked to changing attitudes associated with war, to the techniques of cinema, and to surrealism, but also to the influence of Benckard's book. The resemblance between the death mask image and movie star portrait is significant for an understanding of the origins and affective impact of a certain photographic style. This essay also suggests that the death mask as a figure in film and photography theory emerges out of this particular style of photography, and this specific social and cultural context, but then becomes applied to 'the photograph' in general. I argue that the idea of photographs as like death masks is overdetermined by the social and cultural context of 1920s Europe.

In 1928, Edward Steichen was commissioned by Vanity Fair to photograph Greta Garbo (fig. 1). Describing the experience in his autobiography, Steichen said,

I made five or six exposures, all more or less like her typical movie stills. She moved her hair this way and that way, chin up and down, but what bothered me most was her hair. I said: It's too bad we're doing this with that movie hairdo. At that, she put her hands up to her forehead and pushed every strand of hair back away from her face, saying 'oh, this terrible hair'. At that moment, the woman came out, like the sun coming out from behind dark clouds. The full beauty of her magnificent face was revealed. (Steichen cited in Muir, 76)

Garbo only became Garbo the icon once the overt signs of fashion (the “hairdo”), and therefore of the passing of time, were removed. Without hair covering her forehead, Garbo’s face appears more sculptural, and harder to place in a time or a social class. The importance of this in the construction of Garbo as a “star” was dramatised in her first American film *The Torrent* (dir. Monta Bell, 1925) in which she plays a peasant who becomes a famous singer: as the singer, La Brunna, she appears with her hair slicked back from her face. The look is distinctively Art Deco: film scholar Lucy Fischer has described how Garbo was increasingly moulded to fit an Art Deco ideal, her face simplified and abstracted through its framing by collars and hats, through the styling of her hair and make-up (83–85, 103–105).<sup>1</sup> Yet Garbo’s star persona, constructed in the films and publicity stills, seemed to imply a quality that went beyond the transience of fashion: she was described as “the face of the century”, “eternal”, “divine”.

**FIGURE 1** Edward Steichen, portrait of Greta Garbo, 1928 © the estate of Edward Steichen/ARS, NY and DACS, London 2016.

Garbo’s stardom is consistent with Walter Benjamin’s contemporaneous definition of aura as a strange mix of the momentary and the permanent, of proximity and distance. In “Small History of Photography” (1931) he described aura as “a peculiar weave of space and time: the singular appearance only of distance, however close it may be” (83). Benjamin saw aura as something

photography had only been able to capture in its very early days, technically conditioned by long exposure times, so that in Hill and Adams' portraits, for example, "light wrests itself agonisingly from the darkness" (80). Aura is associated with the technical limitations of early cameras, but also with the sitters themselves, who had not yet learnt to pose for the camera, who "stepped spotless into the image space", and who themselves possessed the aura of a social class on the rise (70, 80). After the 1880s, the technical refinement of photographic optics, the increased commercialisation of the portraiture, and the arrival of the "imperialist bourgeoisie" ousted aura from the photograph. According to Benjamin, it was substituted by an artificially-created aura, using techniques such as retouching and lighting, and "it became fashionable to have a blurry tone, interspersed with artificial highlights" — the pictorialist style that the nineteenth-century press disparagingly referred to as "fuzzy-graphs" (81).

Nowhere was the production of artificial aura more important than in Hollywood, and the burgeoning industry of movie magazines relied on this tension between intimacy and distance.<sup>2</sup> Garbo was contracted to Metro Goldwyn Meyer (MGM), who employed their own staff photographers both to document the films on set and to take official publicity photographs. Film historian David S. Shields argues that "photographic work at MGM represented the height of a kind of industrial rationalisation infused by an intense communal impetus for aesthetic polish" (15). Steichen was not a staff photographer, but his photograph, first published in *Vanity Fair* in 1929, set a new standard of aesthetic refinement, moving the visual representation of Garbo away from the fuzzy-graphs of the Garbo's previous photographers, Arnold Genthe and Ruth Harriet Louise but also building on the visual repertoire of poses and lighting they had established.<sup>3</sup>

Steichen's photograph uses a dark framing to contrast with Garbo's pale complexion. Garbo wears a long-sleeved dark dress with a low neckline but as her arms are raised to pull back her hair, the dress becomes a black geometric surround for her face, while her neck is concealed in shadow. Garbo's face appears to float within this black geometric frame, while the photograph retains a candid, immediate feel, after all, she is just pulling her hair back with her hands. It preserves the

sense of her face as a momentary revelation, “like the sun coming out from behind dark clouds”. Steichen’s portrait underscores the importance of a play of revealing and concealing both in the construction of Garbo as a star, and in Modernist photography more generally. The new emphasis on “capturing the moment” in photography, combined with unusual geometric compositions and intimate close-ups, was aided by new cameras such as the Rolleiflex and the Leica. Steichen was a key figure in the popularisation of “straight” photography, and his influence challenged the pictorialist approach which had hitherto dominated the studios.

However, it was not Steichen who produced the most iconic and “timeless” (and impeccably Art Deco) photograph of Garbo. That was made by Clarence Sinclair Bull, staff photographer for MGM, who photographed Garbo regularly from 1929. Bull took the photograph in question in 1931 for *Mata Hari*. The portrait is lit so that Garbo’s head emerges from the darkness. A similar technique had been used for an earlier portrait taken during the filming of *The Kiss* in 1929.

