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Andrzej Wierciński & Andrej Božič (*Eds.*)

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Personambiguity in Kobo Abe's *The Face of Another* and the Abyssal Surface of Responsibility

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Abstract

Numerous studies across disciplines discuss the complex relationship between human facial features and personal identity in psychosocial dynamics. Most of these researches follow the common definition of the face as the forepart of the head. Kobo Abe's *The Face of Another* (*Tanin no kao*) is a Japanese novel that explores the face's complexity in great depth and contests this common notion of the face. First, this novel shows that the search for meaning behind the face's physical properties

is lacerated by discords of individuality/abstraction and identity/pretense. These straining pairs (which I call *personambiguity*) exemplify Lévinas's point that the face's meaning outweighs its phenomenality. Second, this novel presents that the constraint and primacy of responsibility transcend the face's sensible qualities. My reading holds that the face is an abyssal surface, in which the other manifests itself against our appropriative idea of otherness and summons us to irrecusable responsibility.

Keywords: Abe, ethics, face, Lévinas, phenomenology.

Dvoumnost osebe v romanu *Obraz drugega* Koba Abeja in brezdanja površina odgovornosti

Povzetek

Številne študije s področij različnih disciplin obravnavajo kompleksno razmerje med človekovimi obraznimi potezami in osebno identiteto znotraj psihosocialne dinamike. Večina tovrstnih raziskav sledi splošni definiciji obraza oz. obličja kot sprednjega dela glave. Roman Koba Abeja *Obraz drugega* (*Tanin no kao*) je japonsko delo, ki zelo poglobljeno razgrinja kompleksnost obraza in spodbija takšno splošno predstavo obraza. Najprej, roman kaže, da iskanje pomena za fizičnimi značilnostmi obraza trgata razpora med individualnostjo in abstrakcijo ter med identiteto in pretvarjanjem. Razpetost med takšnimi pari (ki jo imenujem *dvoumnost osebe*) pojasnjuje Levinasovo mišljenje, da pomen obličja presega njegovo fenomenalnost. Nadalje, roman ponazarja, da je zadrega in predhodnost odgovornosti transcendirata občutne kvalitete obraza. Moje branje zastopa mnenje, da je obličje brezdanja površina, na kateri se drugi sam manifestira zoper našo prisvojitveno idejo drugosti in nas kliče k neogibni odgovornosti.

Ključne besede: Abe, etika, obličje, Levinas, fenomenologija.

All around me are familiar faces
Worn out places, worn out faces

Roland Orzabal: "Mad World"

The face is our darling conundrum. Human beings highly esteem the face and see it as the first enactment of beauty. The global market value of the beauty industry has been steadily growing over the last decades, with the total head-and-face procedures exceeding other procedures—breast, body, and extremities. Even the current pandemic does not seem enough to halt this business. Quite the opposite, thanks to mandatory face covering and stay-at-home orders, the demands for cosmetic and reconstructive facial surgery are soaring highly. These recent phenomena accentuate psychosocial findings that facial features affect our self-image and life satisfaction.*

The exact value of the face, however, remains obscure. The following cases suggest that the value of the face is conditional, if not entirely arbitrary. Studies on facial disfiguration and facial prosthesis/transplant find multifaceted relationships between the face and personal identity. Head-and-face procedures only bring minimal improvement to the self-esteem of people with body dysmorphic disorder.* These discoveries imply that aesthetic appraisal and embodied identity are dictated more by subjective body image than objective facial figures.

Still, saying that the human face is totally vacuous would be a hardly sustainable conclusion to live with. Our brains are hardwired for faces. Human beings are attracted to face and gaze since birth, and atypical faces usually cause disruptive observability as well as social impairments. Immediate judgments in daily social life employ some degrees of spontaneous association to initiate facial reading. Facial reading is a salient function that we inherit since time immemorial and preserve as a heuristic mechanism, because knowing people is important for our survival.* It is not surprising that physiognomists since Polemon of Laodicea have been inventing many scales, in order to map meanings onto the face's contours and proportions.

* Due to proportional consideration, nearly all references to psychosocial studies—as marked by superscript asterisks throughout the article—are omitted from the publication. Further inquiries are most welcome.

From Lavater and Galton to Ekman, Kosinski/Wang, and Wu/Zhang, facial analysts claim to master the meanings behind human facial features, such as personality traits, moral character, emotion, intelligence, even sexual orientation. Although our facial configurations might not be completely arbitrary, physiognomic meanings encrypted into the face's physical properties lack serious warrants, because any appearance-based mental inferences and algorithms are liable to countless biases. Building any generalized essentialistic judgment over some resting face samples might not only amount to the glad game of gullibility, but also lead to gruesome injustices.*

Since aesthetic assessment is not an exact science and facial reading is far from accurate, what is, then, in a face?

