
REFLECTING ON ANALOGUE FACES AND DIGITAL MASKS THROUGH *MISSION: IMPOSSIBLE* (1996-2023)

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ABSTRACT

This article uses the idea and practice of the mask and masking technology in the popular Mission: Impossible film franchise to critically consider the tensions between digital and analogue. In the Mission: Impossible films, the masks are a core component of the films' intrigue, and they serve the plot dynamics of each franchise entry while also revealing ever-sophisticated diegetic film technologies that make these silicone-based masks increasingly hyper-realistic in spy-craft and anti-surveillance deception. This article demonstrates how the mask is an identity technology that qualifies the persona as potentially deceptive and duplicitous as it relies on a convincing presentation of a character's self that does not accurately reflect the interiority of this character, and on a betrayal of trust of the affective investment of a particular micro-publics. As such, the viewer reflects on facial representation not only in terms of verisimilitude, but also veracity. Within a context of techno est ubique, the mask has evident transformative capacities as a temporary interface with the world and as a remediation technology. However, the mask is also a precarious technology because it is highly visible and needs monitoring for proper presentation and error. It is a seamless technology, which evokes further reflections on photorealism and deepfakes. Additionally, digital comes to denote 'dead', and the digital mask of especially the later Mission: Impossible films – identifiable by its skeuomorphic qualities – challenges the continued existence of the analogue (organic face) as mask and related appearance replication technologies come to replace human faces and bodies entirely.

KEY WORDS

Analogue; Digital; Mask; *Mission: Impossible* films; Death Mask; Technology of Deception.

INTRODUCTION

While previous research has foregrounded Tom Cruise as an ageing action hero and star (see Stephen Mulhall 2006) and selected gender dimensions (see Boncori 2017), this article critically considers the idea of the mask in the *Mission: Impossible* (1996-2023) spy film franchise in relation to the face, and within the parameters of the analogue and the digital. Put differently, I use the idea and practice of the mask in the *Mission: Impossible* (from here on referred to as *M:I*) films as an incitement to think about the significance of the face and the idea of the mask, and within a larger context of persona studies. My thinking is guided by two intersecting concepts: analogue and digital. For this article focusing on faces and masks, analogue is understood as

organic (the human face) and pre-digital (in terms of visual effects), and digital is understood as inorganic, which draws on data and adjacent technologies for its terms of existence.

This article uses the terms ‘digital’ and ‘analogue’ in predominantly metaphorical terms. However, the use of these terms in the context of film and digital technologies acknowledges that digital technology – and digital processes – features in film post-production when special visual effects, such as parts of the *M:I* films’ mask-rips, are finalised. The *M:I* mask is, in this article, aligned with the postdigital’s awareness of resurrected older media format such as vinyl and cassette and processes such as printmaking (Cramer 2015, p. 13).

In conceptualizing and discussing analogue-digital tensions, this article acknowledges the prevalence of the postdigital as a critical attitude for investigations of the theory and constitution of the digital world, and the consequences thereof (Peters & Besley 2019, p. 30). Indeed, the postdigital complicates the notions of ‘digital’ and ‘analogue’ in the humanities (Cramer & Jandric 2021, p. 985) by addressing the “entanglements of media life after the digital” (Berry & Dieter 2015, p. 5).

Florian Cramer (2015, p. 15) defines the digital as “an idealized abstraction of physical matter, which [...] has chaotic properties and often ambiguous states” (2015, p. 18); Cramer’s description could as proficiently capture the dynamics of the *M:I* mask and its status as a fallible technology of deception. Additionally, the digital is characterized by the fragmentation and division of information, whereas with the analogue, information “instead consists of one or more signals which vary on a continuous scale” (Cramer 2015, p. 18). Analogue, then, in contrast to the digital, describes information as unified, coherent and continuous. Similar to the human face, the analogue has discrete material properties in the absence of the of digital’s processing procedures (Cramer 2015, p. 20) which characterise the *M:I* mask. It is with this distinction in mind that this article recognizes ‘analogue’ and ‘digital’ as analogical to ‘face’ and ‘mask’ in the context of the *M:I* films where the face is a reliable, continuous constant and the digitally manufactured and rendered mask that overlays it presents identitarian ambiguity. The *M:I* mask’s function as overlay atop the face of the mask-wearer exemplifies David M Berry’s (2015, p. 44) articulation of digital surfaces of “theatres of action and performance”.

I will use notions of the analogue and the digital to offer some thoughts on how these concepts, as crystallised in the *M:I* films and its use of masks, can inform thinking about the notion of persona. In persona, agency matters. According to Kim Barbour (2015, p. 38), a persona is an intentional presentation “constituted within the systems of representation on which it is built”. The “perceived distance between the performer and the performance” (Barbour 2014, p.2) marks the difference between presentation and representation, where the former has a higher immediacy of connection (that is, a closer distance) than the latter. Barbour (2014, p. 2) continues that persona operates as a “construct or automated script” that the individual assembles to act as a proxy for their interaction with and within their environment. When we shift this understanding of the persona from its highly relational online contexts to film, the idea of persona becomes a lens through which to make sense of character appearance, performance and behaviour. Here, thinking about persona in film is an invitation to consider what the interplay of face and mask in the *M:I* films can offer persona discourse.

