

**MOURNING WITH MASKS:  
POLITICAL DEATH & VIRTUAL LIFE**

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**ABSTRACT** // In this essay I explore how the V mask (Guy Fawkes mask) not only became a ‘resistance’ mask for the Turkish protesters during the 2013 Gezi Park demonstrations, but also how it visually transformed into a new image. I argue that this new face became a virtual ‘death mask’ for one of the killed protesters and that the image exemplifies a shift in commemorative practices. Furthermore, I examine the relationship between this mask and the process of mourning to discover why the Turkish protesters decided to adopt this particular mask for the dead. This essay argues that the mask and the need to wear it can be explained as an attempt to keep the lost one alive by virtually becoming him. In this sense, the V mask transformed from being just a ‘political’ symbol in real life activist movements, into a new mask which signifies something beyond the political, that is, a more ‘personal’ connection with the deceased that in turn ‘resurrects’ him.

*Here I am alive and folks carry my image — more than anyone will ever do when I'm dead.*

*Sosia, line 459 act 1 scene 1*

On 8 June 2013, as I was waiting for the ferry in front of the Kadıköy pier in Istanbul, a man carrying a big black bag and a roughly made portable table approached the building. Without losing any of his precious time, he placed this wooden piece of furniture at the entrance and quickly unpacked his merchandise. After carefully placing a few of his products on the table he began shouting: 'Resistance masks! Resistance masks for everyone!'<sup>1</sup> (*Direnış maskesi! Herkese direniş maskesi!*). There was nothing extraordinary about this man. He was one of the many who would peddle the cheapest products for the highest price when the time was right. He was one of those men who sold umbrellas at the busiest streets in Kadıköy to the unlucky few who were caught in the rain unprepared. He was just one of those 'ordinary' men who 'Istanbulers' passed almost every day. Yet there was something out of ordinary that day. He was not selling just any product, but 'resistance masks', as he called them. Later that day, I noticed that a small shop for sewing materials in the district Maltepe, had added a new product to its shop window. Placed at the centre of the shelf, so that anyone passing could see it, a brand new 'resistance mask' was waiting for its owner.

It was the tenth day of the Gezi Park protests and apart from the heat and the overcrowded streets, which on a normal day were just enough to cause frustration, one could also feel the tension and uneasiness in the public spaces. Turkish flags were hanging from balconies as a sign of support for the protests and quite often one could see that people walking in the streets would look up to check who is who in terms of their political sentiments. TV screens in cafés and shops repeatedly showed images of the events and at some point or another, conversations invariably turned to the topic. What had started as a peaceful demonstration to 'save' a small urban park located next to Taksim Square (in Istanbul's Beyoğlu district) had escalated into a series of riots throughout the country's major cities. There were three events that raised the public awareness on the subject. First, there was the police intervention when they decided to handle the initial sit-in with excessive use of pepper spray. Afterwards, on the fifth morning just before dawn, masked municipality workers entered the area occupied by the demonstrators, pulled everyone out of the park and set the tents on fire. Those who resisted were violently beaten. This was followed by the Turkish Prime Minister's public speech on the construction of the third Bosphorus Bridge in which he also included a message for the protesters: 'Do whatever you do, we have already decided.'

News of these events spread so quickly that by the end of the day hundreds of people organized Gezi park protest in at least five of Turkey's major cities. However, each of the demonstrations was handled so violently by the po-

lice (with excessive use of tear gas and pressurized water) that on the next morning even more people poured into the streets. Thus the Gezi Park protests developed into a 'resistance' (*direnış*) movement against the Prime Minister's 'authoritarian' style of rule and against police violence (Fraser and Emiroğlu 2013). Thousands filled the streets, occupied urban parks, made noise with pans and pots, and shouted day and night for the Prime Minister's resignation since he did not recognize the opinion of the 'people' (*halk*).

In the following two months clouds of tear gas covered the cities, barricades and pools of blood divided the streets while cafés, offices and hotel lobbies became infirmaries for the injured protesters. Yet amongst the poisonous mists, protesters stood their ground fighting for their rights. Wearing gas masks, swimming goggles, medical masks, scarfs and motorcycle helmets, the protesters did not leave the streets, but reassembled each time they were scattered away through gas, water and plastic bullets. Beside all these objects used as protection against the effects of tear gas, there was also another one that did not protect but 'silently' carried a message.