I shall address this question by reading Kōbō Abe's novel *The Face of Another* (1964) from the lens of Lévinasian ethics. This work is a profound meditation on the ambiguity of the face. The novel consists of three notebooks with an exclusive postscript[1] that an anonymous man wrote for his anonymous wife. In reply, she left a short note that ended in "about two and a half lines of erasures, obliterated to the point of illegibility" (Abe 1980, 224). At last, in a post-event comment, the protagonist closes their correspondence with contemplations on suicide and her murder. I will review the novel's *personambiguity*[2] issues as instantiations of Lévinas's thoughts on the face and responsibility. Like his wife's "lines of erasures,"[3] this reading argues that the phenomenality of the face is liminal relative to its appeal for responsibility.

1 Although the postscript might contribute little to the plot progression, it was meant as a reading instruction and should be read prior to reading the notebooks (Abe 1980, 213, 220).

2 This portmanteau is meant to convey the polysemy of *persōna* and preserve its ambiguity. In Latin, *persōna* may refer to: (1) a mask; (2) a dramatic role; (3) a personal role; (4) an individual personality (in actual context); (5) a particular individual (in legal contexts); or (6) individuality in general (as an abstract notion) (*Oxford Latin Dictionary*, s.v. "persona").

3 Allow me to cite Schnellbächer in full length: "'Writing with an eraser' is a declaration for realism. Within this realism, the principle of deletion is an acknowledgement of the ultimate reality of existence, but on the other hand, there must be phenomena to be deleted in the first place." (Schnellbächer 2004, 461.)

1. Personambiguity

The Face of Another is a compilation of relentless psychomachia.[4] The main character suffered from severe facial deformation after his first experiment with liquid oxygen had exploded. The accident caused keloid scars over his face, leaving only his eyes and lips intact. So, to hide his nightmarish face, he wore bandages behind a pair of dark myopic eyeglasses. At first, he presumed that he would not feel like "a pimply adolescent who lives in vision," because he was a financially-secured doctor who supervised a respectable high-molecular research institute (Abe 1980, 13). Whenever that skin-thin issue disturbed his peace, he would recompose himself from any "baseless, irrational" feeling and simply accept his "repulsive" face (Abe 1980, 13). So, he treated his leech-like mass of scar with a "conscious provocation," that is, by publicly comparing himself to a horrendous monster (Abe 1980, 15).

Nevertheless, his coping strategy was proven effective only for a brief period of time. As the "leech-like corrosion" was "spreading like webs" (Abe 1980, 14) all over his face, identity crisis was creeping inside him. One day, when a young female subordinate showed a print of Klee's *False Face* to tease him, "an indescribable feeling of humiliation" dawned on him (Abe 1980, 14). From that moment on, his irritating confusion was becoming more and more difficult to contain. He felt that his mere existence was an abomination, not only to society, but also to his wife, "who had rejected me so positively, who had rebelled against my face" (Abe 1980, 195). Her refusal of his sexual stimulation made him realize that face was not "a mere screen, an illusion of no importance" (Abe 1980, 18).

4 Currie's dissertation is one of the earliest studies that terms the protagonist's issue as a divided self or self-alienation (Currie 1974; cf. Schnellbächer 2004, 458: note 226). As Calichman highlights on the basis of battlefield reflections and racism, war imagery is also ubiquitous in this novel (Calichman 2012). This imagery is further incorporated many times in the novel's tragic heroism and morbid associations (Abe 1980, 22–24, 26, 119–120, 135–136, 149, 166, 170–171, 181, 218, 226, 229–234). Interestingly, like the (fictional) opinion of Doctor K, war is historically pertinent to our problem regarding the face. Studies found that "plastic surgery was initiated as the community's way of covering over the sites of trauma left by war on human bodies" (Andreescu 2017, 2).

The urge to reconnect to his wife and society made him fancy a life-like mask, and he finally built one for himself. First, he sought a mask with the "ability to act," in order to counteract her "transparent nonexpression" (Abe 1980, 92). After six months of technical preparations, he developed the facial implant technology and came up with sixty-eight face models—all were based on his own face, but somehow none was similar to his real face.[5] To obtain a skin sample, he offered a hundred-dollar deal to the billowing faces at a station. Afterward, he spent more than twenty days constructing the mask and another twenty days crafting the beard. Ultimately, he wore the mask to seduce his wife to betray her lawful husband, him himself.

As I shall expose, the endless agitation of Abe's protagonist demonstrates the overlapping facets of personambiguity between individuality/abstraction and identity/pretense. The first pair is closely related to his search for meaning in facial features. His attempt to build a life-like mask required a sort of principle to incorporate meaning into the mask. If the face is meaningful in itself, where and how does it store meaning? Since no precise answer could be given to this question, another issue consequently follows: if the meaning is not encoded in the physical face, how to distinguish one's true identity from mere pretense? If no difference exists between one's real face and a mask, what makes a real face meaningful?