Tom Cruise’s Ethan Hunt has been the face of the popular American *Mission: Impossible* film franchise since the first film in 1996. The first six *M:I* films earned \$3.578 billion globally. While stunts and spectacle may remain the core of the *M:I* films’ popular appeal, this article focuses on an equally salient and narratively dynamic part of the film franchise: how Ethan Hunt and other agents of the Impossible Missions Force (IMF) use ever-developing mask technology to accomplish mission outcomes and deliver plot twists. Upon the release of 2023’s *Mission:*

Impossible Dead Reckoning – Part One, some film critics, such as Gary Kramer (2023), lamented the new film’s reliance on the mask as a stale gimmick, while others, such as Priscilla Page (2023), maintained that the masks are part and parcel of the *M:I* films’ exciting commitment to illusion, trickery and deception. The franchise used masks to make it possible for characters to break into the Vatican (*M:I III*), trick terrorists into sharing information with IMF agents (*M:I Fallout*), to pose as government officials (*M:I Rogue Nation*), and to generally bewilder opponents and colleagues alike as individual identity, denoted by the face, becomes an unreliable currency in espionage. (Similar masks to the ones used in the *M:I* films are increasingly used in real-life crimes (Robertson, Towler, Sanders & Kramer 2020)).

Through a remarkable synchronicity, 1996 saw the release of the first of the *M:I* films, as well as the publication of “When the Interface is a Face” by Lee Sproull, Mani Subramani, Sara Kiesler, Janet H Walker and Keith Waters. The publication worked from the presupposition that individuals change their behaviour when they are present with others, and they also change their behaviour when a computer interface is designed to present “human-like qualities” (Sproull et al. 1996, p. xx). Finally, “as computer interfaces become more ‘human-like’, people who use those interfaces may change their own personas in response to them” (1996, p. xx). Persona is understood here as the context and environment-specific public presentation of the self. Sproull et al (1996, p. xx) mention that the use of human-like qualities such as faces in interfaces has occurred throughout the history of the computer.

The release of the first *M:I* film further temporally corresponds with the rise of mainstream access to the Internet from 1993, the release of the Mosaic web browser, and the subsequent exponential increase in websites from 1993 to 1996. Against the exponential development and sophistication of access and display technologies, J Sage Elwell (2014, p. 235) contends that Internet users do not simply ‘go online’ anymore, as the Internet “is of a piece with the infosphere where we already are and of which we are increasingly a part”. For Elwell (2014, p. 236), individuals already embody an exo-self of information and software due to their daily sustained and intensive use of the Internet. The individual’s digital and analogue being can then be considered in terms of what Elwell calls an existential equivalence (2014, p. 237). Existential equivalence also refers to “the extent to which our technologically mediated selves can and do impinge upon our embodied selves” (2014, p. 237). As such, this term aptly describes the impact of the *M:I* mask upon its wearer.

The mask itself mediates an exo-self, which is part of the fabric of the IMF agent’s work environment in the context of the films. The mask remakes a primary vehicle of the character’s persona - the face - to provide a deliberately designed public interface for other characters and the viewer. Because the mask hides the face by providing another face – usually the face of another character that the viewer and possibly other characters would already be familiar with – this public interface does not reveal the mask wearer’s interiority. It does, however, accomplish an existential equivalence in foregrounding the significance of the mask on and for the wearer. Suppose we understand this presentation of a particular false identity as providing the face of another as a public interface. In that case, the mask becomes a technology of deception.

MASKING IN THE *MISSION: IMPOSSIBLE* FILMS

Strategies of public identity deception are central to the intrigue of the *M:I* films in which primary protagonist Ethan Hunt (Tom Cruise) and his IMF colleagues execute off-the-books missions in the interest of global peace. The *M:I* films have technology at the centre of their narratives, whether the technology takes the form of a valuable code, a laboratory-developed

virus and its antidote, fatal nanoscopic bombs, or advanced nuclear weaponry, all the way to *Dead Reckoning's* Entity, a villainous virtual presence that is pure artificial intelligence. The Entity is the causally anticipated outcome of the *M:I* films' internal logic of technological deception and threat captured in the analogue-digital face-mask dynamic. Other American feature films have explored the identity-concealing and revealing productive and destructive possibilities of masks, such as the id-unleashing mask of the comedy *The Mask* (1994) and the horror genre masks made from human skins in *Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974) and *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991). American feature films that engage with or invite the idea of masking are usually characterised as revealing an identitarian contention at their core. Here, a character's fate is tied to their ability to navigate different aspects of themselves while they perform an apparently holistic or singular persona to and for the outside world.

Films such as *Ready Player One* (2018) place persona in a gaming, virtual reality and cinematic context where the avatar as persona is foregrounded, while several thrillers play with identity and persona as a central theme: *Black Swan* (2010), *Cam* (2018), *Fight Club* (1999), *Mulholland Drive* (2001). Even in the 1990s, action cinema swapped celebrity faces in *Face/Off* (1997) (director John Woo would go on to direct the second *M:I* instalment), while in the political comedy *Dave* (1993), the American president's doppelganger turns out to be a better president than the legally legitimate ruler. More recently, contemporary body horror in the films of Brandon Cronenberg (e.g. *Possessor* (2020) and *Infinity Pool* (2023)) uses persona and identity to explore the loss of agency and unethical cloning, respectively.