This was the V mask (fictional Guy Fawkes mask) from the 1982-89 comic book series *V for Vendetta*, created by Alan Moore and David Lloyd, and on that hot sunny day in Istanbul the demand for this mask had become so high that one could even find it at this tiny shop in Maltepe. One of my informants, a 27-year-old Gezi Park protester, who is also a big fan of the series, recalls:

Once it was impossible to find it and we had to order it on eBay. We paid so much for its delivery and waited almost a month until it arrived, but now everyone can get it almost everywhere in Istanbul.

And indeed, by the end of the first week of the protests, the V mask had become so popular among the protesters that now it was sold as a 'resistance mask' (Dedeoğlu 2013).

In fact the image had become a symbol of political activism long before the Turkish protests. Originally created for a graphic novel, this little piece of art first materialized into real life with the hacker activist (or 'hacktivist') group called 'Anonymous'. Since then, the mask had appeared in movements all around the globe including Occupy Wall Street, the Arab Spring and the US anti-SOPA/PIPA demonstrations; eventually transforming the image into a symbol of anonymity, equality and freedom (Sauter 2012). However, in the case of Turkey not only did the mask represent 'resistance', but it has also become a tool for commemoration, when it was transformed into another face – one that represented a killed Gezi Park protester. With some visual modifications the mask's meaning went

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise specified all Turkish was translated by the author.

beyond the 'political' and created a more 'personal' connection with the dead by virtually sustaining his presence.

In this essay, I will argue that the adoption of this particular mask, unintentionally created a way to mourn the protester. I will also illustrate that the mask did not only represent the deceased but also embodied the survivors' own selves, in the form of the 'imaginary' deceased. My main argument is that through this mask, the protesters kept the dead present in order to reconstruct their 'selves' and their connections with the world, thus reconfiguring death into a positive element for being alive. In order to do so, I will present some ideas regarding the conception of the person and how masks create ambiguities. Finally, I will conclude my argument with a few comments on the virtual 'self' (yet it should be noted that throughout the essay I use the term 'virtual' as 'digital' – as from the virtual world of the internet), and will demonstrate how this particular process of mourning illustrates the inter-relatedness of objects, selves, ideas and spaces.



**FIGURE 1** A Turkish man wearing the V mask. Istanbul, 2013 (Photograph: Ertunç Ertav)

## THE DEATH OF ETHEM

On 1 June 2013, news that a protester had been shot with a 'real bullet'<sup>2</sup> at the Gezi Park protests in the capital Ankara went viral on Facebook and Twitter. At first there were many debates regarding the reliability of the information and many refused to believe that the police had begun using live ammunition at the protesters. For days no one knew what had really happened to the young man named Ethem Sarısülük and since the government officials refused to comment on the event, terror spread among the demonstrators. As I was actively following the social media and the online stream of information regarding the events that took place in Istanbul, Ankara, Izmir and Eskişehir (four of the major cities in Turkey),

I can recall the fear expressed by many protesters during the following days. On Twitter accounts, some of them wrote 'Be careful they are using real bullets now!' or 'Run when you see the police they have orders to shoot and kill.'<sup>3</sup> The shock from the shooting was thus followed by panic and fear, and when it was finally officially announced that Ethem had died from a gunshot to the head, his death became the manifestation of 'what people were "fighting" for'<sup>4</sup>. His image became the face for the word 'resistance'.

A few weeks later on 24 June a new mask emerged on the internet. Published by the Turkish socialist 'hacktivist' group 'Redhack', it demanded justice for the protester's death. Merged with the V mask, Ethem Sarısülük had been resurrected in a new image. The cold white face with a serious look and beard just like Ethem's lacked the 'resistance' mask's archaic grin. In fact, one may say that the face was stripped of emotion – posed in stillness between life and death. Along with the image there was also a message, urging people to use this mask as their Facebook and/or Twitter profile photos until the police officer responsible for Ethem's death was punished. Just in hours the picture went viral on both social websites as hundreds donned the mask on their virtual 'faces'.

Although the Ethem mask appeared as a kind of protest against the unjust death of the demonstrator, I argue that at the same time the idea to make a mask and the need to wear it was also a way to mourn his loss. To elaborate, I turn to Freud's early theory about mourning, where he suggested that mourning worked as a process of recollecting memories about the deceased (Freud 1917). He argued that during this phase the survivor replaces the actual absence of the person with an imaginary presence. In other words, he seeks a 'magical' recovery of the lost one. According to Freud such desire to 'resurrect' the dead was of course, for self-satisfying reasons. Drawing from his 'primary narcissism' theory, he suggested that we love others because of their ability to embody and reflect a part of our self (Freud 1914). Therefore, during mourning the survivor attempts to reclaim that part of his 'self' which he has originally projected onto the other. In order to do so, he tries to keep the lost object alive by identifying with the dead in an attempt to become him. Nevertheless, this identification also leads to the idealisation of the lost one, since the mourner chooses to remember only his best qualities (Freud 1917).