1.1. Individuality/abstraction

Against his reluctance to acknowledge the indispensability of face, the protagonist conceded: "there is metaphysical significance to the face […] that facial features had considerable relationship to the psyche and the personality" (Abe 1980, 57). He also admitted that, like adolescents who copied their idols to disguise their individualities, his bandages were a dandy disguise that "suppresses the heart by wiping out the face" and "cutting off the connection

5 Despite his intention to make "an imitation completely indistinguishable from the real thing," "the real thing" here does not mean his individual, original face (Abe 1980, 29). On the contrary, he reasons: "wouldn't the meaning of the mask be completely negated, no matter how skilfully it was constructed, if I wore one identical to myself?" (Abe 1980, 36). So, I interpret "the real thing" as "the natural face."

between face and heart by concealing the expression" (Abe 1980, 19, 76). At a certain point, he went even further by stating that the face was "*the essence of human relations that are composed of the transitory elements*" (Abe 1980, 106).[6]

But accepting these facts cornered him to a dead-end, because all that remained of his face was nothing but a "cast-off skin" (Abe 1980, 15). The accident had pillaged every expression from his face so that he thought: "my original real face too was a kind of disguise" (Abe 1980, 90). Ripping the bandages would not help his situation, because his face was "an incomplete mask" in itself (Abe 1980, 214). Therefore, the only option left for him was making a life-like mask, one that "should not appear to be a mask" (Abe 1980, 85).

The tension between individuality and abstraction started here. In order to suit his personality, the protagonist synthesized Jungian analysis and Boulan's classification to create some facial types. But contrary to expectation, the abstract values that guided him up to this stage sabotaged the production process. Choosing the face turned out to be the most difficult step. Uncertainties clouded his mind from seeing which type could clearly and faithfully reflect himself as an individual.

To overcome his indecision, he formulated two classification rules. The first rule prescribed an objective standard of value: a facial model should be chosen regardless of his own feelings. As concluded in the "Black Notebook"'s first "Excursus": "*Undervaluation and overvaluation of the face are equally artificial*." (Abe 1980, 32.) Ironically, the so-called *objective standard* was as naïve as the face's metaphysical magnitude. If the universality of facial expression ever existed, he wagered one's face and psyche would truly "stand in a fixed relation to each other" (Abe 1980, 45). Standard shifting should have never occurred in the first place, if there was any governing principle that appointed a certain meaning to a face.

Although his indecision in choosing the face also suggested that every face was somehow meaningful, that intuition did not inform him of its precise meaning. Since the objective standard did not seem to exist, his second rule bluntly canceled the first, and he made that major decision based on coin

6 All italics are original.

tossing. In his defense, he said: "No matter what a man's personality, one and one are always two." (Abe 1980, 58.) The universal objectivity of the face lingered as a vague abstraction relative to individuality. It was coldly irrelevant, both to his real face and to the mask. So, to him, the conventions of both the face and the mask were equally empty; such abstractions were fit only to replace the concrete human relationship. Abstraction was a substitute where people might actualize their impossible wish: "to escape from themselves, to be invisible beings" (Abe 1980, 227).

1.2. Identity/pretense

The second pair of personambiguity is articulated in two cases. First, the protagonist's case illustrates an oscillating tension between himself and the masks (the bandages and the life-like mask). The bandages offered anonymity, so he could roam free during his three-month stay in Osaka without concealing his true identity. This anonymity, however, came at a high price: he became a prison for himself. As the solitary bubble kept him at a safe distance from everyone, he wished to "become a monster, indifferent to my appearance, and break with a crash all the bonds which bind me to this world" (Abe 1980, 61).

Unlike the bandages, the life-like mask played a more active role. Instead of driving people away, it "furnished an evasion of reality" by taking over his identity (Abe 1980, 178). He reckoned: "with no resistance I slipped into his face. At once we fused, and I became him. […] I had apparently begun to feel and to think with it." (Abe 1980, 104.) The mask's "double aspect" (Abe 1980, 93) had negated his face and subsequently became his new face. This new face, which should subject to his choice, "suddenly […] had been forcibly shifted from what I myself would choose to what would be chosen for me" (Abe 1980, 92). Once it became his face, the mask "was growing thicker and thicker. It had grown at last into a concrete fortress that enveloped me." (Abe 1908, 152.) While the mask "thought itself in fact real" (Abe 1980, 211), he found his own existence "shallow and illusory" (Abe 1980, 205) without it.