FIGURE. 2. Portrait of Garbo for *The Kiss*, 1929 © Everett/REX/Shutterstock. This photograph appears to be taken by Clarence Sinclair Bull, though it has also been credited to Nickolas Muray, whose family gifted a negative of it to the George Eastman Museum.

In the earlier photograph, Garbo was wearing a beret, which gave a sharp outline to her forehead, but the edges of her face were soft (fig. 2). But now Bull had abandoned the expressive pictorialist softness of Garbo’s earlier photographs for a sharp, clear cut Modernist aesthetic that is much more polished, and less spontaneous than Steichen’s. The photograph shows Garbo styled as her character in the film, with hair slicked back, her hand almost seeming to prop up her face, which floats against a deep black, but in light shadow, sharply lit at the edges to separate it from the dark background (fig. 3).

FIGURE 3. Clarence Sinclair Bull, Portrait of Garbo for *Mata Hari*, 1931 © Moviestore/REX/Shutterstock.

Garbo's eyes are cast down, and her mouth firmly closed. If Steichen's portrait suggests the revealing and concealing associated with the passing moment, Bull's *Mata Hari* photograph suggests a different play of concealing and revealing. Here, the slick precision of the image is such that it seems as if Garbo, like Queen Nefertiti, embodies a beauty that will never change or deteriorate. The portrait displays Garbo's face for the viewer to examine in detail while at the same time seeming to hold something back, behind the closed lids and mouth.

The idea that Garbo was distant and unreadable was reaffirmed through such photographs. She was nicknamed "The Swedish Sphinx", a reference to her inscrutability and preference for privacy. In 1931, Bull even made a photomontage of Garbo in which he superimposed her face on the Sphinx. This notion of her face as a kind of mask is repeated in the most famous essay on Garbo, Roland Barthes' "The Face of Garbo", originally published in the periodical *Les Lettres Nouvelles* in 1955. Barthes described Garbo's face as "an admirable face-object" and he wrote, "the make-up has the snowy thickness of a mask; it is not a painted face, but one set in plaster protected by the surface of the colour, not by its lineaments" (56).<sup>4</sup> Barthes implies that the make-up takes the face in the direction of something that is not living: an object, a plaster-cast, a statue, a death mask. Yet, "in this deified face, something sharper than a mask is looming" (57). According to Barthes, Garbo's face is archetype and idea, but also hovers between mask and face, being exactly at the transitory point "when the archetype leans towards the fascination of mortal faces" (57).

Steichen's photograph of Garbo was also recirculating in the year Barthes was writing: it featured, for instance, on the cover of *LIFE* magazine on 10 January 1955, to accompany "The Great Garbo: A Candid Biography". Garbo was also featured in *Paris Match* in April 1955, the same month that Barthes essay was published, under the title *l'Enigme Garbo* (Garbo the Enigma). Barthes refers specifically to the film *Queen Christina* (1933), which had been recently screened in Paris. During the shooting of the final scene, in which Queen Christina gazes out to sea, its director Rouben Marmoulian reportedly instructed Garbo to "make your mind and your heart a complete

blank, make your face into a mask” (cited in Vieira 188-9, see also Milne, 74-75). The final shot slowly tracks in to a tight close-up of Garbo’s face, which, as film theorist Mary Ann Doane has said, “is held for an unexpectedly long time”. Doane comments “Although Garbo’s face here seems to constitute a veritable zero degree of expression, its blankness nevertheless is forced into legibility by the pressure of the narrative culminating in that moment” (101).

These are very specific ways of talking about photographs and film sequences of Garbo’s face: as mask-like, blank and yet somehow legible or expressive; as a surface that repels interpretation yet seems to have endless depths; as an archetype or ideal that nevertheless hovers on the edge of being human; as something that seems to promise to remain forever and yet also seems about to disappear. This discourse describes something very specific to Garbo, and something that other film stars and studios would attempt to emulate with limited success, but it is also consistent with the “floating face” style of portraiture, which bridged the divide between pictorialist and Modernist styles, and which became popular at the same time as Garbo.

There are a very few examples of this portrait technique, in which an illuminated face glows from a surrounding darkness, before the 1920s. We can identify it in Julia Margaret Cameron’s famous portraits of Sir John Herschel, though in the early print that she gave to Herschel the velvet in which she had draped him is clearly visible. But Cameron is in many ways an anomaly in the history of photography. It would be more accurate to say that this technique was pioneered by cinema. The cinema of the 1920s brought to prominence the close-up on the face, in particular, which had a number of curious effects. First, the face is dissociated from background or *mise-en-scène*, from any “spatio-temporal co-ordinates” (Dowd 74). Second, it causes the time of the film to appear to slow down, so that the film image become more like a still (Balázs 39, Wen 24). This is doubled by the presentation of women as objects of “erotic contemplation”, so that, as film theorist Laura Mulvey noted, the lingering close-up on the female star seems to stop the narrative flow of the film altogether (Mulvey 19). Additionally, the close-up enlarges the face far beyond human scale. In his 1940 essay “Sketch on the Psychology of Cinema”, André Malraux wrote:

A small head in an enormous auditorium, such is the stage actor; a film actor is an enormous head in a small auditorium. All to the advantage of the latter, for moments that the theatre could never render save by silence could, even on the silent screen, be implemented by the play of emotions writ large on a face (323).