Preceding many of these films, the *M:I* franchise is the primary mainstream commercial film franchise to explore the use of masks in relation to identity and persona. For Marshall (2015, p. 129), persona culture is pervasive because it compels individuals to revisit the tension between the public, the private and the intimate. While the *M:I* films' preoccupation with masks and their technological mediation is not unique, its attitude to how the mask technology prioritises public persona is anchored in the tension between the analogue and the digital. Put differently, the tension between the analogue and the digital is crystallised in the films' identity technology of the mask. This tension develops as the franchise grows and incorporates more technology behind the scenes during production and post-production and as part of the films' technoscapes of gadgets, weapons, life-sustaining devices, and identity technologies. In the *M:I* films, protagonist Ethan Hunt and an assortment of antagonists don masks to hide their faces in the act of identity-appropriating disguise, which allows these characters to pretend to be someone else, usually another character important to the narrative and who can swing the climatic encounter from possible destruction to likely salvation.

The revelation of a character removing their masks to reveal an organic identity underneath – the identity communicated by numerous reliable communicative facial nodes – is a highlight in the films; these moments, known as mask-rips, confirm that the mask is intentionally duplicitous. The mask-rip reveals a tactile humanity underneath the mask; while faces and mask appear similar, they are ontologically different. In such instances of disguise, most characters and the viewer, do not know which identity is true and which is false until the mask-rip reveals the actual face of the hero or villain beneath the synthetic skin. Jane Harris (2013, p. 248, emphasis added) explains that:

skin is one of the most challenging materials to digitally represent further complicated by intricate underlying muscle systems, in particular facial muscles that control and actuate a full range of expressions, each aspect of which is required to function virtually and in accordance with real life, in order to render believable characterization that can *seamlessly* be related to in a 'real' way, beyond the realm of 'cartoon caricature'.

As such, the mask is a visage of liminality caught between a binary, between 0 and 1: it presents a superficial face and covers a natural face, even if the mask's interface suggests it is true. The false face can be donned as a means-to-an-end before it is removed and discarded; the true face is not removable or replaceable, although it can, as the mission requires, be covered, concealed, and hidden until the strategic moment arrives to reveal the mask wearer's true face once again. These masks have specific benefits beyond the wearer's convincing performance of being another character: the mask can grant access to restricted spaces, forge relationships with stakeholders in life-or-death situations, and secure the endgame of a specific film's mission.

Some *M:I* films even include masking technologies that overlay and disguise the human face even in a live stream. In *Ghost Protocol*, Ethan uses a corridor-wide, programmable and environmentally attuned digital screen to hide his presence from guards when infiltrating the Kremlin. In *Dead Reckoning Part One*, Ethan's ally Luther (Ving Rhames) manipulates an airport's surveillance and security technology to actively and in real-time manipulate facial identity by digitally transposing Ethan's face onto several other characters to confuse those looking for Hunt. Ethan's face is everywhere: in only one instance does the face belong to Ethan, and in all others, it is false, a digital layer applied to characters of minor narrative importance.

In *Dead Reckoning*, the antagonistic Jasper Briggs (Shea Wigham) warns his colleagues that they need to "put a wooden stake" through the "expendable" Ethan Hunt's heart to make sure he is dead. While the line is delivered playfully, Brigg's comparison of Hunt with a vampire offers another useful provocation. The comparison evokes a mythology of immortality in which a recognisable individual remains alive until a specified condition is met to ensure this individual is killed. This immortal figure cannot grow old (or at least not older beyond a certain age) and remains recognisable, then, for the persistence of its face: the face itself does not change and remains consistently the same across the vampire's existence.

Dead Reckoning features a compelling scene in which Ethan accesses the unofficial offices of the IMF by wearing a mask based on an employee's face. Ethan's deception is not signalled by wearing the mask as he passes through conventional security checkpoints. Once inside, he steps into a high-level meeting where he is the subject of urgent conversation, and, after knocking out everyone else with sleeping gas, he removes the mask to reveal his face to his former handler Kitteridge (Henry Czerny). When Kitteridge later asks Ethan how he intends to leave the premises safely, Ethan turns around to reveal that he is now wearing a mask of Kitteridge's face. Kitteridge can only mutter "of course" in a muted response to what is, in the world of the *M:I* films, a logical technology; "of course", one reads in Kitteridge's words, "my face is not my own". Furthermore, Kitteridge's sense of surrender also captures anxieties around deepfakes – your face is not your own and can be anywhere and everywhere if the necessary technological conditions are met. (I revisit the idea of the deepfake, below.) Kitteridge's inevitable identity crisis also points to the digital replacement of organics, which I discuss at the end of this current section.

The formal qualities in which these events are framed are important to the film's dramatic use of mask-rips and characters putting on a mask. The film visualises intentional spatial arrangements to focus the viewer's attention on important information. In addition to this *mise-en-scène*, film can cut to important information across time and space (editing) and keep the viewer within the diegetic space and time of a particular scene by offering a shot uninterrupted, with minimal obvious interference and cutting. In *M:I*, the interplay between different shot selections, editing decisions (or sustained longer shots), and the distance between the object of focus (a character or a part of a character) and the viewer creates cinematic

opportunities for aligning persona-based performance registers with selected scenes. Edward Hall's proxemic patterns of human interaction have often been brought into film to make sense of the relationships between the object of focus and the viewer, and between characters in a film.