In fact, wearing a mask can be considered as the most obvious representation of this urge to become the deceased. Thus, it is possible to suggest that despite the original idea behind the creation of the Ethem mask, the image functioned as a way to mourn his death. In this sense,

<sup>2</sup> The news stressed 'real bullet' because until that day only plastic bullets were used for crowd control.

<sup>3</sup> It is also difficult to find the original source of these posts since they were massively re-tweeted.

<sup>4</sup> This phrase was used by six of my informants.



FIGURE 2 The Ethem Mask (Image: RedHack 2013)

Turkish protesters replaced the absence of Ethem with an imaginary presence through his new virtual image. The mask, on the other hand, represented the deceased yet it was not really him or more precisely completely him, for it was not a photograph but a symbolic representation – a fusion of two distinct faces. It was thus a representation of only the ‘best’ in Ethem, that is, his innocence, ideas and his bravery – something that each protester could relate to. This can also explain why when hundreds donned the virtual mask, many also posted the phrase ‘One dies – thousand resurrect’ (*‘Bir ölür bin diriliriz’*) expressing that Ethem lives on within them. Nevertheless, this idealised image that continued to live was the ‘imaginary’ Ethem that reflected the protesters’ own selves, since even the ones who did not know the deceased in person could relate to him, feel his loss and eventually replace it with a presence exceeding the real world.

However, here it is crucial to state that Ethem became ‘known’ to most of the protestors only after his death. Indeed, this complicates the Freudian framework on mourning, where the deceased is lost to the ones who mourn him. In Freud’s analysis the deceased is a ‘lost object’ taken away from the survivor. His death constitutes personal loss – loss of an individual already present in the survivor’s life. However, in Ethem’s case the deceased was ‘added’ to the protester’s lives after his death, thus his death cannot be considered only as the loss of the individual. This raises a question: who or what was really lost then?

Various ethnographic examples have illustrated that many different cultures perceive the death of the individual as disrupting society itself by challenging the social order. Consequently, mortuary rites have been discussed in

terms of restoring the sociality of the survivors, re-establishing the communal ties, and maintaining the social order (see Hertz 1960, Huntington and Metcalf 1979, Bloch and Parry 1982). Of course, death beliefs, mortuary rites and mourning practices vary to a great extent throughout different societies, however, what seems to be a common feature (at least in a more general sense) is the idea that death endangers the society and that through the mortuary rites society regenerates itself. Though Ethem’s death itself did not present a danger for the Turkish people, it did symbolise the presence of a threat – the loss of safety and recognition by the state. In a sense, his death distorts the categorical boundaries that separate death from the political, and the individual from society, rendering the deceased both as an individual and as something else at the same time. In this context it is the shared sentiment – the ideas that are embraced by the deceased – that embody the protesters’ own selves in the form of the ‘imaginary’ Ethem. Therefore, the fusion of the two faces in the Ethem mask unintentionally created a way to mourn Ethem’s death, and transformed the negativity of his death into something positive, that is, by keeping death present in life, the survivors were able to detach themselves from the deceased and project their selves once again onto others, thus reconstituting themselves and their ties with one another.

To suggest that the Ethem mask was an attempt to mourn the lost protester and that this ‘resurrected’ him in the process brings forth two questions. First, was the success of the Ethem mask a result of this ‘unique’ merger with the V mask? And second, to what extent was Ethem still present in the Ethem mask? In order to answer these, we should probably turn to the meta narrative of *V for Vendetta* where it is emphasized that the man behind the V mask is no longer a man of flesh and blood but an idea.

#### THE MASK OF AN IDEA

In one of their comments a member of the group ‘Anonymous’, an Anon’ nicknamed ‘That\_Anonymous\_Coward’ explained why the V mask became a symbol for Anonymous and for resistance in general.