One effect of this enlarging, which actually works against the emotional identification with the actor, is that the face can become “unrecognisable, monstrous and effectively inhuman” (Dowd 75). In contrast to the cinematic close-up, photographic close-ups in the form of prints do not generally enlarge the face, but shrink it. Nevertheless, they share some of the impact of the cinematic headshot, not least through the use of similar lighting techniques. Cinematic techniques of lighting and framing were adopted by portrait photographers: unsurprisingly in Bull’s case, since he worked in such proximity to the movies and had been a film cameraman.<sup>5</sup>

By 1933, the floating face looming out of a dark surround had become a photographic cliché: the German film and photography critic Siegfried Kracauer wrote in that year, “why are very many portraits, particularly so-called artistic ones, so odd? I am thinking of the portraits that one often sees hanging behind glass, framed, at the entrances to photography studios. Some famous man’s head emerges out of a mystical darkness...” (“A Note”, 59). The popularity of this style of portraiture testified to the on-going influences of phrenology and physiognomy, Victorian fads in which the external appearance of a head or face becomes the means to classify an individual as a type; but it also staged, as a hallucinatory vision, the promise of immortality offered by fame. The depicted subject is unaccompanied by the trappings of the age (by period objects and fashions), and becomes a ghostly floating countenance. The floating face promises to endow the sitter with mythical status, just as the close-up in film did. But it also brings the sitter closer to being an object: the cinematic close-up makes objects expressive, like faces, and faces “objective” or object-like (Balázs, 60). This is noticeable in photography of the period too: for example in the work of the Swiss-born portrait photographer Helmar Lerski who treated faces as sculptural objects, their expressions little more than effects of lighting. Lerski also had a background in cinema, having worked as a cameraman and lighting technician on German Expressionist films (including Fritz



Lang's *Metropolis*). Photography critic Francis Hodgson sees Lerski's portraits as exemplifying the way "the face is only one small remove away from the mask" and as seeming to turn the human countenance into the faces of a Gothic sculptures. (Hodgson 2013).

### **The Undying Face**

Conversely, cinematic lighting techniques could animate the inanimate: Malraux wrote in *Museum without Walls* (1947) of how photographs of statues made them resemble film stars through the use of identical lighting techniques (Malraux 1967, 86). The cultural historian Claudia Schmölders mentions early 1920s German books, depicting the heads of medieval and Gothic statues, that similarly treated their subjects as film stars: "They doused them in dramatic lighting, they severed head from body and shot them in close-ups" (74). As these writers suggest, the influence of the cinematic close-up on photography was not restricted to the Hollywood studio portrait. Similar lighting techniques were used in a remarkably influential book of 1926: *Das Ewige Antlitz (The Undying Face)*, authored by the art historian and critic Ernst Benkard. Benkard's widely-circulated book contained photographic reproductions of 96 death masks (112 including life-masks and busts) and had gone through at least 19 print runs by 1935.

In *The Torch in my Ear*, the second volume of his autobiography, the writer Elias Canetti describes his first encounter with Benkard's book. The book was given to his friend Ibbi Gordon by one of her male admirers, who was a bookseller in Vienna. It had a strong effect on the young Canetti who recounts that he and Ibbi pored over the book in rapt silence, and the bookseller left, having been almost completely ignored. The scene takes place in a Viennese coffeehouse in 1927. Canetti writes, "I had never seen death masks: they were something completely new to me... I reeled from one face to another, as though I had to catch and hold each single one." (242-3).

Curiously, in a book that mentions photography several times, Canetti overlooks the fact that the images of the death masks are photographs. Their vivid impact is transmitted through photography, but Canetti writes as if what he encounters, as he turns the pages, are the masks

themselves, unfiltered by any photographic rhetoric or staging. Essentially, the fact of the photograph's apparent fidelity as a copy is what allows Canetti to treat the photograph as transparent and assign this affect to the masks. Yet the death masks are photographed and presented in Benkard's book in very specific ways. The majority are photographed from the front, though in some cases a second, profile shot is included. They are generally lit as if from above and to one side — that is, from over the top of the head, so that shadows are cast beneath the brow and nose, just like a portrait of a living person standing up (rather than lying down, in death). Several use the portrait lighting style sometimes referred to as "Rembrandt" lighting, in which one side of the face is in light shadow, but with an illuminated triangle on the cheek.

The backgrounds are nearly always plain, and range in tone from black to light grey: the only exception to this is the first mask, of Bernardino da Siena (1380-1444) which is presented surrounded by leaves. Many float against black, for example, the masks of Franz Liszt, Isaac Newton and Queen Louise of Prussia, or the gaunt, scrunched-up face of Saint Antoninus (d.1459). Some appear serene, but a few, most notably the mask of Marat, seem to be seized by agony (and unusually, both his mouth and eyes are open). Most have their eyes cast down and their mouths clenched shut. Some, like the masks of Jonathan Swift or Walter Scott, are like moons or pebbles, white and uncannily smooth (fig. 4). Those such as Schiller's and Mahler's, that are presented both in front and side-view, are revealed as objects, since the masks have no back. Others are also very object-like, too much like decapitated heads than faces still belonging to a body: the masks of Peter the Great and Henry II both appear as objects simply plonked onto a surface and photographed. As Benkard's notes to the plates reveal, the death masks are held in various collections across Europe, and the photographs taken by different photographers in a number of countries, yet they are remarkably consistent in style.

FIGURE 4. Death Mask of Walter Scott 1771–1832 as reproduced in Benkard, *Das Ewige Antlitz*, 1926. Private collection.