Creating Persona Performance Registers

However, my aim here is to posit these patterns as corollaries of persona performance registers and to demonstrate how the application of these registers further clarifies the deceptive strategies around mask and persona within the context of high-stakes international espionage. Drawing on Erving Goffman, Marshall and Barbour (2015, p. 5) recognise the significance of performance registers to explore "particular types of performance, those roles we play to connect, differentiate, and engage with our personal and professional communities". These performance registers are the professional, personal and intimate. *M:I* shows the application of the mask to the wearer's face and head in medium close-up, which brings the viewer into the character's personal space (e.g. Ethan Hunt) and suggests to the viewer that they are 'in' on the duplicity. Additionally, another three or four IMF characters are usually nearby in the same room, checking and confirming the mask's verisimilitude, effectively monitoring the mask's efficacy by assuming the role of a micro-public invested in the success of the mask's veracity. A micro-public is relational, socially hewn group of individuals characterised by interconnection, "flows of information and interpersonal communication" insofar as they constitute a networked community (Marshall *et al* 2015, p. 291). The act of monitoring one's persona is an essential part of negotiating one's numerous (online/offline) identities (Marshall 2015, p. 116). Considering its importance and regularity, this self-monitoring has a ritual dimension. In addition, one's "personal mediatized identity becomes the new vehicle for the movement of information" (2015, p. 117). Marshall reminds us that "monitoring the self is also a form of production of the self" (2015, p. 119). The individual's efforts at producing the self aim at a positive version of the self that is an outward-projected public persona (2015, 120).

Monitoring and visibility are crucial in the *M:I* films. Here, monitoring denotes an internal state of knowledge (a character's interiority; "I know who I am") while the visible lends itself to the external by presenting public content (presentational information in the form of performance of identity) about who others consider us to be. For optimal dramatic effect, characters usually remove the masks in close-up, suggesting an intimacy – a privileged closeness to the truth and revelation of the wearer's identity – and thereby constituting the viewer as yet another short-term micro-public for the duration of this particular shot, which lasts a couple of seconds. The cuts from close-ups back to medium close-ups or to long shots, each constituting a different distance between the viewer and the masked face as an object of focus, demonstrate the utility of seeing these relationships as the films' performance registers.

Additionally, the *M:I* films often show a character putting on their mask in a single, uninterrupted take where the camera moves around the character and their heads. A salient example of this setup is when potential IMF recruit and thief Grace (Hailee Atwell) puts on a mask to appropriate the facial appearance of international arms broker Alanna Mitsopolis (Vanessa Kirby). Grace, a dark-eyed brunette, wears the face (and hair and voice) of blonde, blue-eyed Alanna. The camera closes the distance between the character and the viewer, bringing the viewer into the character's personal space to ensure that the viewer cannot forget who is wearing the mask. More importantly, this shot allows the viewer to take in and recognise the mask's technological wizardry and to confirm the mask's efficacy as completely hiding the mask wearer's true (analogue) identity. Personas are aimed at particular networks (Marshall *et al* 2015, p. 291), which, as in the scene described above, serve to validate the effort and result of

an individual (character) performing a particular public persona. Beyond this intradiegetic micro-public consisting of supporting and secondary characters is also a larger yet fluid extradiegetic viewing audience, “a collection of individuals who share engagement with a text or performance” (Barbour 2015, p. 25) and whose investment in the *M:I* film rests on the mask gambit delivering tension, excitement and revelation each time it is deployed. The mask enables a particular persona, “a *fabricated reconstruction* of the individual that is used to *play a role* that both helps the individual navigate their presence and interactions with others and helps the collective to position the role of the individual in the social” (Marshall & Henderson 2016, p. 1) (emphasis added). The *M:I* mask literalises Marshall and Henderson’s emphasis on fabrication and role-play, and it is this literalisation that enables Hunt and others to be active in formerly restricted or out-of-bounds social contexts and to pursue power shifts.

After fitting the Alanna-mask, the character Grace (now played by Vanessa Kirby, who plays the role of Alanna) gazes at her new face, in a cracked mirror against the wall. Grace herself confirms the efficient duplicity of the perfectly fit mask, and here, the mirror invites an important observation. “From a glance in the mirror,” writes Sabine Melchior-Bonnet (2002, p. 1), “flowed [...] a new geography of the body, which made visible previously unfamiliar images (one’s back and profile) and stirred up sensations of modesty and self-consciousness”. In this scene, the analogue technology, the mirror, presents the digitally-layered subject (Grace) with a vital new geography: that of the mask, the face that she wears and that fits her but *does not belong to her*. More so than the back and profile, the new visage is the ultimate ‘unfamiliar’ image, unfamiliar to the point of being uncanny, and the sensations it evokes in Grace (and accordingly invited from the viewer) are awe and wonder, not modesty.

With the above in mind, I ask: what do the *M:I* films offer viewers as provocations to think about faces and interfaces in the unique way that these films utilise analogue and digital technologies to alter the human face temporarily but convincingly? What can we extrapolate from these provocations for larger discourses around persona? I offer five observations at this point that I consider crucial in understanding the mask in the *M:I* films. In the next section, I will describe these five observations and further theorise masks and faces in the *M:I* franchise.

Firstly, the *M:I* mask is a seamless technology. While it is worn as a second skin of sorts, the mask – complete with hair, eyelashes, lips – functions without seam or a visible line to indicate to friend or foe that the individual wearing the mask is hiding their face. The mask fits seamlessly and does not call attention to its artifice, although the film pays sufficient screen time to the manufacturing of the masks to ensure that the viewer knows that masks are at play in the intrigue. So smooth is the *M:I* mask in its execution that it prefigures the increasingly prevalent deepfake. A deepfake is an appearance-replacement product that uses deep learning in artificial intelligence to accomplish face-swapping. However, more recent developments in deepfake technology have also foregrounded sophisticated voice replacement technologies (Robson 2022).

