# Pollyanna Ruiz
## Revealing power; masked protest and the blank figure

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# Revealing Power:
# Masked Protest and the Blank Figure

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**Biography**
Dr. Pollyanna Ruiz (BA Liverpool, MA Sussex, PhD Sussex) is a member of the Association for Cultural Studies, International Association for Media and Communications Research, the Sussex Centre for Cultural Studies and the Centre for Material and Digital Culture. Her work focuses on the organizational systems which structure alternative and mainstream public spheres and examines the ways in which very differently orientated protest clusters communicate across political difference.

**Abstract**
This article examines the practical and theoretical implications raised by protesters' use of masks to conceal themselves from the eyes of the state. It argues that the refusal to seen and categorised by the state is empowering in that it exposes, and then unsettles the power dynamics that structure public space. These issues are explored through an analysis of the masks worn by the Zapatistas, the black bloc, carnivalesque protesters, anti-war protesters and the occupy movement.

Habermas maintains that the public sphere should be an inclusive and universally accessible discursive arena. Moreover he suggests that political debate within these spaces should be characterised by reason, sincerity and *transparency*. The notion of transparency is central to this theoretical framework and hinges on a series of conceptual binaries that limit and confine more complex understandings of the contemporary public sphere in general and the use of masks in particular. Consequently mainstream images and narratives of protest invariably frame the wearing of masks in public spaces as a frivolous and/or duplicitous barrier to communication.

This analysis pulls out some of the many different ways in which masks create transformative in-between space which break down the boundaries of the public sphere as it is traditionally conceived. It argues that the blank space created by masks signifies the presence of a deliberately unspecified absence and facilitates the possibility of thinking differently. It concludes by arguing that this strategic form of presence reveals the usually invisible boundaries of the public sphere and in doing so unsettles the dynamics of power which structure articulations of dissent.

**Revealing Power:**
**Masked Protest and the Blank Figure**

When the year draws to a close, newspapers and magazines traditionally look back over the previous twelve months and reflect upon the impact of significant figures and events. In 2011, Time recognised rising levels of global unrest by nominating 'the protester' as its person of the year. This edition of the magazine looked at protests from around the world and included interviews with various protesters, first person accounts from journalists in the field, and an article on Loukaikos Athens' protest dog. Rather than depicting a particular protest or protester on the cover, Time presented its readers with an imaginary protester. This cover is of particular interest because it encapsulates a 'common understanding' of the practice of political activism which highlights the way in which 'ordinary people' imagine the role of protest within the public sphere (Taylor, 2003, p.23).

The background of this cover depicts muted images of demonstrations from the era, in which 'protest was the natural continuation of politics by other means' (Time, December, 2011). The anonymous masses, suffused in a revolutionary red, can be dimly seen raising their faces up to the powers that be, their arms raising placards, their mouths calling for action. In contrast, the foreground is occupied by a single figure; a masked protester. The protester's identity is almost entirely concealed by a woollen hat and a cotton neckerchief. Consequently the usually identifying features of the human face are concealed, the individual's gender, race, age remain deliberately undetermined. The protester's eyes, which are brown, are the only distinguishing feature. They reach out through the fabric of the mask that covers their face and beyond the borders of the magazine that frames their face. They are calm

and determined but also defiant. They interrogate, rather than invite, the reader's gaze.

If, as Castells suggests, the media are the 'space where power is decided' (2007, p.242) then the appearance of this potentially challenging image, in a mediated space as mainstream as Time magazine, signals a shift in the way in which protest is perceived in the public sphere (Cottle, 2012). The image of the human face has always been a central element of political communication (Castells 2007, Street 2003). Leaders from Alexander the Great to Queen Victoria to Barak Obama have used the human visage to establish their political legitimacy and to create a sense of trust within the wider population. In this way the emperor's face on a coin, the queen's face on a stamp or the president's face on an advertising hoarding can be seen to communicate power from above. In contrast I would suggest that the masked face signifies a new and potentially productive power emerging from below.