We are told to remember the idea, not the man, because a man can fail. He can be caught, he can be killed and forgotten, but 400 years later, an idea can still change the world... Because the ideas carried forward by those in the masks are more important than the individual messengers... Because the mask can let you see that you are not alone, that there are others who feel as you feel and are unwilling to take it anymore without a fight. That even as you take away some masked troublemaker, there are more behind them making sure the message is still heard. (That\_Anonymous\_Coward 2012)

Similarly one of my informants, a 17-year-old Turkish

'Anon', explains that the V mask represents the 'unity' of a single idea: the struggle for equality, justice, and freedom. He also adds that 'it doesn't matter who is wearing it or whether he or she is part of Anonymous or not, because it is the idea that matters'. In this sense, the person behind the mask becomes part of a *unity* of an idea. Similarly, Sauter (2012) suggests that the power and attraction of Anonymous is built around the concept of a hoard. To elaborate she refers to the group's unofficial motto: 'We are legion. We do not forgive. We do not forget. Expect us.' explaining that the phrase 'we are legion' shows the peculiar nature of Anonymous where different individuals join the group by 'temporarily subsuming their personalities under the larger, meta-personality of the Anonymous hoard' (Sauter 2012). However, here I argue that what is subsumed with the mask, if subsumed at all, is not the 'personality' of the individual but the 'self' as a whole. Although Sauter does not describe in depth what she means by 'personality', the term itself can be easily confused with a more passive transformation, where the person behind the mask becomes only a representative of an idea rather than the very idea.

To elaborate it is necessary to note that for quite some time now Western societies have entertained the

conception of the person as a bounded, unique, more-or-less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic center of awareness, emotion, judgement, and action organized into a distinctive whole and set contrastively both against other such wholes, and against social and natural background... (Geertz 1983: 59)

This has led us to depict the person as an autonomous entity struggling to create his own personal and social identity. Furthermore, as Napier (1992) suggests, we have been obsessed with the 'integrity of personality' – the sense of what we are – that we cannot accept any 'change so radical as to turn us into something "different"' for it would mean to become selfless (ibid: 147-148). On the other hand, we have configured the body as the container of ourselves, setting the boundaries of what constitutes the unique self, and we have become these fixed perceivers of the world. In this context consciousness becomes the locus of establishing personality, and in turn, because personality is our conscious level of being – the phenomenon bounded by the categorical differences we perceive – we are so afraid to lose it for that would result in selflessness.

However, what masks seem to do is to distort these categorical differences and address the ambiguities of point of view. And while many have discussed wearing masks in terms of losing personality and becoming what the mask represents (see Cole et al. 1970; Leenhardt 1970; Honigmann 1977), such an explanation would suggest that wearing masks affects only the awareness of the masked person. For example, Honigmann (1977) argues that the Hopi man masked as the *Kachina* spirit and the

Austrian *Krampus* at St Nicholas Day both are violent because their feelings and attitudes become appropriated by the characters represented with the masks. Therefore, he concludes, in both cases the men's awareness of who they are is affected by the mask (Honigmann 1977: 271). Yet, what seems to happen with the donning of the V mask is not a loss of awareness (as subsumed 'personality' by the mask) but a 'becoming' on a much deeper level. That is, since the V mask is the embodiment of an idea, it follows that the wearer would also become that idea. However, here the categorical difference is not simply between two 'personalities' (ex. man/spirit). If it were so we would talk about the V mask in terms of becoming the fictional Guy Fawkes (the representative of the idea) and not the idea. But what is an *idea* if not just a reflection of one's own 'self' projected onto the other? Why would one desire to become the other? Wouldn't he be willing to do this only if he sees that 'other' as his own 'self'? Here, however, the 'other' does not necessarily need to be another 'self' for one could as well project himself onto objects, like masks as in this case. In this context, I suggest that our ability to project and in turn to receive projections binds all beings in a web of interrelatedness. Thus, I use the term 'self' as the dispersed person (not bound by consciousness and self-awareness), rather than the conscious 'personality' as the fixed perceiver of differences. Then, if we turn back to Freud and his 'primary narcissism,' we may argue that one's will to identify with the 'other,' because of what he sees as an idea embraced by that 'other,' surely fits the hypothesis that we love others less for their uniqueness and more for what they embody from our own selves. If ideas are part of our own 'selves' wouldn't we also consider the 'other' who shares them as part of us too? Then what is the V mask if not the manifestation of the ego which one imagines outside itself, reflecting back the 'self' to oneself. As a result, to wear the V mask means to lose the *unique* 'self,' but not the 'self' as a whole. Here the 'self' is disintegrated and then reintegrated into something else. Hence, we can no longer talk about the 'self' as a static being bound to a single form, but as a multiplicity of potentials where it can even 'become' ideas floating beyond space and time. Consequently, we may suggest that the manifestation of the V mask in real life political and activist movements was a result of its ability to distribute the *unique* 'self' throughout different bodies, in order to create a *unity* of bodies connected by an idea – a network of projecting 'selves'.