Interestingly, he was never transmuted into two agents. He was still "one actor playing two parts. […] 'the mask, that is, the other me'" (Abe 1980, 192). His wife's note pinned it down most explicitly:

> At first you were apparently trying to get your own self back by means of the mask, but before you knew it you had come to think of it only as your magician's cloak for escaping from yourself. So it was not a mask, but somewhat the same as another face, wasn't it? […] It was not the mask, but you yourself. […] It was all the same to you whether you burned your face or didn't, whether you put on a mask or didn't. (Abe 1980, 222–223.)

All faces, his wife's included, are the second example of personambiguity. Everyone's face was "*a mask of flesh*" that protected their "*scar webs inside*" (Abe 1980, 107). To hide their true selves, people adorned themselves with tattoos, cosmetics, and artificial expressions ("making a face"; Abe 1980, 216). To perform well in society, people should put on certain facial expressions and tailor their inner scar webs. They should wear and animate their faces as a masquerade to comply with the unwritten convention of social drama. Thus, he imagined a nation as "*an enormous mask intolerant of the rivalry of individual masks*" (Abe 1980, 167).

The protagonist believed that somehow everyone shared his confinement, because there was no exit from one's real face. The difference between them was simply that no one had experienced the breakthrough of his mask experiment. In this instance, he even claimed that he enjoyed a kind of anomalous freedom that other people had not possessed, because his real face "was merely an incomplete copy of the mask" (Abe 1980, 215).

The personambiguity of identity and pretense created a mutual misperception that finally ruined the protagonist's marriage. To him, his wife had become an unknown, "profileless shape" (Abe 1980, 91) with "transparent nonexpression" (Abe 1980, 92). There was no more trace of personality behind her caring withdrawal; she only performed domestic duties out of "excessive impersonality" (Abe 1980, 85). The woman he was married to for eight years then turned into "a complete stranger"; her identity denied every color and form that his memory could ever recall of her (Abe 1980, 137).

He saw her cold equanimity as an indication of a double personality: "If I was another person wearing a stranger's mask, you were another person wearing the mask of yourself." (Abe 1980, 188.) By pretending to be deceived

and condoning the seduction, she had become his partner in crime and the masks' accomplice. Yet, after more than ten affairs, she looked just as calm as her usual self, showing neither guilt nor shame. So, he wrote: "among you and the mask and me, you alone had escaped intact" (Abe 1980, 209). She played a masquerade and kept her true self shrouded in cold and bitter silence. Her perfect pretense baffled him:

> What kind of a person were you, for God's sake?
>
> What kind of a person were you, you who had gone through the barrier of taboos unopposed and unabashed, who had seduced the seducer, plunged him into self-contempt, you who had never been violated? (Abe 1980, 206–207.)

His wife, on the other hand, also failed to recognize his true self. Although she could see past the mask and knew who the real seducer was, her unmasking light somehow blinded her from seeing the psychomachia that was buried deep beneath his absent face. To her, the mask only made him appear "so full of self-confidence"; so, she filtered everything as an epitome of his vanity (Abe 1980, 222). She was fully convinced that his new face only served as a stage entry to flaunt his ego. The mask was never meant to be a roadway for the others, because all he craved for was a mirror to admire himself.

His masquerade concealed his self-reproach so flawlessly that she failed to notice his deeply-ingrained frustration and how he felt like "a meaningless entity" (Abe 1980, 204) due to her frigid gestures. She was totally oblivious to the ambivalence[7] that swayed him like a chaotic pendulum—from the desire to build a relationship into a desire to avenge[8] "the arrogance of faces," and wavered back again to "reestablishing relations with others" (Abe 1980, 189).

7 He confessed: "I wanted to get close to you, and at the same time to stay away from you. I wanted to know you, and at the same time I resisted that knowing. I wanted to look at you and at the same time felt ashamed to look. […] both the desire to restore the roadway between us and vengeful craving to destroy you fiercely contended within me." (Abe 1980, 93; cf. Hardin and Abe 1974, 442.)

8 This vengeful motif appears a couple more times; once against "the authority of the face" (Abe 1980, 30) and another time against "the convention of faces" (Abe 1980, 76).

Both her awareness of his true identity as well as ignorance of his inner brokenness proved one thing: his role-playing provided a better camouflage that the mask could not give. After the second affair, he confirmed that the mask had become nothing more than a furtive surveillance instrument. It had betrayed its primary purpose: to reclaim himself and to win her back. Ironically, this also means that, since then, he was able to simulate confidence. The post-event note testified that he was simply "too wretched and embarrassed to justify" the worthlessness of his mask experiment that early (Abe 1980, 228–229).