This article will examine the practical and theoretical implications raised by protesters who use masks to communicate power from below. It will argue that the refusal to be seen and categorised by the state is empowering in that it exposes, and then unsettles the power dynamics that structure public space. In doing so it will suggest that the image of the masked face has the potential to make the previously unseen, unheard majority visible and is therefore a purposeful form of presence. It will conclude by maintaining that this use of imagery renegotiates the boundaries that usually frame the representation of popular protest, creating spaces in which us/them distinctions can be drawn differently. It will conclude by arguing that coalition protesters' use of masks

enables them to bracket difference in a clearly visible way, which first overrides, and then foregrounds, political difference.

According to liberal models of the public sphere, the media represents a forum in which all views can be collectively articulated, discussed and evaluated in order to arrive at a consensus about what best serves the common good (Habermas, 1974, p.49). This model aspires to be a 'utopia of transparency'; a space in which 'pure publicity and full disclosure' (Johnson, 2001, p.97) enable the individual, via the articulation of rationally debated opinion, to exercise a degree of political power. However this understanding of the public sphere as a transparent and inclusive space in which power has been bracketed off, can be deceptive, for as Fraser points out:

> Declaring a zone neutral is not enough to make it so and
> consequently deliberation can all too easily become 'a mask
> for domination' (Fraser, 1990, p.64).

Thus, while in principle the media in such a model not only accommodates but actively welcomes the articulation of dissent, there has long been a feeling amongst the radical left that the mainstream media fails to adequately articulate and sometimes even actively misrepresents activist issues and debates (Herman and Chomsky 2008, Donson et al 2004, Stein, 2009).

This sense of injustice is felt particularly acutely by coalitions of protest groups who frequently find their polyvocal position difficult to articulate in an arena accustomed to a single and unified narrative. The frustration felt by activists is exemplified by the

words of an anonymous protester who complained that the mainstream coverage of Orange Alternative[i] 'happenings' was 'a veil that missed or minimised every substantive issue' (cited by Lane Bruner, 2005, p.148). This perception of the mainstream media as a barrier that actively impeded, rather than facilitated, the flow of information from the political margins to the mainstream clearly has deeply problematic implications for the processes of democracy.

As Johnson points out, the Enlightenment ideals of sincerity and participation tactically depend upon 'the banishment' (Johnson, 2001, p.91) of anything that might impede or conceal the workings of democracy. Protesters' use of masks initially appears to undermine the public sphere ideal of transparent communication. Indeed, the masking of the face has been read as a politically problematic concealment, which has usually been dismissed in one of two ways. It is either perceived as either a frivolous lack of sincerity, evidence of a fundamental lack of political seriousness[ii], or understood as a duplicitous and insidious manipulation of the communication process[iii]. Thus liberal bourgeois models see the mask as creating a communicative barrier between protesters and the wider public.

This is a view summed up by Silverstone when he says

> Masks too are mimetic. As barrier it separates the
> worlds which otherwise it might connect: the celebrity
> from the fan; the terrorist from the victim; the bomber
> from the bombed; the self from the other. (2006, p21)

In Silverstone's view the mask quite literally stands between individuals wishing to communicate with each other, distorting and disguising the communications process. However, in an article on the use of masks during the French revolution, Johnson makes an important distinction between a mask and a disguise. In this way he argues that

> A mask is not a disguise. Disguise hides its 'masks'. Masks hide a true identity in a visible way. Disguise asserts identity, a false identity, but the concealment is concealed. Only if a disguise is discovered can its masks be known (2001, p.96).

Thus he argues that by utilising communicative discourses which actively foregrounds overtly constructed barriers, such as the mask, protesters are able to draw the public's attention to the hidden structures that covertly structure political communication within the public sphere. In doing so he suggests that the physicality of masks foregrounds protesters' 'ruse' and highlights 'the purpose of concealment' (Johnson, 2001, p.96) enabling activists to become the tellers of alternative and powerful truth. In this article I want to explore the way in which coalition protesters use masks in order to highlight the communicative barriers that they perceive to exist between themselves and the mainstream.