Benkard's book was the first, but a flurry of books on death masks followed — notably Richard Langer's *Totenmasken* (Death Masks) of 1928, and Egon Friedell's *Das letzte Gesicht* (The Last Face) of 1929. Schmölders sees Benkard's book, and the volumes which followed it, by Langer and others, as a new attempt to produce “a national portrait gallery” for Germany (78). She suggests that Benkard's book provided a compromise between the gallery of “meritorious men” and the bourgeois thirst for photographs (73–4). And this is a parade of “great men”: five women are included in the German edition, and only two in the English edition, one of which is Queen Louisa of Prussia and the other is the famous but anonymous *Inconnue de La Seine* (Unknown Woman of the Seine), a purported death mask of a drowned woman (fig 5).<sup>6</sup> The *Inconnue* mask was hugely popular, inspiring stories that attempted to give some identity to the unknown woman: her appeal lay in the contradiction between her serene expression and tragic end (see Saliot for a full account). In her anonymity, she was effectively an empty vessel for the projection of desire.

Fig. 5. The *Inconnue de la Seine* as reproduced in Benkard, *Das Ewige Antlitz*, 1926. Private collection.

Schmölders also comments on the death mask photographs in *Das Ewige Antlitz*, linking them to photographs of silent movie stars: “they appeared like powdered faces sprung from a silent movie” (74). Her main interest in them is in their possible influence on Hoffman's 1927 portrait of Hitler, which was the basis of a 1932 election poster. As she discusses, the portrait was from a larger shoot in which Hitler practiced the gestures from his speeches — the whole set reminiscent of a slightly ludicrous silent movie performance. In the poster, Hitler's face looms out of a dark background, disconnected from any body or context, and anchored by the single word “Hitler”. It is hard, with hindsight, to see this image as anything other than threatening, and at the time, it

presumably would have worked in a double way, as a threat to some, and as announcing his greatness, or star-like appeal, to others. This emphasis on the physiognomy of Hitler was, as Schmölders shows, part of the larger cult of the face, and linked to ideas about national and racial identity.

Benkard's book is one of several German titles that used the word *Antlitz* (face or countenance) in this period, as part of this "national face cult" that was not restricted to photography or to death masks or even to "meritorious men" (Schmölders 78). These were part of a new, post-war construction of German national identity: historian Peter Fritzsche writes that before 1914 the histories had focussed on the achieving of German unification, now there was a new emphasis on the *Volk*, on social "types" enumerated through "physiognomic surveys" (25). August Sander's collection of his own photographs, *Antlitz Der Zeit* (Face of Our Time) was published in 1929, only a few years after Benkard's book of death masks — Alfred Döblin's introduction even compared the book to Benkard's (James 39). While Sander's photographs were full length portraits, other photographers worked specifically with close-ups of faces, for example Lerski's 1931 book *Köpfe des Alltags* (Everyday Heads) and Erna Lendvai-Dircksen's *Das deutsche Volksgesicht* (The Face of the German People) which was published in several volumes beginning in 1932. This archive fever quickly gets harnessed by the Nazis for the purposes of racial classification (Fritzsche 27).

Several writers connect the fascination with the death mask book with the experience of the Great War, both the scale of death and the mutilated soldiers whose presence was an uncomfortable and ongoing reminder of the conflict. By the 1920s, Emanuel Alloa writes, "a vague desire to endow the phenomenon of death with a meaning transcending its historical circumstances" was being expressed through the death masks. He argues that, "In the death masks of outstanding historical figures, the wounded Weimar Republic not only lent death a singular countenance, but was also able to found a new beginning upon the rubble of the past." (Alloa 70-71).

Schmölders also connects Benkard's book with the war, seeing the images as a kind of "reconciliatory compensation" for the educated bourgeoisie. She suggests they acted as an "aesthetic buffer" against other, more violent images of war and death — for instance, those circulated by pacifists and anti-war activists as in Ernst Friedrich's photographic book *Krieg dem Kreige* (Wage War on War) of 1924 which included close-up portraits of soldiers with facial mutilations, in some cases, patched together experimentally by an early plastic surgery, which, if life-saving, was also monstrous (Schmölders 74-5). Friedrich intended the pictures to shock, accompanying them with explicitly anti-war captions in German, French, Dutch and English, hoping that it would influence the public to oppose war (for more on see *Krieg dem Kreige* see Sontag 2002, Apel, and Hüppauf). The book was denounced by patriotic organisations and bookshops were raided: in Germany, as in Britain, "the wounded face was taboo." (Biernoff 28).<sup>7</sup>

Schmölders suggests that the floating, ghostly and organically whole death masks in Benkard's book might have acted as compensation for these other shocking depictions of the consequences of steel helmets and shell warfare (74). Yet such political meaning was not altogether evident at the time, since not everyone who opposed war subscribed to Friedrich's tactics and since such images were not in wide public circulation. Virginia Woolf, herself a lifelong pacifist, published the British edition of Benkard's book. In fact, it found its greatest reception among the bohemian circles of the European avant-garde and their attraction to death masks can be understood as related to their interest in other kinds of masks, and in the dismembered and fragmented body, the savage "breaking of the human frame" that repudiated the glorification of war.

### **The Uncanny Mask**

The surrealists were fascinated by death masks but also by Oceanic and African masks. Masks spoke of hybridity, metamorphosis, the blurring of boundaries between human and animal, human and machine, the animate and the inanimate. They were associated with fluidity of identity,

with acts of mimicry in which the mimic becomes that which she or he imitates. In surrealist journals such as *Minotaure* and *Variétés*, the masks of non-Western cultures were brought together with older hybrid creatures from the Western tradition, such as the Minotaur and the Sphinx (Cheng 67). Around 1929-30 *Minotaure* and *Variétés* included numerous photographs of masks, mannequins and people wearing facial coverings such as diving helmets, gas masks, optometric instruments, as well as photomontages replacing human heads with technical objects. These mechanical masks and commodified bodies mock the modern cult of the machine and turn images associated with desirability into uncanny grotesques (see Foster 136 -140 for a more detailed analysis).