### THE ETHEM IN THE MASK


Following this argument, I shall turn back to the question to what extent Ethem is present in the Ethem mask. At first one might have assumed that the mask was 'successful' because of its merged image with the V mask. However, the frequency of its appearance on different virtual profiles was not because it looked like the V mask but because it represented Ethem. In a sense, it represented 'resistance' but in its own culture specific way, where death had become a part of expression for the Turkish protest-

ers. Additionally, the discussion above proves that the V face had not subsumed entirely the part that was Ethem, since the V mask itself could be considered as a manifestation of the ego. Then, it is not the V face that subsumes Ethem but the ego of the one who dons the mask, because primarily the V mask represents an idea – a unity rather than the man in whose image it was created. Therefore, here the question should not be whether the V mask took over the image, but to what extent Ethem continues to exist with the Ethem mask?

Clearly the Turkish protesters believed that Ethem was still present or otherwise they wouldn't have suggested that '[when] one dies thousand resurrect'. But what is intriguing here, is that even the Turkish people argued that metaphorically the deceased still lived within them. In an article series, published by online newspaper *Alinteri*, over hundred people wrote their last messages to Ethem, a person who some did not even know in life. Each message was directly written to the deceased and it sounded more as if the dead is still present rather than lost. One interesting message published by an anonymous writer in part IV said: "I didn't see how you fell, but I can see how you rise Ethem!" (*Nasil düştüğünü görmedim, ama nasıl kalktığını görüyorum Ethem!*). And indeed, Ethem was rising. He was now present more than ever in this new form that he had taken as the 'idealised' Ethem – the outcome of what Freud describes as the phase of recollecting memories about the deceased. This Ethem was the one rising through the V face which made it possible for everyone to identify with him. The mask could no longer be the real face of Ethem, but an abstract one which embodied 'resistance' since the collective memories about Ethem could only constitute a brave 'face' that 'fought' and died at the Gezi Park protests. Additionally, the creation of a symbolic Ethem – a face which cannot be killed (because that's the idea behind the V mask) – in the form of a mask, exemplifies how during the process of mourning the survivors attempted to keep the deceased alive. On the other hand, the 'real' Ethem, although subsumed by the ego, still *haunted* the survivors for the mask did not become a mask of different selves but a collective Ethem, constantly reminding them of him. By recollecting their parts originally projected on him, they also took a part of his image onto themselves. They kept the 'real' dead present by becoming him through the donning of this virtual mask until the process of mourning him and them could be concluded.

## CONCLUSION

With no previous knowledge of the V mask, it is quite hard to perceive the Ethem mask as a mask. In fact, we can only perceive objects in their context; therefore, a mask can be a mask only if it is used as a mask, that is, to cover a face. Here I have argued that the Ethem mask was a mask because Turkish protesters used it as their virtual profile picture. In other terms, they changed their virtual visual 'self' or 'avatar' with the Ethem face. The reason

why we can consider such 'avatars' as our virtual 'selves' is because they don't just represent us but as Belk (2013) suggests they are in a sense our 'extended selves'. He further argues that we are disembodied and then re-embodied as 'avatars', photos, and videos when we enter the digital world. This virtual self-construction is of course connected to our non-virtual self-construction, where 'we are also outside and constantly looking at ourselves as avatar' (Belk 2013: 482). Mainly because we can see ourselves and not just rely on others' feedback, our avatars give us a sense of 'self' that is dispersed throughout space and time, in an interrelatedness with 'others' (both in the real world and the virtual one) – a 'self' which we display and project to an infinite number of 'others'. Then a Turkish protester who wears the Ethem mask not only becomes Ethem through his extended virtual self, but he also sees himself as Ethem and projects this onto others. This cycle of transforming subjects into objects exemplifies how according to Freud mourning concludes with the restitution of mastery over one's world. Therefore, in a sense mourning transforms the negativity of loss to something positive when it preserves death into life so eventually the survivor could detach himself from the dead and become free again – able to project his 'self' onto others. To conclude, I have tried to show how the meaning of a single object can transform when it encounters different cultures. With the V mask the journey began in a graphic novel series and then it materialized in real life with the 'hacktivist' group 'Anonymous'. When it came to Turkey the mask became a symbol for 'resistance', but its transformation did not end there. By changing some of its visual features the mask not only became the representation of a dead protester but also the protester himself. It both demanded justice and revived the dead. The Ethem mask shows us that masks do not only conceal but they also bring forth the 'other'. However, here the 'other' is also a part of ourselves and through mourning we actually try to retrieve that part of ourselves which we have initially projected onto the other. Then, mourning as a process is something which keeps the dead 'alive' in order to reconstruct the self and its ties. 

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