According to popular iconography, the wearer of a mask, particularly a black balaclava, is doing something secretive and/or illegal. This aspect of facemasks is addressed by the law in New York that makes it unlawful for three or more people to

cover their faces at any one time. Cameron proposed introducing similar legislation in the UK following the riots that took place in August 2011. This was a call for action that quickly faded when it was realised that the police authorities already have the power to remove face coverings worn in public spaces. On this level the mask can be read as a pragmatic means of hiding one's face, evading identification and therefore capture by the authorities. While this image is still occasionally romanticised by Hollywood representations of highwaymen and cat burglars, it is now increasingly being associated with far more serious and sinister threats.

Images of masked men are now more commonly associated with globalised acts of terror such as suicide bombings and hostage taking. Within this cultural context the chaotic figure of the single rioter is replaced by images of multiple, coordinated frequently militarised figures. At this point the mask's criminal connotations begin to be overlaid with potentially more powerful political ones. These images evoke the fear of an *organised* threat to society and have been used by nationally-based revolutionary/terrorist organisations such as the IRA in Britain, ETA in Spain and Hamas in Palestine. Within this context the mask loses its ambiguity and becomes part of a uniform that signifies 'the visible expression of an undivided general will' (Johnson, 2001, p.108).

This use of masks is clearly incompatible with Habermas' rather idealised notion of the public sphere. However, if one sees the public sphere not as a utopia of reason and transparency but as a Foucaultian nightmare of surveillance and coercion, then the balaclava can be read very differently. This is a reading which can be illustrated by examining the Zapatistas' use of the balaclava in Chiapas, Mexico. I would

suggest that the Zapatista uprising which took place in 1994 can retrospectively be understood as a key moment in a shifting social imaginary surrounding the sense of legitimacy enjoyed by activists protesting against the unfolding effects of neo-liberal capitalism which shapes both ordinary people's understanding of neo-liberal capitalism in general, and the 'widely shared sense of legitimacy' associated with the practice of mask wearing in particular (Taylor, 2003, p.25).

Clearly, as part of an armed uprising, the Zapatista use of balaclavas still carries military connotations. Their black balaclavas, like those of Hamas or the IRA, preserve individual anonymity and offer a degree of protection from a potentially punitive state. However, unlike other paramilitary organisations, the Zapatistas softened their use of balaclavas by wearing them in conjunction with nationally undervalued indigenous clothing and symbols. This use of visual imagery confounded the Mexican government's efforts to dismiss the Zapatistas as 'a couple of hundred transgressors of the law' (Carrigan, 2001, p.431) and situated them within a wider globalised context that privileges indigenous cultures as authentic expressions of cultural and political difference. In this way the Zapatistas are a good example of how global solutions are increasingly been sought to address very localised problems (Bauman, 2004, p.6).

This sympathetic global gaze enabled the Zapatistas to move beyond an essentially unwinnable military campaign and to engage in a potentially more successful struggle over symbols. As Klein points out, while the internet[iv] has played a well-documented role in the struggle in Chiapas, the Zapatista's 'true secret weapon' was their use of language and cultural dexterity (*Guardian*, 2001). It is these qualities which enabled

the Zapatistas to reach beyond the boundaries of their nation state and to shape the debate in the globalised public sphere (Castells, 2008, p.86) Within this context the mask stops being simply a means of evading state surveillance and becomes instead an expression of indigenous resistance. In other words it becomes a communicative tool capable of 'shaping minds', rather than a military tool designed to coerce the human body (Castells, 2007, p.238).

The Zapatistas' use the balaclava is rooted in a socialist anarchist tradition that strives to downplay the role of the individual and to foreground collective political endeavours[v]. This is an ideological emphasis, which is shared but inflected differently by Black Block protesters in Europe and America. The Black Block are loosely organised collections of anarchists who routinely mask their faces and wear clothes which are 'intentionally menacing' (Mary Black, 2001) during public protests. In these instances, balaclavas or bandanas do more than conceal the identity of its wearer; they also signal a collective identity. This is important because while the Zapatistas are a community-based organisation, rooted in a shared sense of place, European and American anarchists tend to be geographically dispersed. Consequently Black Block protesters use masks to gather together otherwise entirely unconnected groups of individuals and enable them to converge in protest spaces and act as a more or less discrete political unit.