* * *

The dual pairs of personambiguity—individuality/abstraction and identity/pretense—seem to be inseparable. These ambiguities are closely interrelated because each pair presupposes the common conception of face, i.e., the visible front part of one's head. The face is an aporetic surface, because its essentiality is attributed to its peripherality (Sakaki 2005, 369–370). The monstrosity of the protagonist's face became a problem, because it was mounted (Lat. *monstrāre*) in the first place as an extraordinary visible object instead of as a mere sign of warning (Lat. *monēre*).[9] The abstraction issue ensued, because abstraction could only extract the meaning that it had first assigned to particular contours and facial features. In his case, abstraction processed every facial model as a composite of fragments, so sixty-eight face models meant sixty-eight different facial compositions.

Likewise, pretense (making-face) requires visible facial expressions. If people could perceive beneath what appears on the surface, false impressions would mislead nobody. The protagonist believed that such an ability was the kind of "intuition" that people needed if they "sincerely wanted to face others" (Abe 1980, 208). Under this light, we can understand why he longed for a reconciliation "*with neither face nor mask*" (Abe 1980, 150). Thus, the

9 Historical inquiry upon Latin etymology suggests that *monstrum* is probably derived from *monēre*, and only later merged with *monstrāre* (Benveniste 1969, 256–257; cf. Demeule 2017, 52–53).

following section replaces the common conception of the face with the paradox of abyssal surface. I will examine after Lévinas how the abyssal surface works in Abe's novel to summon (Lat. *summonēre*) responsibility.

2. The abyssal surface

Unlike the common conception of face, I see Lévinas's notion of the face as an abyssal surface. As a surface, the face expresses visual and tactile information, and yet, it is abyssal in terms of phenomenal meaning. The face's meaning does not lie on the front surface of one's head. Here, the face refers to the direct (*face à face*) ethical relationship with an individual, whose identity is irreducible to its sensible facial properties. For Lévinas, the relationship with the other is an abstract element that transcends optic and haptic presentations, and, at the same time, it refuses totalitarian abstraction that defines otherness in terms of essence as the ground of being.

In different terms than personambiguity, the face is also ambiguous. It is infinitely ambiguous, because, as a surface, it transcends phenomenal experience and comprehension. Its sensible givenness only serves as a frozen caricature of its breathing character, which is always altered (*le visage altéré*) and unrepresentable. Once seen and/or touched, the face would have fallen into the unretrievable past as a plastic image. The face is abyssal, because it signifies how every other (*tout autre*) expresses (*s'exprime*) itself against our abstract horizon of otherness. Its signification works like an abyss (*abîme*), because it stands alone (*sens à lui seul*) and signifies itself different (*signifie autrement*) from the abstract formulation of our thought. The face is, therefore, called the uncontainable (*l'incontenable*) that resists every objective appropriation (Lévinas 1951, 97; 2000, 44, 101, 168, 204–205, 216; 2004, 121, 143, 149; 1982, 91). Lévinas describes it as a paradox:

> The face has no form added to it, but does not present itself as formless [*l'informe*], as matter that lacks or calls for form. Things have a form, are seen [*se voient*] in the light—silhouettes or profiles; the face signifies itself [*se signifie*]. (Lévinas 1979b, 140; cf. 2000, 148–149.)

The face stirs incalculable unrest, because it escapes from psychological categories and the registry of physiognomy (Lévinas 2000, 193–194, 215–217; 2004, 47, 148–149; 1979a, 75). Unlike Sartre's idea of the acquisitive threat of *le regard d'autrui* (Sartre 1943, 296–308)[10] or the anxious/aroused awareness of being looked at,* this kind of unrest is not particularly related to the other's gaze *per se*, but to its radical alterity (exteriority), which transcends phenomenality and eye-contact. Our relationship with the other is a face-to-face relationship with the utterly other (*tout autre*) whose otherness defines itself. The other does not conform to our subsuming conception as our alter ego, because every other is utterly other due to its own alterity (*son altérité même*) (Lévinas 2000, 25, 43, 126, 338; 1967, 199; 2004, 121, 125; 1979a, 8, 75; cf. Perpich 2019).

For Lévinas, the relationship with the utterly other is "a relation with a certain depth [*une profondeur*] rather than with a horizon" (Lévinas 1996, 10; cf. 1951, 97). Like an abyss, the other's face is laid bare and naked as a trace of itself that signifies itself. The face is an unrepresentable trace (*trace irrepresentable*) of the irreversibility (*illeité*) between one and the other. Following this trace will not lead us back to ourselves. The other's face is an ambiguous trace of the abandonment (*trace d'un abandon*) of our subjectivity and commitment; it forces a detour against our conception of the other as our alter ego (Lévinas 1951, 97; 2004, 27, 150, 158, 174, 234). Therefore, in a discourse on *The Face of Another*, Abe wrote: "we must attempt to communicate directly with the other by effacing the idea of the neighbor that exists within us. […] everyone is an other." (Abe 2013, 97.)[11]

By the same token, in a dialogue with Minkowski, Lévinas recommends "to avoid the word *neighbor*," because the other is more unlike us than similar to us (Lévinas 1996, 27). To resist the totalizing appropriation of the same, he does

10 The protagonist seemed to echo Sartre when he said: "It was as if I were putting on a play in which I was the only actor, thinking I was invisible […] completely oblivous to the fact that I had been seen by a spectator." (Abe 1980, 225). However, this statement only appears on this occasion and is elaborated upon nowhere else in the novel.

