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Our face work diminished, we cannot mask the cost

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“Are they any use?” Rambert, the journalist, asks in Camus’s *The Plague* when he is told to put on a mask of cottonwool enclosed in muslin before entering the hospital. No, not really, his guide replies, although they “inspire confidence in others”.

Of course, Camus could have been wrong. Surgical masks had only been invented in 1897 and, while Malaysian physician Wu Lien-Teh improved their design and pioneered their use in controlling infectious diseases during the Manchurian plague of 1910-11, their efficacy outside the operating theatre remained controversial for decades.

Yet the vital question for Camus was not clinical effectiveness; it was their impact on a society whose bonds were already fraying as it struggled with a menace it scarcely understood.

There is, after all, no part of the body that plays as crucial, and as potentially vulnerable, a role in defining personal identity as the face. The “balcony of the soul”, Dante called it, “the lamp lit in the world” by the subject who stands behind it.

And, while our face announces our distinctive presence, the faces we encounter create, however transiently, a world we share, although in some way remaining beyond it, forever out of reach. Much like our own face, they are, in other words, obviously visible and yet not completely legible: just as a face reveals, so it can deceive, in ways an elbow or shoulder cannot.

Playing off that ability to reveal and deceive, the mask has always represented both the “defacing” of human individuality and its replacement by an assumed identity or, even worse, by the “facelessness” of anonymity.

Little wonder then that we “unmask” hypocrisy and deception, while “facing” facts and “facing up” to responsibility. And little wonder too that being surrounded by people wearing masks coats daily life with a deep glaze of oddness, casting ourselves and everyone around us as simultaneously risky and at risk, contaminable and contaminating.

Freud, who lost his daughter Sophie in the Spanish flu pandemic, called that feeling of estrangement “das Unheimliche”, a term best rendered as a “disturbing strangeness” — a condition in which the unfamiliar seeps into the familiar, undermining our sense of being at home in the world.

Whether that strangeness will eventually fade is hard to say. What is clear, and makes it especially troubling, is that “reading” the face is at the heart of Western modes of social interaction.

In Japan, anthropologist Takie Sugiyama Lebra notes, “the front of self — face, eyes, mouth” is regarded as deceptive, while it is “the back of the body which reveals the real unadorned self”. There, far from being alienating, wearing a surgical mask confirms a social norm of maintaining distance, underpinning the mask’s widespread acceptance.

However, in the West, observing our interlocutor’s mouth is an integral part of sense-making, while smiles, looks and glances — “the currency of our affections” — are the cues that guide the ability to connect.

Those differences’ origins are controversial. But there is little doubt that the rise in the West of “commercial society”, which, after a slow start in the 18th century, triumphed over everything that stood in its way, made them more pronounced.

Not Britain but the America of Andrew Jackson, who — leading what would now be called a populist revolt — served as president from 1829 to 1837, marked the turning point.

The “market revolution” that swept Jacksonian America placed contact with strangers at the centre of economic and social life, making the ability to discern the trustworthiness of people one knew very little about increasingly consequential. As Christopher Lukasik and Martine Dumont separately showed, the result was an explosion of popular interest in physiognomy, as the “art”, and presumed “science”, of assessing character from faces became an enduring obsession.

At the same time, the Jacksonian transformation of politics, which brought unprecedented numbers of Americans into furiously fought electoral battles, created an entirely new demand to know how the contestants actually looked.

In a rambunctious democracy, to support a candidate was no longer an act of reverence, as it had been with America’s founding fathers, whose portraits invariably transformed their likenesses into models of virtue’s natural aristocracy; rather, it was the result of identifying with that candidate, and particularly with the earthly, and often earthy, “look and feel” that made him “one of us”.

Accompanying those changes was another that proved enormously significant in itself and in consolidating the centrality of the face in Western culture: the emergence of the handshake — with its disregard for rank, its market-like ritual of offer and acceptance, and its direct look into the face of the other — as the standard gesture of greeting and farewell.

Again, Jacksonian America was the pacesetter: as late as 1862, Henry Parkes’s Empire newspaper, which championed mid-century liberalism, could deride American “hand-pumping” as epitomising a society that had no sense of manners. But by the early 1920s, Australia’s aspiring engineers were being taught that the key to success lay in “a cheery ‘good morning’, a hearty handshake and an open smile”, while The magazine Everyone’s marvelled at the major cities’ “modern woman”, who readily shook hands with strangers.

It is therefore unsurprising that Erving Goffman called his path-breaking study of Western social interaction “Face Work”, returning time and again to the handshake — with its “little dance” in which “faces light up, smiles are exchanged [and] eyes are addressed” — as the exemplar of egalitarian sociability.

Nor should it come as a surprise that the elbow bump, in which we resolutely stare past each other, hardly replaces it, any more than Zoom conferences and ordering in compensate for limited access to the real thing.

However, it is not simply the impoverishment of daily life that occurs as the epidemic freezes one element of Western sociability after the other that matters; it is the erosion of the ability to comfortably frequent the public space, which makes navigating the outside world an experience that is less prized than survived.

That was what terrified Camus: the disengagement from interaction as “a sort of unreality” pervades what used to be face-to-face communications, deadening discussions into “a colloquy of statues”.

And with people retreating into the isolation of their private sphere, as if the great disaster had already occurred, society becomes weaker and the state – vastly empowered by the crisis, and always poised to abuse ordinary citizens — becomes even stronger.

Perhaps that is the price we pay for whatever small margin of safety those measures provide. And perhaps there is, in Robert Frost’s phrase, no way out but through. But as sociability dwindles, and our sense of being at home in the world with it, we cannot and should not mask the cost.