André Breton, Paul Eluard, and Louis Aragon are among those known to have been influenced by Benckard's book and subsequent ones on death masks (Saliot 68, Alloa 70-71, Stubbs). They may even have connected them to the life masks taken of the war-mutilated: Breton and Aragon had worked at the Val-de-Grâce military hospital in Paris, which contained a museum displaying wax and plaster casts of mutilated faces (Lyford 46-7). Art historian Amy Lyford argues that the Val-de-Grâce museum defused the violence of the facial casts (or "life masks") by showing them in sequences representing stages of recovery and reconstruction, but that singly displayed, one of these casts "emphasises trauma as something permanent, static, endless" (Lyford 50). It freezes time, like a photograph.<sup>8</sup>

Photography further confused masks and faces. In 1929 Man Ray photographed the death mask of Modigliani. The same year he photographed the model Jacqueline Barsotti, isolating her face with paper and delineating it using his solarisation technique, so that it appeared like a mask. In 1933, Lee Miller, his collaborator since 1929, photographed *Vogue* model Mary Taylor with her head seeming to float, as if severed, against a dark background (entitled "Floating head" in monographs of Miller's work) (fig. 6). In doing so she articulated something already implicit in the floating face style of portraiture, in its separation of head from body, the aestheticisation of decapitation, the necrophiliac appeal of *L'Inconnue*.

Understood as part of the visual iconography of surrealism, masks, including death masks, are uncanny in the Freudian sense: Freud included “wax-work figures, articulate dolls and automatons” as uncanny objects and they share with the mask their capacity to conflate the animate with the inanimate through doubling (Freud cited in Foster, 128). Hal Foster links the Freudian uncanny to the surrealist concept of “convulsive beauty” (Foster 20-23). He gave examples in *L’Amour Fou* (1937), including instances of mimicry in nature, mediated through photography, such as Karl Blossfeldt’s mysterious botanical photographs, in which, “the animate is so close to the inanimate” that it “suggests the inertia of life, the dominance of death” (Breton, cited in Foster, 23; Foster 23). The death mask photographs also heighten this sense of the animate-inanimate, insofar as they are inorganic objects that substitute themselves for the once-animate, photographed in such a way that they appear alternately as real faces and as lumpen things.

Other examples of convulsive beauty relate to the arrest or expiry of motion, or more violently, “reality convulsed in shock” (Foster 28). Art theorist Rosalind Krauss describes this as “intrinsically photographic” but we could say it is also intrinsically a quality of death masks (Krauss 28). The death masks reproduced in Benkard’s book would have been mostly taken very shortly after death, before the onset of rigor mortis. As Canetti observed: “It is the bating of breath, but as if the breath were preserved. Breath is man’s most precious possession, most precious of all at the end; and this ultimate breath is preserved in the mask as an image” (243). The death mask translates the fragile and ephemeral breath into an image and by doing so holds (bates) it. The photograph of the death mask doubles this affect, not by freezing the object (which is already inanimate) but on the contrary, by seeming to reanimate it, implying the possibility of further movement by increasing the similarity between the mask and a human face. It convulses the death mask into life.

Surrealist images of female bodies often seem to violently and misogynistically affirm a connection between death and sexuality. Foster suggests they were influenced by Freud’s concept of the death drive: the drive of the organic to return to the state of inorganic, the compulsion towards dissolution and death, closely bound to the sexual drives (Foster 10-11).<sup>9</sup> Benkard’s book

also suggests the idea of death as a kind of heroic and sexualised pleasure in a “note” on the process of making death masks, by the German sculptor Georg Kolbe:

... the last breath is followed almost immediately by an unearthly smile. Freed from all suffering, achievement! To die seems thus a fulfilment, a consummation, the most exalted moment in life. So long as the blood is yet warm and the muscles yet in action, the face is transfigured as if in a final glow of youth. (Benkard 43)<sup>10</sup>

While Kolbe’s description seems to almost anticipate not the fragmented and dismembered bodies of surrealist art, but the Nazi cult of the idealised body, Canetti’s response to the death mask photographs also suggests there is a heroism in confronting death. He singles out one mask in particular that he keeps returning to, the mask of Blaise Pascal (fig. 7), which seems to preserve, not just a momentary breath, but the experience of pain, through which his face becomes “eternal” (244).

Fig. 7. Death Mask of Blaise Pascal (1623–1662), as reproduced in Ernst Benkard, *Das Ewige Antlitz*, 1926. Private collection.

Yet Canetti rails against the inevitability of death. The masks, he points out, capture the “final instant before decay”, and in doing so,

“there are some that wound you — masks that expose. Their purpose is the dreadful truth that they churn up, the dominating principle on which this specific life had to end: the burden on Walter Scott, the sharp madness of old Swift, the terrible, consuming disease of Géricault” (243).

For Canetti, the death masks also seem to pause the passage of time in a physical, bodily way. Both the “indignation against death” and the fascination with the face after death are associated in his mind with Gilgamesh, the Sumerian king of the ancient epic (50). Gilgamesh’s futile quest to defeat death begins with the death of his friend, and in the version Canetti had heard, he sits with the corpse until its face begins to decompose.