11 Abe criticizes the neighborly appropriation as a violent objectivation against the other. Against Lévinas's thought on *illeité*, appropriation requires reversibility and a need to see that "the other was *always already* the self in its pre-reflective exteriority" (Calichman 2016, 104). Note: *Beyond Nation* is a rich phenomenological analysis of Abe's works, but interestingly, Calichman leaves not a single reference to Lévinas.

not hesitate to call the face as an abstract visit and describe the relationship with the other as an element of abstraction. It is important to bear in mind that the sense of abstract here refers to the relationship with the other, not to the essence of being (*l'etant*) as naturally conceived from the face. It is hardly natural to render substantial abstraction out of the face's volatile, multiplex properties (cf. Black 2011).[12] The element of abstraction here calls for the ineffaceable distance (*proximité*)[13] to the exterior other, to whom none can get close enough (Lévinas 1967, 197; 2004, 89, 104, 134–135; cf. Hollander 2010).

The role of the visible face is liminal in the relationship; it reveals the other (Lévinas 2000, 161). The face's value will be reduced to nothing, if one seeks to exhaust its meaning within the boundary of purely perceptive and performative roles. As Abe illustrates, the protagonist's attempt to contain the meaning of the uncontainable only led to transient abstraction that wildly fluctuated based on the other's fickle expression (pretense) and one's transient impression as a subjective beholder. So, unlike physiognomic conceptions of the face, Lévinas argues that the face "is the pure trace of a 'wandering cause [*cause errante*],' inscribed in me" and which summons our responsibility (Lévinas 1991, 150; cf. 2004, 235).

The other's face is inscribed as a trace in us, not as an authorization to determine its meaning, but as an irrecusable call to obligation. Unlike its common notion, the face signifies the incommensurable exteriority that shatters our obsession with the identity of being (*l'essence de l'être*). This trace's

12 Based on his observation when serving the war-injured soldiers, Doctor K believed that the subtlest alteration on the face entailed a special signification, because "man's soul is in his skin" (Abe 1980, 26). The protagonist, however, was skeptical. For him, "[f]aceless battalions would be ideal groups of soldiers," since death was already closer to them than anyone (Abe 1980, 218). Faceless soldiers would charge most fearlessly into combat, because they could not care less about their place in other people's fading memory. Although his fatalistic perspective shows an acute concern for the physical face, as Lévinas contends, the abstract association between one's soul and face might be anything but natural.

13 Minkowski reads proximity as "an immediate given, that we find in the 'neighbor,'" but Lévinas holds the contrary (Lévinas 1996, 27). The immediacy of proximity—as well as of face—is given as an unrest (*inquiétude*) that conserves the distance of absolute exteriority, not erases it (cf. Lévinas 2000, 22; 2010, 437; 1967, 230–231; 2004, 32, 47, 80, 82, 92, 94, 130–31, 158, 184, 193, note 1; 1979a, 89).

inscription does not elevate us as powerful subjects; instead, we become hostages of accountability. As a powerless authority, the face of the other addresses us as the accusative of infinite responsibility. It charges us with the imploring command, to which we can only respond: "Here I am [*Me voici*]." (Lévinas 2000, 195; 2004, 26, 31, 98, 177–182; Wright et al. 1988, 169).

The call of responsibility ceaselessly resonates in *The Face of Another*. The protagonist knew that his expressionless face was a "false face, seen but unable to look back" (Abe 1980, 15), and rationalized that condition as "the advantages of seeing-without-being-seen" (Abe 1980, 13). Nevertheless, invisibility did not grant him moral impunity nor obliterate his guilt. In fact, he was troubled if being seen should be "the cost of the right to see," and if thus far he had lived like a "disguised spy" (Abe 1980, 61, 77). As in the myth of Gyges (Lévinas 2000, 90),[14] his most "reprehensible" masquerade could not exonerate his guilt and spare him from the others' outcry (Abe 1980, 158).[15]

Ineluctable responsibility is more intricately woven into the seduction dynamics. From the first time wearing the mask, the protagonist was convinced that he had become unrecognizable. The mask disguised him as a "complete stranger" so that he could seduce his wife—whom he saw as "the symbol of the stranger" (Abe 1980, 125). Although he wanted to make her "*fall in love with the mask*" (Abe 1980, 136), to his surprise, the mask came alive and transformed his plan into a triangular relationship.[16] Like "the shameful face