During the anti-globalisation demonstrations of the late 1990s, the Black Block engaged in property destruction and actively sought violent confrontation with state authorities. In these circumstances a mask is undeniably useful, as it intimidates the authorities whilst also shielding the wearer from the surveillance of the state. While

the activities of the black block are frequently dismissed by the national press as 'thuggery masquerading as protest' (*Guardian,* 2[nd,] May, 2005 cited in Donson et al, 2004, p.12), it is important to remember that even extreme violence retains a political dimension. The provocation of state violence is a protest strategy that has been used to great effect by both non-violent and more confrontational protest movements[vi]. Indeed the death of a masked black block protester Carlo Giuliani during demonstrations in Genoa, heralded a significant shift[vii] in both public and academic perceptions of the relationship between police and protesters (Monbiot, Guardian, 24th July 2001, Juris 2005).

Having explored some of the ways in which the Zapatistas and Black Block protesters use masks, this article will now explore how other, less confrontational, elements of contemporary protest movements have developed the communicative qualities of masks. Protesters committed to non-violent direct action tend to draw on the more frivolous, carnivalesque connotations of mask wearing. As Bahktin points out, during carnival the usual order is subverted and revellers enjoy 'a bodily participation in the potentiality of another world' (1968, p.48). Within this context the mask has a long history of being used to transform and liberate the pleasure-seeking self. Carnivalesque protesters deploy this sense of freedom, equality and abundance (Robinson, Ceasefire 9th September 2011) and build upon it by suggesting that these changes should and will become permanent. In this way their use of masks invokes please and serious political intent (Notes from Nowhere collective, 2003).

However, it would be a mistake to assume that this more sparkly (frivolous?) use of masks somehow denies or eradicates the mask's more threatening incarnations.

Indeed, in many ways carnivalesque protesters' use of masks only functions because of those more menacing undertones. For, as Karen Engle points out in an article on the depiction of terrorists, the 'threat to the state posed by a being masquerading without the proper identification, a being without a recognisable face or name' is 'absolute' (2007, p.397). This point is well articulated by a non-violent anti-globalisation protester who acknowledges that 'part of the effectiveness of our mass mobilisations rest on this threat of implied violence' (anonymous protester cited in Do or Die 2001).

Carnivalesque protesters temper the confrontational and challenging nature of mask wearing established by the Zapatistas and the Black Block with a much less threatening, far more media-friendly, emphasis on pleasure and political revelry. This is a tactic that has been deployed particularly successfully by pink and silver anti-globalisation protesters. Pink and silver protesters are usually (but not always) women who attend demonstrations dressed in tutus, sparkly tights, butterfly wings, sequined masks and feather boas. By exaggerating and exploiting the vulnerabilities traditionally associated with femininity, Pink and Silver protesters address the fear felt by many women confronting all-male police lines. As one protester from Quebec grimly stated 'No one has come here expecting a safe or peaceful struggle. Everyone who is here has overcome fear and must continue to do so moment by moment' (Starhawk, 2003, p.340).

The photogenic contrast between the brightly coloured, fragile bodies of anti-globalisation protesters and the darkly helmeted, padded up bodies of the riot police also offers protection in that it inevitably attracts the media's attention. As one

unnamed protester puts it 'no police department wants a reputation for beating a battalion of ballerinas' (Notes From Nowhere Collective, 2003, p.179). In this way the pink and silver protesters' exaggerated sense of femininity places 'the responsibly for protesters safety in the hands of the authorities[viii] (Doherty 2000, p.70). Moreover they do so in the knowledge that should the police authorities fail to meet their obligation to them as citizens of the state then it will be harder for the media to represent them as the perpetrators of violent conflict. In this was carnavelesque protesters, like the Zapatistas and the Black Block, build upon a protest tradition that implicitly aims to reveal the preparedness of the state to impose its version of order by force.