The appeal of the death mask to Canetti is that it suspends this moment between when a life expires, and before decay and the ravaging of the face. Benkard himself also saw the death mask as a threshold object, that “stands and admonishes us at the gateway between what we call life and what we call death” (39-40). Here he seems to almost anticipate later theories of photography, particularly Barthes’ *Camera Lucida*, in which Barthes treats photographs as speaking both to our anticipation of our own death and our sense of the thin line between the living and the dead, evoked by photographs of the dead when they were living (“he is dead and he is going to die”) (Barthes 45).

### **The Death Mask in Photography Theory**

The desire to defeat death and the attempt to preserve or stop time are key themes in twentieth-century photography theory, but they emerge earlier in nineteenth-century writings on photography. The death mask as a figure for the photograph only appears later, well after 1926, when death masks, photographed and circulated for the first time, coincided with certain cultural preoccupations with death and with new cinematic conventions. Photography had reached a certain maturity by this point: the first subjects of photography were now dead, and as Kracauer argued in 1927, what photographs seemed to preserve was not “time” at all, but the “detritus” normally left behind by memory and history ( “Photography” 35). Time has turned the face into a mask: “The girl smiles on, always the same persisting smile, which stands still, without reference anymore to the life from which it has been taken” ( “Photography” 35). While Canetti finds in the death mask photographs a reaffirmation of his own rebellion against death, his own desire to defeat the inexorable, Kracauer sees photography itself as bound up in the inevitability of death as well as the desire to prevent it. He writes, “That the camera gobbles the world is a sign of the fear of death”, but also, “this [photographed] present seems to have been delivered from death but in reality is delivered up to it” ( “Photography” 40).

Perhaps the most famous essay to parallel death masks with photography is André Bazin’s “The Ontology of the Photographic Image”, first published in French in 1945 (but written a few

years earlier).<sup>11</sup> Bazin takes up this notion of photography being bound up with the human desire to defeat time and achieve immortality. Alongside embalming and cave paintings, he cites death masks as evidence of what he calls the “mummy-complex”, meaning the human psychological desire to defeat death. Bazin mentions them only in a footnote, but oddly, in Anglophone photography theory in particular, it is this aside which has become most strongly associated with his essay, and his broader position (Bazin 7).<sup>12</sup> Death masks have since been referred to a number of times in photography theory, particularly to suggest that just as the death mask is a direct cast or imprint, so is the photograph, a quality that gives it a particularly powerful “truth-claim” or realism. For example, in *On Photography* Susan Sontag describes a photograph as “a trace, something directly stenciled off the real, like a footprint or a death mask” (154). Rosalind Krauss, in her essay “The Photographic Conditions of Surrealism” also repeats the analogy, describing photographs as related to “palm prints, death masks, the Shroud of Turin, or the tracks of gulls on beaches.” (26)

The difference between Bazin’s analogy and Sontag and Krauss’s is that while they place the death mask in relation to types of unmediated, accidental, or even miraculous types of images or imprints, Bazin is clear that the death mask is an artifice; like embalmed mummies and cave painting, it is a cultural expression. What it expresses is “man’s primitive need to have the last word in the argument with death by means of the form that endures” (6).<sup>13</sup> He links the mummy complex with a certain magical understanding of images in which the image has an inherent connection with what it depicts, regardless of whether it visually resembles it. Indeed, Bazin distinguishes it from “the obsession with resemblance” (the culture of copies) that comes to dominate Western art since the Renaissance.<sup>14</sup> This “sublimates” the mummy complex, which only reappears with photography. Photography succeeds both in appealing to the mummy complex and freeing “the plastic arts from their obsession with likeness”, not because it produces more adequate resemblances necessarily, but because it produces them mechanically, and “objectively”, that is, by means of the lens (in French, “objectif”) (Rifkin 12, 122; Bazin, 7). The mummy complex, in itself,

does not require perfect illusionism (as the references to Egyptian art and cave painting suggest). What it requires is a means of representation that promises to defeat time, that directly addresses the struggle against death.

The death mask is marginal to Bazin, and appears only in a footnote, because it is a “minor art” out of step with the main thrust of Western culture prior to photography, which had been to sublimate the mummy complex. As Malraux later argued in *Museum without Walls*, minor arts compete with major ones through photographic reproduction (Malraux 1967, 94). So the death mask really *arrives* with photography, in the sense that it is both consistent with photography’s “argument with death” and given a new and more visible status by photographic reproduction. In *Das Ewige Antlitz*, Benkard makes the case for seeing death masks as modern objects, that only become relatively commonplace with modern secularisation and “disenchantment”. Death masks displace religious effigies of the dead at the end of the eighteenth century, at “the twilight of the idols ushered in by the rationalist era” (37). Benkard describes the mask of Lessing as the first modern death mask in the sense that it becomes symbolic of the “spiritual bond” with the dead, rather than something associated with superstition or magic (38).

Photography theory, then, adopts an analogy that is overdetermined: by the publication and impact of *Das Ewige Antlitz*; by the popularity of a certain photographic style that, influenced by silent cinema, produces object-like faces; by the surrealist reading of the death mask in terms of the marvellous / uncanny; by the cult of faces; and by the priorities and modes of perception of a generation still coming to terms with the consequences of the Great War and who possess, for the first time, photographs of their own dead ancestors. This analogy is not incidental or marginal in later writings, though it is in Bazin. Instead it is central to a theory that presents photography in general as inherently cast- or imprint- like (indexical) and inherently deathly.