14 Beside the problem of phenomenality, just as Gyges salvaged the golden magic ring from a cadaver (Plato, *The Republic*, 2.359d), Abe's protagonist also wrote of an abandoned child corpse that he saw twenty years before: "*It reminded me that, outside of plastics, there was a world that could be touched with one's hands. The dead body would go on living with me forever as a symbol of another world.*" (Abe 1980, 181.) I find it noteworthy that K's silicon as the origin of his artificial invisibility emitted the "stench of dead flesh" and left a weird sensation of deadly infection (Abe 1980, 22).

15 Beside his wife's protest, the workers of the Institute were outraged at his economic plot. "Instead of constrained smiles directed at a cripple, I was now being treated on an equal footing," he wrote (Abe 1980, 82).

16 This triangular relationship—between him, the mask, and his wife—introduced additional distress that tore him apart. On the one hand, his plan succeeded, because he used the mask to enchant her; on the other hand, he needed to kill it, if he wished to redeem himself. Initially, he thought of ending this conflict by killing her as well, so he could save her for himself. Yet, doing so would mean that he played into the mask's hand, who went rogue and planned to kill her in the first place.

of a hidden parasite" (Abe 1980, 182), the mask began to take over the leading role in seducing her:

> The mask, as the name implied, would forever be my false face; and although my true nature could never be controlled by such a thing, once it had seen you it would fly off somewhere far beyond my control, and I could only watch it go in helpless, blank amazement. (Abe 1980, 142.)

Nonetheless, as mentioned above, the mask did not constrain him whatsoever. Like Lévinas's term about the starving other (Lévinas 2000, 73), the mask was a "famished fugitive" (Abe 1980, 167). It was nourished by the same jealousy that consumed the protagonist with anguish. Later, he stated that the mask's "tedious persuasions" actually advanced out of his own "conscious provocation" (Abe 1980, 172). His masquerade was not effective in evading responsibility.

Since the early episode, when he consulted Doctor K, the protagonist had already admitted that no facial transformation could ever alter his identity. And he never recanted that conviction. Although there was a gap that "could not be filled in" between the mask and his face (Abe 1980, 175), he wrote that such a "vertiginous abyss" was "only a few inches of facial surface, and for the rest we were the same" (Abe 1980, 188). He confirmed that he had "unrestricted freedom […] of flawlessly transparent glass" (Abe 1980, 152, 229), and that he should "acquire command of the mask by adroitly keeping my equilibrium" (Abe 1980, 200). No wonder the mask accused him of pretending "to have been defeated" (Abe 1980, 128).

Right from the outset of the mask play, the protagonist's wife could also see through his conniving scheme. Not only did she recognize his identity beyond the mask, but she also claimed: "Even you knew very well that I had seen through you. You knew and yet demanded that we go on with the play in silence." (Abe 1980, 222.) She added:

> You write that I rejected you, but that's not true. Didn't you reject yourself all by yourself? I felt that I could understand your wanting to. […] love strips the mask from each of us, and we must endeavor for

> those we love to put the mask on so that it can be taken off again. For if there is no mask to start with, there is no pleasure in removing it, is there? Do you understand what I mean?
>
> I think you do. After all, don't even you have your doubts? Is what you think to be the mask in reality your real face, or is what you think to be your real face really a mask? Yes, you do understand. Anyone who is seduced is seduced realizing this. (Abe 1980, 222–223.)

Against his precaution that the "Notebooks" might pain her, she begged him to re-read the diaries and listen to her own "cries of pain" through it all (Abe 1980, 224). Her plea stood on top of his testimony as a call for sympathy.[17] Her entreaty echoed in his "Notebooks" like the trace of a wandering cause so that he relented in the closing comment and acknowledged that his entire confession was truly full of self-defeating alibis, like a terrible ouroboros.[18] In the aftermath of his decaying masquerade, he wrote: "the passions of the mask, my hatred for the scars, began to seem unbearably hollow, and the triangle with its roaring spin began gradually to lose momentum" (Abe 1980, 208).