The cohesive qualities of mask-wearing can be further illustrated by examining how the anti-globalisation movement has utilised both the threatening and the frivolous, connotation of the mask to create an enormously effective and imaginative organisational tool. During the Carnival Against Capitalism in London, green, red and gold masks were distributed among the crowd. Each mask carried the message,

> Those in authority fear the mask, for their power partly resides in identifying, stamping, cataloguing – in knowing who you are. The wearing of a mask symbolises the rejection of the cult of personality so crucial to consumer capitalism. While the elite gangs of state and capital become ever more faceless their fear of the faces of everyday resistance grows
>
>     (Barker, Carnival against Capitalism, www.vanguard-online.co.uk)

Protesters were invited to follow their colour on a collectively led 'Magical Mystery Tour' onto buses and into the underground, eluding police and creating a spectacular

amount of transport chaos, before regrouping – as if by magic – into a multicoloured mass in front of the LIFFE building. Once assembled, more militant (masked) members of the protest stormed the building causing an estimated £250, 000 worth of damage to what was perceived to be a symbol of global capitalism (Barker, Carnival against Capitalism, www.vanguard-online.co.uk)

Carnivalesque protesters' use of masks can be read as part of a wider strategy designed to disrupt mainstream representations of activists and to reposition them within the social imaginary as good citizens exercising their right to occupy public space. Seminal studies such as those conducted by Hollaran et al in the 1970s and Gitlin in the 1980s developed a nuanced account of the ways in which media representations contribute to 'ordinary people's' understanding of the right to protest. These representations frequently pivot upon a change in register from the political to the moral (Mouffe, 2005) in which the protesting other is delegitimized as 'dangerous criminals or terrorists' (Juris, 2005, p.48). This type of reclassification was clearly identifiable in the rhetoric of the Bush administration used to justify the wholesale abandonment of the rights and conventions following the 2001 attack on the World Trade Centre.

The uncompromising 'with-us-or-against-us' rhetoric used by Bush[ix] made maintaining a nuanced position on 'the war on terror' within the public sphere difficult. Indeed, and as Gilroy points out, the articulation of even mildly expressed dissent quickly came to be perceived as a hostile act.

The state of permanent emergency enacted through

the declaration of 'war against terror' allows minimal

scope for active dissent. In many countries dissidence

has been criminalised as a minor form of treason.

(Gilroy, 2004, p,65)

Consequently common understanding of what was and was not permissible as legitimate forms of resisting practice in public spaces were inevitably, and radically, altered. These newly antagonistic divisions meant that the political terrain for political activists attempting to articulate a coherent and cohesive response to the war on terror became increasingly difficult and circumscribed. This was particularly true for those involved in formulating a response to the American government's illegal detention of 'enemy combatants' in Guantanamo Bay.

Despite these circumstances, activists continued to deploy the mask as a means of communicating the unequal power relations between the individual and the state to the wider public. The political possibilities inherent in the political use of masks can be further illustrated by examining the use of masks by anti-war protesters in the form of Guantanamo-style hoods. Anti-war protests frequently employ orange jumpsuits and black hoods in order to evoke a detainee's denial of basic human rights. Within this context the masked faces of usually western protesters creates an empty space that invokes the rights and privileges denied to usually non-western detainees. This use of masks deliberately blurs the boundaries between 'us' and 'them' enabling protesters to renegotiate the position of 'enemy combatants[x]'. In this way activists' decision to deploy their 'right bearing bodies' (Gilroy, 2006, p.89) in community

spaces creates an all-important 'sense of there being an elsewhere, and of that elsewhere being somehow relevant. Thus the hooded figure, like the Afghani blacksmith heard by Roger Silverstone (2007, p.10) created a presence within western political cultures that could not be ignored.

A similar set of dynamics surrounds Occupy activists' use of the V for Vendetta mask. The masks are a spin off from a film[xi] in which a lone anarchist or urban guerrilla makes a stand against a corrupt political system. The film ends with a group of unarmed protesters, all wearing the vendetta mask, marching upon parliament. The V for Vendetta mask was first worn in a political context by activists from the group Anonymous in 2008 during a protest against scientology. The mask has since regularly appeared during occupy demonstrations and, perhaps more significantly in the pages and screens which represent those demonstrations to the public at large. The mask has been described as a way of preserving individual anonymity while promoting a clearly visible collective identity (Rosie Waites, BBC news magazine).