These qualities are used to define photography as such, to distinguish its medium-specificity, that is, to mark it as distinctive from other kinds of image. But what gets lost is a sense of the specificity of the masks and the photographs of the masks: whether symptomatic of modern

ideas about mortality and collective social identity as Benkart would have it, or of the “mummy complex”. Instead the death mask is drained of any cultural meaning, and any historicity, primitive or modern. It becomes merely death + mask (ie. cast), a handy cipher for what are understood to be the two fundamental characteristics of photography as such.

The work of Jean-Luc Nancy offers an alternative theory of the image, although also rooted in the death mask and specifically in Benkart’s book. For Nancy, the image is not about representation, but is about acts of appearing and disappearing, concealing and showing. As Louis Kaplan has argued, an alternative to the characterisation of photography as a deathly imprint can be found in Nancy’s reading of Heidegger, specifically the discussions of death mask photographs in Heidegger’s Marburg lectures of Summer 1926.

Heidegger did not mention Benkart. But as Nancy writes: “There is no great risk in the hypothesis that Heidegger was also struck by this work [Benkart’s book], whose renown would surely have made him aware of it.” (91). For Heidegger, the death mask photographs offered a means to explain more general processes of seeing images and their copies, and in particular, to interpret Kant’s writings on the mental schema that mediates between a concept of a thing and its appearance. In Heidegger’s reading of Kant, objects offer themselves to the gaze, and so do their copies or reproductions. But this is complicated when the thing reproduced is itself already showing something else. So the photograph shows the death mask, shows itself as photograph, and also shows the “showing itself” of the death mask, meaning it shows what the death mask shows: the appearance of a human face shortly after death (Nancy, 87).

Nancy uses this to think through a different theory of the image. The death mask is “the casting of a presence fleeting into absence” (Nancy 99). In Nancy’s writing, the image is not first about representing something but about acts of appearing and disappearing, concealing and showing. Like the portraits of Garbo discussed at the beginning of this essay, for Nancy the death mask hovers between being available to be gazed at, and withdrawing from the gaze, between visibility and concealment. The photograph as death mask is photography as a form of

“monstration” — of showing, or a method of display. But to display is also to hold back, and it involves, in Nancy’s phrase, “the withdrawal of the gaze”. In the death mask, the eyes are always shut, and these are eyes that have seen but see no longer. Since, in Heidegger’s terms, objects are not only seen, but offer themselves to a gaze, looking at the death mask is an odd experience. The face “does not show itself but essentially withdraws itself from all monstration” (Nancy 91).

Using Nancy and Heidegger, Kaplan re-reads the death mask as the foundation for a different photography theory. He writes, “In invoking the death mask’s casting of presence as simultaneously the becoming-absent of the body, Nancy recasts photography theory from thinking about the index to thinking about exposure” (49). Exposing means to be “in a relationship with the outside” as Kaplan puts it, and of course, this idea evokes the photographic meaning of exposure (50). Nancy is not the only Heidegger-influenced philosopher to theorise the image in terms of exposure and exteriority: Maurice Blanchot also did, though for Blanchot it is the cadaver, not the death mask, which becomes the model for the image (Kaplan, *Alloa* 77–78). However, neither Nancy nor Blanchot were speaking specifically about photography, their interest was in theorising the *image* (and not even, solely, the visual image). Even if, as for Benjamin, portraits are exemplary for Nancy, his category of the image does not privilege photography: he writes of pictures that are not “images” (“an identification photo, a descriptive record”), and pieces of writing that are (Nancy 4–5). He avoids the question of the medium and makes the image an ideal and ahistorical category. If we were looking for an alternative ontology of the photographic image, or an alternative way of expressing the medium-specificity of photography, it is not here. Either the death mask is a figure for the image in general, or it is a figure that marks out photography as specific and different from other kinds of image.

## The Image as Garbo

Bull's *Mata Hari* photograph seems to explicitly dramatise the tension between presentation and withdrawal, intimacy and distance that Nancy makes characteristic of the image, so that the "floating face" collapses the qualities of the image-as-death-mask with the qualities of Garbo herself. However Garbo's face could only be preserved as image through her gradual withdrawal from the public eye, beginning with her retirement from films in 1941. As Roland Barthes put it: "The Essence became gradually obscured, progressively veiled with dark glasses, broad hats and exiles: but it never deteriorated" (57). After her final withdrawal, film opportunities arose but were not accepted.

Garbo was, in any case, known for her refusals and withdrawals. Richard Schickel suggests that Garbo was "always a creature of withdrawal, of silence – thus ideally of the silent – an actress who from the first moment she appeared on the screen defined herself by her refusals" (Schickel 441). Charles Affron writes of her performances as "withholding and yielding ... hiding and revealing" (142, 164 and 126), while Melinda Szaloky uses Gilles Deleuze's phrase "turning towards-turning away" (3). Accounts of Garbo's cinematic performance stress the flickering rapidity with which emotions seem to pass across her face, while her expression hardly changes. Szaloky sees Garbo in films as both "mercurial" and still, restrained and understated by the standards of the day (7). Even so, Paul Morrison argues that her career could not withstand the increasing rejection of theatricality in film. Garbo was grand and enigmatic, her face characterised by a "sublime inaccessibility" entirely out of step with the demands of a newer, more naturalistic cinema (Morrison 159).