Secondly, and again similar to the deepfake, the *M:I* mask facilitates the effect of an individual’s recognisable humanity – their face confirms the presence of an identifiable human. Similar to deepfakes, the masks come complete with increasingly sophisticated voice modulator technology (first introduced in *M:I II*), so the mask wearer is entirely convincing – unambiguously so – as another character. In short, the mask, wrapped around the head of the wearer and not simply placed onto the wearer’s face, is utterly convincing to the other characters and viewers. This mask is a presentational medium which is “performed, produced and exhibited by the individual or other collectives” outside of the domain of the corporate hegemonies of traditional representational media (Marshall 2014, p. 160).

Thirdly, the mask in the *M:I* films foregrounds analogue-digital tension as the digital skin of the mask, itself the property of technological innovation, overlays the analogue human skin. The mask has in its production a digital status because the viewer sees it rendered as a digital visual effect, *even when it is simply an actor performing as a character to create the illusion that the character is wearing a mask*. This mask is a technology with a literal face and haptic qualities, and is reconstituted as analogue because it is printed and moulded to fit the face and head. The key is that the viewer differentiates between digital and analogue. One face is fake/superficial (the mask), one face is real (the wearer's actual face).

Fourthly, the mask – the face worn from the outside at the cost of covering the face beneath – is a technology of deception that complicates the identity of the mask wearer. This exo-self may or may not be reliable. It needs to be monitored by the mask-wearer and other individuals to confirm the mask's veracity, thereby legitimating the mask as a key communicator of a particular persona.

Finally, the technology of the mask during the first *M:I* films is prone to malfunction: the synthetic skin bubbles and sags, and this propensity for eventual failure risks it becoming a technology of premature revelation instead of concealment. The mask is an unreliable epidermis, inorganic yet appearing as organic within its existential equivalence, and capable of a much faster rate of general decay than visible human skin. Unlike the computer, the *M:I* mask is not a Muskian fantasy of technology's inevitable success, but is instead evidence of its limitations. While the mask may act as a security barrier to protect the wearer's identity, it also risks visibly compromising the wearer's safety. As I will detail below, the notion of the mask also extends to replacing actors' faces with copies of their own faces or the faces of others.

Faces and Masks

The mask has been a central technology in the *M:I* films since the start of the franchise. It opens another way these films utilise identity-as-quantitative-biometrics, the first way being the computer. Indeed, for Stephen Mulhall (2006, p. 97), the first *M:I* film places the computer as central to the film's plot, a technology that is "immune to malfunction (other than those caused by others' manipulation, or the limits of its material medium)" and is "perhaps the contemporary gadget that best absorbs this fantasy of technological success as an absolutely foregone conclusion". For Mulhall (2006, p. 106), the central sequence of suspense in *Mission: Impossible* (1995) in which Ethan Hunt breaks into a top-security CIA computer room – which I reframe here as the tension between analogue (the human agent) and accelerating technologies of security and access – demonstrates "an epitome of the IM world's reduction of identity to fragmentary traces of a human body" where sanctioned human presence in a restricted environment is verified by voice and retina as well as access cards and codes. In the first *M:I* film, technology mediates access by monitoring its environment for signs of unsanctioned organic access. Again, in the logic of the *M:I* franchise, the "foregone conclusion" vis-a-vis Mulhall is the Entity's attempt to monitor and mediate human presence in its digital and haptic environments is effectively an attempt to excise humanity from the world completely.

The human face is recognised in and for its "[e]xpressive movements [that] provide information about emotional states, eye and head movements [that] provide information about the direction of attention, and movements of lips, tongue and jaws [that] provide information which aids speech perception" (Young & Bruce 2013, p. 31). The face communicates non-verbally, and facilitated and enhanced verbal communication. Heather Laine Talley (2014, p. 13-14) agrees that the face is "a means of communication" and adds that it is also a "powerful biosocial resource" that is a primary "marker of identity and personhood, a signifier of social status, and a form of capital". Talley (2014, p. 13) provides an overview of the face as a major

“locus of many organic functions and social processes” which physiologically consists of “the mouth, lips, nose, eyes, ears, cheeks, forehead, eyebrows, philtrum ... and the skin that covers these features. The face facilitates vital functions, most obviously eating and breathing, but it also mediates each of our ‘five senses’ or methods of perception”. These are features and capacities shared by most faces. The face is a common human presence, yet, as Adam Wilkins (2017, p. 309) explains, artistic interest in the human face rose only about 5000 years ago. After approximately 300 years since the start of the Christian Era, “the interest in faces became fully conscious and explicit” (2017, p. 315) as artists began to capture faces in their paintings and later portraits. Within this fascination of the face is a dual emphasis on sameness (all faces are the same in many meaningful ways) and divergence: the face is a phenomenological marker of human difference, and for this reason, individuals are likely to experience “fascination when one is confronted with the paradox of twins” (Miller 2004, p. 17) or of an identical doppelganger wearing one’s face for a mask.

A mask is not simply a picture (Pollock 1995, p. 594) or a static image worn on a more malleable, elastic skin surface. Persona is linked to “strategic masks of identity” (Marshall & Barbour 2015, p. 1). Marshall and Barbour (2015, p. 2) explain that the mask, in its ancient Greek context, “conveyed the identity of a character at some distance” and made it possible for the two or three actors in the play to perform more than one character in the same play, similar to how the *M:I* masks make it possible for Ethan Hunt to present several other characters by replicating their faces. In ancient Athenian theatre, actors treated masks with much care, suggesting that the mask contained the character the actor would play (McLeish & Griffiths 2003, p. 9). The mask-wearing actor may sense that the mask has an “independent identity which is liberated at the moment of performance” (2003, p. 9). Another similarity to the later *M:I* masks is that the mask used in Greek tragedies was full-headed (Varakis 2010, p. 17, 19).