The triangular relationship faltered, because the mask and his wife summoned him to take responsibility regardless of the face's phenomenality. Relative to this call of responsibility, the meaning of the sensible face is merely liminal in introducing the other. Under common conception, its meaning only invokes responsibility on the capricious bases of abstract construction of ego identity and socio-political convention. Although regulating facial display/dissimulation is instrumental in panoptic stratagem, either for promoting prosociality or suppressing anarchic impulse,* its call of duty is economically and geopolitically driven.[19] The same findings also reflect that

17 Elaborating upon Cavell with Lévinas, Morgan distinguishes the expressions of pain in testimony from those in sympathy. While the first is an auto-exhibition, the latter is a response made to acknowledge the other's suffering (Morgan 2007, 77).
18 She compared his confession to "a snake with its tail in its mouth" (Abe 1980, 223).
19 Take, for example, the conflicting policies of public facial display. On the one hand, the government of France bans the use of veil as a part of religious attire (Assemblée Nationale 2010), and the government of Hong Kong prohibits the use of masks in public protests (GovHKSAR 2019). Both policies categorize facial dissimulation as

both the principle and the outcome of such regulatory functions are sinuous and conditional.*

For Lévinas, the role of the face's phenomenality is liminal in revealing the absent presence (*présent s'absentant*). This infinite ambiguity reveals that the face's meaning does not lie in its sensible properties. Irrespective of its sensible properties, the face is a signal for an incalculable direct encounter with the utterly other and our unyielding responsibility. Its sonorous appeal holds us accountable, even prior to our recognition of freedom, moral conscience, and commitment. The other's face and gaze are incomparably unknown to our comprehension, because the other is the coming one (*le prochain*; *venir*) who unravels our horizon of perception and anticipation. (Lévinas 2000, 56, 74, 79, 86, 101, 193–194; 2004, 141, 173, 234; Wright et al. 1988, 171). Therefore, albeit harshly and reluctantly, the protagonist admitted:

> *I needed to feel no responsibility for strangers. For what they were looking at was the truth. What was visible was only the mask, and those strangers had perceived a truth more profound than eyes could see directly*. (Abe 1980, 180.)

3. Conclusion

Kobo Abe's *The Face of Another* portrays the notion that the face's meaning is not harbored in its sensible properties. Contrariwise, personambiguity erupts, because these peripheral properties reveal an unpassable abyss between the individual face and its essential signification. The protagonist's existential crisis shows the inadequacy of the face's phenomenality to carry the weight of its meaning. Simply put, the face is not a trustworthy witness for one's true self. As a forepart of one's head, it is a multilayered masquerade of opaque plasticity, upon which we ascribe meanings without any sufficient warrant.

a potential threat to surveillance and national security. And yet, on the other hand, alongside many governments worldwide, France and Hong Kong mandate the wearing of face masks, in order to reduce the widespread transmission of the COVID-19 (GovHKSAR 2020; JORF 2020).

Therefore, Lévinas proposes to see the face, not in terms of its peripheral character, but in its inexorable ethical command. Notwithstanding its sensible features as a surface, the other's face is an ambiguous abyss that obliges us to respond. The face is an abyssal surface that calls for our responsibility to every other (*tout autre*), not as our alter ego, but as utterly other (*tout autre*). The face of another is ascribed in us as a wandering trace of ineluctable responsibility that surpasses our appropriative reasoning and anticipation.

My reading finds that *The Face of Another* accommodates this idea of irrecusable responsibility without reserve. The personambiguity puzzle does not stop at challenging physiognomic claims over facial meaning, but it also affirms that nobody is exempt from this responsibility. The face's ambiguity does not absolve anyone from culpability, because the (contested) meaning behind its physical features neither establishes nor measures responsibility. Responsibility always already awaits us, because the other's command is anterior to our self-same agency and transcends the logical dialectic between identity and otherness. Therefore, on the last page of the novel, the protagonist concludes:

> I do know that the responsibility is not the mask's alone, and that the problem lies rather within me. Yet it is not only in me, but in everybody; I am not alone in this problem. True, indeed, but let's not shift the blame. I still hate people. I shall never admit the necessity of justifying myself to anyone! (Abe 1980, 237).

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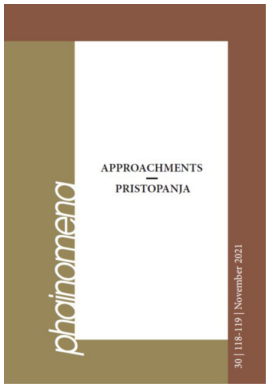

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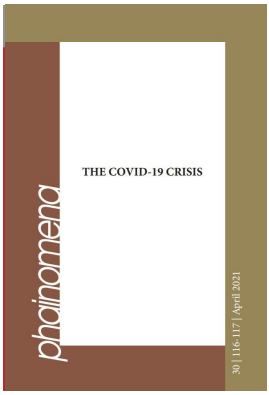

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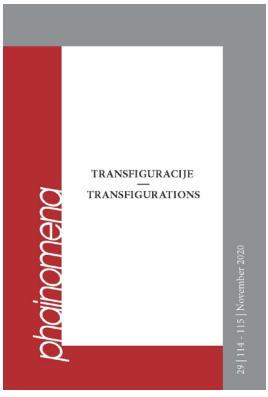

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