Garbo became "eternal" by refusing to be photographed, but also by being photographed, in a particular way, in the first place. It is true, I think, that the photographs by Steichen and Bull have not dated in the way that her films have. But even in these photographs, or especially in these photographs, there is a sense of her pulling away from visibility, as I have suggested. These photographs epitomise both Nancy's theory of the image as displaying / withdrawing and

Benjamin's theory of the aura, even if Benjamin saw aura as only artificially constructed in such images. Like Nancy's image, Garbo is separate, cut-off, distinct, unavailable, and yet at the same time "intimate" (Nancy 1–3). Like the image, Garbo "crosses the distance of the withdrawal even while maintaining it", she keeps her distance "while also making contact" (3). Nancy's formulation comes especially close to Benjamin's when he says that the image "approaches across a distance, but what it brings into such close proximity is distance", and again, he could be describing Garbo in these portraits (4).

I have tried to show that ways of conceptualising photographs develop and mature in specific historical and cultural contexts. To say an insight has specific historical origins does not tell us anything about its value, but it does suggest that different historical circumstances might have produced a different set of concepts. Photography theory is developed in the encounter with specific photographs (as in Barthes' *Camera Lucida*) but also it has a longer, more obscure history in other texts and in other images. Images themselves theorise the image. It is no coincidence that the characterisation of withdrawal and refusal as a qualities of the (auratic) image seem to echo descriptions of Garbo, and that these qualities are articulated so precisely in certain "floating face" portraits. There is a story that in 1947, the film director Billy Wilder asked Garbo to play *L'Inconnue de La Seine*. Perhaps Wilder sensed the similarity between the famous photographs of the *Inconnue* and of Garbo, but while the unfortunate *Inconnue* was passive in the face of other people's projections, Garbo was not. She refused.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Art Deco was the first mass-produced, industrial style that permeated all aspects of design and visual culture. Garbo, as an Art Deco star, is arguably the epitome of the film star as industrially styled product. See Fischer 2001.

<sup>2</sup> Titles such as *Photoplay*, *Screen Romances*, *True Romances*, *True Confessions* and *Romantic Movie Stories* (US) (US), or *Picturegoer*, *Picture Show*, and *Film Pictorial* (UK), indicate the importance of a mix of visual idealisation and a sense of intimacy.

<sup>3</sup> Louise, a young woman the same age as Garbo, was hired by MGM as a portrait photographer in 1925 and had the distinction of being the first female portrait photographer in Hollywood.

<sup>4</sup> Garbo's luminously white countenance was not strictly an aesthetic choice but a technical response to early film stock's sensitivity to red hues, which made pink faces appear dark. The thick make-up of the silent film era, more vivid to Barthes in the 1950s, was effectively a racial marker, to distinguish white skin from brown (Brownlow, 171).

<sup>5</sup> Curiously, one initial side-effect of the introduction of the sound to the movies was a temporary end to the cinematic close-up: sound immobilized the camera so that for the 1930 film *Anna Christie*, the only close-ups of Garbo that the public saw were the stills made by Bull (Pepper and Kobal 237).

<sup>6</sup> In the original German edition the other women included are Charlotte Volter, Alma von Goethe, and Anna Amalia von Sachsen-Weimer: presumably none were considered sufficiently well-known to a British readership.

<sup>7</sup> The photographs in Friedrich's book may have been taken originally for purposes of facial reconstruction. In Britain, Henry Tonks photographed disfigured soldiers in collaboration with the surgeon Harold Delf Gillies. Tonks' images were reproduced in Gillies' book *Plastic Surgery of the Face* (1920), but did not reach a non-specialist audience.

<sup>8</sup> Similar casts were used during wartime at the American Red Cross Studio for Portrait Masks on the Left Bank in Paris, for making prostheses (partial masks) for soldiers with facial injuries, in order to make them publicly acceptable (and their lives bearable) (Lubin). In contrast, the Surrealists wanted to undermine the view of the war as rational, to reveal that which is repressed in official accounts (Lyford 51).

<sup>9</sup> Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* was not translated into French until 1927, and surrealist writings rarely refer to it, yet Foster argues that the surrealists were aware of it "by late 1929 at least" (13).

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<sup>10</sup> Though early associated with artists the Nazis classified as “degenerate”, Kolbe continued to practice throughout the National Socialist era, and his idealized nudes fitted well with the Nazi fetishisation of the “Aryan” body.

<sup>11</sup> Bazin’s revised version was published in 1958, and this version formed the basis of an English translation published in 1960, after Bazin’s death.

<sup>12</sup> Steven J. Rifkin, in his PhD thesis on this essay, has attempted to correct this reading of Bazin, partly by showing how the translation and reception history of the essay overdetermined this interpretation — the translations altering the paragraph and section structure of the essay and losing many of the psychoanalytic connotations.

<sup>13</sup> Bazin’s choice of examples needs to be seen in the context of his time of writing. When Bazin was working treats ancient Egypt as a foundational cultural moment and place and when he describes cave paintings as “a magic identity-substitute for the living animal”, he is entirely consistent with interpretations of ancient Egyptian culture and of cave painting that were quite commonplace and accepted in European cultural circles in the 1940s.

<sup>14</sup> In this respect, Bazin’s narrative is influenced by Malraux’s “Sketch of a Psychology of Cinema”, mentioned earlier, where Malraux also describes a drive toward illusionism since the Renaissance and sees photography as taking over painting’s representational function (Rifkin 125, Malraux 1958).

<sup>15</sup> The complexity of Garbo’s sexual identity is suggested by the counter-proposal she allegedly gave Wilder: she wanted to play a male clown, adored by female fans, who are unaware that he is in fact a woman. Around the same time, Cecil Beaton photographed her as Pierrot, the sad clown, bringing out something that had always been implicit in Garbo’s face with her arched eyebrows, white make-up and sharply defined lips.