Evidently, masks suggest concealment but also transformation. Here, concealment relates to disguise, whereas transformation suggests a more dynamic creation of a new identity (Elliot & Conneller 2020, p. 660). Pollock (1995, p. 582) agrees that masks transform identity “either through the modification of the representation of identity or through the temporary – and representational – extinction of identity”. This emphasis on extinction evokes images of faces and death, in particular, death masks: in the Western context, death masks are “casts of the faces of the deceased [...] produced from a mould”. This cast is “briefly ‘worn’ by the deceased”, and this brief period of wearing the cast qualifies its end product as a mask (Elliot & Conneller 2020, p. 658).

The *M:I* masks are moulded through advanced yet fallible portable technologies accompanying the IMF agents as they run from and towards enemies across numerous countries. Reflecting on the death mask and its capturing of a likeness for purposes of veneration, for instance, the *M:I* masks are unconcerned with access to biological skin and pores in the making of this mask and are unconcerned with the inevitable decomposition of the dead face. Making the *M:I* mask is a time-sensitive issue in matters of plot and contrivance, but characters can recreate utterly realistic faces by drawing on digital (‘dead’) representations of existing individuals for purposes of impersonation and deception.

Masks in the *M:I* films allow viewers to reflect on facial representation, as the mask’s power “resides in their ability to presence other things” (Elliot & Conneller 2020, p. 657). Masks can distinguish between “what lies in front and what lies behind” (the digital mask, the analogue face) and are objects capable of “semiotic fluidity” (2020, p. 659). Elliot and Conneller (2020, p. 660) further note that the word ‘mask’ in both English and German evokes notions of “dishonesty and insincerity”, suggesting that the euphemism ‘what lies in front of and what lies

beneath' itself underplays – even conceals – the mask's function as “a dividing membrane between truth and deception”. To reiterate an earlier point: the *M:I* films go one step further by providing the mask itself as the surface of deception, where the mask is not so much a “dividing membrane” as it is a seamless fiction of another individual character's face.

For all this emphasis on false faces, true faces and deception, masks evoke more than simply truth and fiction. For Michael Merrill (2004, p. 16), masks and masking invite liminality for both performer and spectator. In Merrill's ritual symbolism context, this liminality concerns the “visible embodiment of the unity of spirit and matter” (2004, p. 16). Masking “creates transformation and moves the wearer and the participants in ritual performance to experience liminality” (2004, p. 19). In the context of ritual and performance, this masking is vital in “achieving an effective transformation experience in which the distance between the human and the divine is bridged by myth that is pre-religious and closer to mystical experience. The significance of the mask is in its role as a constructive transformer to celebrate the spiritual experience through its meanings and symbolism ritually” (Merrill 2004, p. 21). The rituals of espionage – captured in the tropes and iconographies of the mission film and its depiction of assignment preparation and task execution – deploy masks of other individuals' faces. These masks effectively transform one individual (the mask wearer, for instance, Ethan Hunt) into another character with exactly the same face and voice. At the same time, this transformation also closes the distance between human and divine, where the category 'human' indicates the mask wearer and their analogue organic face and body. Where the mask itself is the divine, the digital golden calf worshipped (i.e. into which faith is invested) as representative of a recognised yet abstract greater divine technology, *techno est ubique*.

I have so far used analogue to refer to a quality of organic humanness, and specifically to the organic human face. I contrasted this iteration of the analogue with the digital as 'dead' (in the absence of anything organic in its production and execution). I now turn to complicate these explanations within the context of the films.

DEATH MASKS AND SYNTHESPIANS

How do we explore “this reality of enmeshed analogue and digital media?”, ask Leopoldina Fortunati and John O'Sullivan (2020, p. 165). I propose that the idea and the image of the mask are entry points into an exploration of analogue-digital enmeshment. The *M:I* masks allow us to reflect on the more significant implications of seamless, smooth technologies for the actor, which I discuss with reference to digital masks and wholesale human replacement in the section below.

Digital filmmaking methods “generate quicker, real-time results given that compound images, movements, and interactions can be manipulated and managed instantly, and a greater number of end results can be produced in much less time” (Cohen 2014, p. 48). Historical advances in digital filmmaking methods and technologies include, specifically, in the area of visual effects, and digital face-replacement. This technology allowed feature films such as *Gladiator* (2000) and *The Crow* (1994) to be completed when actors had passed away during production (Oliver Reed and Brandon Lee, respectively) by digitally replacing another performer's face with the faces of these deceased actors (Cohen 2014, p. 51). The digital face replacement functions as a death mask that draws on data, not organic physiology, for its purpose. These actors become post-humous mask-wearers of their own faces (i.e. the face of Brandon Lee denotes 'Brandon Lee', not another actor or their character) in which “the digital substitution of the human body ... holds the risk of being rendered obsolete, discarded like so many other analogue objects when they 'die'” (Chung 2015, p. 63). Indeed, Chung (2015, p. 62)

explains that there is a category of performers called virtual actors, also referred to as synthespians or cyberstars, “virtual characters that merge live-action and CG bodies”. As Martin Constable (2015, p. 71) reminds us, “[w]e cannot index the digital to the physical world so clearly as we can in the case of the analogue”. According to Constable (2015), the analogue is recognisable because it lacks the chameleon-like nature of the digital, which can emulate other media.

With this capacity for emulation in mind, Constable (2015, p. 71) concludes that the digital “demurely hides under the skin of the film and does abrade its surface”. The two key concepts in this last sentence are ‘demurely’ and ‘does not abrade’: the digital presence in the film often does not call attention to itself because of its sameness, smooth operations, and seamlessness. This digital presence sustains the film’s surface – what the viewer sees is what is. This incarnation of the digital – and it holds for the current example of the *M:I* masks – brings to mind Nicholas Rombes’ (2017, p. xix) claim that “[a]t the heart of the perfect digital image – coded by its clean binaries – is a secret desire for mistakes, for randomness, for what Dick Hebdige might call ‘little disasters’”. Increasingly, however, the digital irons out such desires and ‘little disasters’ not for fear of disturbing the surface, but in an unyielding pursuit of verisimilitude. When an actor passes away during a film production, his face is copied onto another actor’s body; when a younger version of a character appears in a film, de-ageing technology de-ages the same actor to appear as the younger character (instead of casting a lookalike-actor as the young character). Such is the avoidance of ‘little disasters’ in the pursuit of smooth verisimilitude.

These synthespians, cyberstars and digital death masks are the collective result of *techno est ubique*, of an entertainment industry’s financial and ideological investment in replacement technologies: replacing human actors with virtual ones, replacing the analogue with the digital, replacing faces with data-drawn death masks. These technologies of replacement were prefigured by special effects filmmaking invested in high levels of visual spectacle. Consider, for instance, the technological advances that made possible cyborgs in James Cameron’s *Terminator* films, where Cameron was unaware that the techno-nemesis his films envisions as the sentient SkyNet were the early actor replacement technology that made the films possible in the first place. Jane Harris (2013, p. 246) describes the cyborg character in *The Terminator* (1984) and *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* (1991) as “depicted as capable of sophisticated transformations, mimicking object and human forms, using a similar mirror-like surface or texture map”. Comparing the analogue special visual effects in *The Thing* (1982) to the pioneering digital effects in *Terminator 2: Judgement Day*, Patrick Crogan (2001, p. 16) identifies the T-1000 as “[morphing] from floor to human” in “a display of the state of power of digital visual effects that corresponds to the showcasing of the ultimate analogue effects of makeup, hydraulics and pneumatics in *The Thing*”. Such is the representational difference between this shiny digital showmanship and the huff-and-puff analogue that Crogan (2001, p. 19) writes: “The increasing utilisation of digital imaging and its arbitrary relation to the ‘things’ it represents, illustrated by the liquid autonomy of the T-1000 effect’s appropriation of photographed ‘reality’, calls for a rethinking of the cinematic representation of things”. As I consider this fluid, flawless-by-design cinematic representation in the context of the *M:I* films, I turn to a discussion of the cyberstar, the skeuomorph and photorealism.

Tanine Allison (2011, p. 328) recounts how Peter Jackson’s *King Kong* (2005) remake – far removed from the originals’ (1933) manually manipulated stop-motion animation – transformed its human actors, such as emerging celebrity and independent film actor Naomi Watts), into cyberstars. For Allison, such a cyberstar represents the impossibility of distinguishing between the actor (e.g. Watts) and her virtual likeness (i.e. the digital mask).

Specifically, the digital model of Watts “included 3D laser scans of her face – a recording – which were attached to 3D digital model of her body – an animation [...] in any shots in which her face could be seen, Watts’ face was digitally painted onto [stunt performer Min] Windle’s body” (2011, 328). The processes that Harris (2013) and Allison (2011) describe echo the very purpose of the masks in the *M:I* films: firstly, as a kind of meta-awareness of the techno-craft that goes into this kind of large-scale action filmmaking, and secondly as a democratisation of the cyberstar as a cyber-obscure where everyone can be anyone. It is in this amplification of the digital that actor Daniel Craig’s version of James Bond – considering the infamous British spy as inspiration for American spy Ethan Hunt – is appealing in its “impressive physical capabilities” where the actor’s “pro-filmic, actual body is vividly emphasized as spectacle of physical endurance and mastery” (Cohen 2016, p. 113). The viewer is not in awe of *techno est ubique* but of the Bond performer’s powerful physique.

Rombes (2017, p. xxx-xxxii) uses the idea of ‘strange correspondences’ to denote how “old images and new are in play with one another, creating opportunities to see correspondences that may have remained buried previously” (2017, p. xxx). Despite the advances in special visual effects, the mask cannot completely shake off its analogue origins and affordances. The presence of the mask in the *M:I* films is a presence of highly advanced technology and an anachronism. Michelle Pierson (cited in Cohen 2016, 104-105) argues that “photorealistic aesthetics incorporate digital imagery as if it were special effects analogue imagery, reproducing the look of physical objects such as models, miniatures, or animatronics through the capabilities of contemporary digital processes”. There are two types of photorealism: simulationist and techno-futurist. Simulationist realism “reproduces the photographic realism of the cinematographic image”, while techno-futurist realism “describes hyperreal, electronic aesthetics” (as in ground-breaking science fiction films). The *M:I* films straddle both types: the digital mask of the latter films is of a future currently configured in the deepfake, its technology a seamless component of the moving image that, as I indicate above, evades even death.

To further explain this functional anachronistic presence, I turn to the notion of the skeuomorph. David Fleming and William Brown (2015, p. 83) define the skeuomorph as “an object or form that anachronistically retains ornamental features or design cues from an earlier technological era or method of production” even though these features or cues have no functional value anymore. Fleming and Brown (2015, p. 85) problematise the fact that despite promises of industrial and aesthetic disruption, many of the skeuomorphic features that contemporary digital cinema retains and displays highlight the aetiological or atavistic link between digital cinema and its twentieth-century, analogue predecessor; these links being for reasons of ‘fashion’ rather than ‘function’. However, for this very reason, the skeuomorphic features of digital cinema are also deceptive in that they disguise the true nature and power of this precisely new medium as they diverge and diversify.

In the spirit of Fleming and Brown (2015) above, the *M:I* digital mask’s visage is inherently linked to the human face it represents. Taking my cue from Fleming and Brown (2015), the vitality of this mechanism in digital cinema is, as established above, that of replacement and even erasure while retaining the surface of the analogue. “In the ruptures and gaps that have opened up as cinema transitions from the traditional analogue apparatus to the digital”, writes Rombes (2017, p. xxvii), “there has been an unexpected resurgence of humanism – with all its mistakes, imperfections, and flaws – that acts as a sort of countermeasure to the numerical clarity and disembodiment of the digital code”. The *M:I* mask remains, after all, only a temporal visage that, at best, temporarily conceals the presence of its star persona, Tom Cruise. In a provocative act of analogue activity, the digital mask is removed manually during the mask

rip. There is no code to deactivate the mask, no software to scramble its facial constitution, just a hand that peels the mask from the wearer's head to explicitly differentiate the deceptive digital face from the reliable analogue face.

In this and other acts in the *M:I* films, there is thus an element of 'pastness' in much of digital cinema, where "cinematic visions of the future help us a priori to understand the future" (Fleming & Brown 2015, p. 86). In this instance, films such as Steven Spielberg's precognition crime thriller *Minority Report* (2002) "function as a form of premediation by not only depicting future media technologies as remediations of current/past media technologies, but they also provide us with a means to understand the future, such that catastrophes such as the destruction of New York's World Trade Center" are not entirely unanticipated (Fleming & Brown 2015, p. 86). By contrast, the *M:I* masks allow for reflection on an already more present and pervasive phenomenon: the displacement of the analogue by the digital across digital (online) and haptic tangible environments and the exponential advance of deepfakes. The construction and performance of the persona is an agentic activity that opens numerous intentional identity-related strategies of deception and duplicity in which the digital often aims to neutralise the analogue.

CONCLUSIONS

Public identity is produced, disseminated and exchanged (Marshall et al 2015, 288). There is agency behind the construction of the persona, "an individual pattern of negotiating one's way through institutions and discourses" (Marshall et al 2015, 290). In *M:I*, agency can cynically lend itself towards deception and duplicity insofar as the personal relies on "weak affective bonds" (as per Marshall 2014, 164) to get the audience to believe in and trust the persona they are presented with.

The *M:I* digital mask is a temporary interface and a remediation technology, an element of visual spectacle that requires affective investment from the public. Within the conceptual space of *techno est ubique*, the digital mask, an exo-self of smooth and seamless artifice, transforms its wearer from analogue to (remediated) digital entity, and positions the technology as divine. This divine status links with the similarities between this highly advanced facial modelling system (as used in *M:I*) and Western death masks by foregrounding the digital mask's capacity to wholly replace analogue or human actors. Such is the existential equivalence that the digital mask affords. Here, human expression – considering all the functions of communication that the face and its organs facilitate – is instrumentalised towards illusion, trickery and deception that depend on the mask's utterly exact verisimilitude with the face it is based on.

In the *Mission: Impossible* films, the digital obscures or conceals the analogue; the digital is the transformative technological achievement that makes optimal deception and enemy infiltration possible. The human face is not always organically available for the mask to be moulded, nor does it have to be as a death mask of the post-digital era, this mask draws exclusively on data based on biometrics and other distinctive organic features. Contemporary technologies can conjure entire beings from biometric data sets. However, such technologies, exemplified by the mask, are prone to eventual malfunction, and the analogue is revealed to possess the virtues of consistency, stability and reliability. While the digital is concealed across all performance registers (public, private, intimate), the analogue is revealed across all these registers but is especially potent in the intimate through the close-up. The acts of concealment and revelation are equally agentic. As the second half of this article demonstrates, however, the digital supersedes the analogue by not simply covering but replacing the human face and body.

In recent film examples, as well as in online environments, the digital provides the image of the analogue to signal the expiry of the analogue.

The *M:I* mask is an un-fit-bit marked by eventual digital decay, implying the unreliability of information communicated by this device (the mask). This is not a technology that monitors, records and stores data that may end up being sold to some unscrupulous companies, but a technology that conceals and deflects. The image of the face itself is sold as public content. Outside the film, we have seen how similar masks or replacement technologies can neutralise the analogue (human). An identifiable face is not simply concealed; its referential indexicality is wholly compromised. In the end, the *Mission: Impossible* films retain a celebratory interest in analogue items and events (the human face, physical combat, chase sequences) and somewhat nostalgically represent the organic human face as real: it is tangibly present, and both accountable and accounted for. By contrast, technologies in the film industry and film-adjacent generative AI present the digital mask-as-face to signal the passing of the organic human face as necessary for digital face creation on screens.

In light of the above, and for consideration in future research, this article highlights how identity technologies challenge persona studies to come to terms with the potential of self-presentation for deception and duplicity, especially in online environments. Finally, the notion of the digital death mask opens a range of philosophical inquiries about online personas and the risk of identity replacement.

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