The Occupy movement's emphasis on mobilising the support of the general public (rather than policy makers) means that activists took a very conscious decision to avoid the more confrontational tactics which have characterised demonstrations surrounding summit meetings such as the WHO in Seattle or the G20 in London[xii]. At the same time, the financial crisis and austerity measures, which in many ways prompted the occupation, mean that these demonstrations have had to be less utopically optimistic than previous demonstrations against neoliberalism. Nevertheless, the renegotiation of us/them, here/there dynamics remain central to the message being communicated by the Occupy movement.

While the more prominent Occupy encampments have all been cleared, there is little doubt that the discussions that took place in Wall Street, St Pauls and across the world have impacted upon the way in which the economic crisis is now discussed within the public sphere. As Chomsky points out 'the imagery of the 99% and the 1%' is no longer relegated to the margins but occupies a central place in people's understanding of the financial system. Within this context the V for vendetta mask played a significant role, blanking out the identity of the individual wearer and projecting the anonymous 99% in its place. In this way the us/them boundaries that characterised coverage of the anti-globalisation protests of the late 1990s and early 2000s used to distinguish between the mainstream (including the financial system) and activists (particularly trouble makers), whereas now they can also be drawn as the mainstream (including protesters) and the financial system (particularly bankers).

The V for Vendetta mask's role in re-negotiating this shift can be seen in the flurry of articles that appeared in mainstream media outlets as 2011 drew to a close[xiii]. These articles are interesting because they indicate a public awareness of the huge range of possible understandings surrounding the cultural practice of wearing masks during public demonstrations. The BBC describes the V for Vendetta mask as 'sinister' and while it makes space for an unnamed protester to describe them as 'a symbol of the movement against corporate greed' it closes authoritatively with quotes from a recognised commentator who maintains that they are a both a 'fundamentally violent image' and 'inherently ridiculous' (Rosie Waites, BBC). In contrast, the Guardian describes them as 'sophisticated, self-knowing and carnivalesque', while it acknowledges that the masks can be read as 'cheerfully sinister', it concludes by

arguing that they are a 'jokey icon of festive citizenship' (Jonathan Jones, the Guardian).

My analysis so far has shown the ways in which different groups of protesters have used the mask as a means of articulating power from below or, in the words of one Occupy protester, of 'bypassing governments and starting from the bottom (anonymous protester, BBC). I now wish to reflect on the mask's role in articulating political difference in a little more theoretical detail. Neil Postman suggests that there is a powerful idea embedded in every technology. He argues that these ideas are frequently hidden from view because of their 'abstract nature' but maintains that they nevertheless have 'practical consequences' (1998, p.5). I want to finish this article by thinking about the abstract idea embedded in the use of masks and to reflect briefly upon the practical consequences of their use as a communicative technology. Kevin Hetherington's work on the 'blank figure' in the construction of social order to further is useful here. Hetherington argues that blank spaces

> allow us in certain instances to ignore or override
> difference. They are figures of the between space…
> facilitators of new possibilities in the connections they
> make between spaces otherwise not connectable
> within the recognised order of things (2002, p.171)

He gives the example of the way in which the blank tiles in a game of dominoes or the joker in a game of cards creates a space in which the player can challenge and

unsettle the pre-existing order. Consequently he proposes that a blank figure therefore 'represents the presence of absence within the social order' (2000, p. 176).

I would argue that mask can also be read as a blank figure. By introducing a blank element into political discourse the mask challenges and unsettles the power structures that construct and indeed constitute the public sphere. In doing so, the mask does two things. It suggests a way of thinking about blankness as a means not only of *erasing* difference but also as a means of *articulating* difference. The political potential inherent in these qualities can be introduced by returning to the example of the Zapatistas and thinking about the way in which they have used the black balaclava to unsettle the communicative barriers which commonly exclude polyvocal articulations of dissent.

Firstly, the presence of a mask creates a space, which can be occupied by those who perceive themselves to be excluded from current debates. Subcomandante Marcos argues that the balaclava acts as a mirror reflecting and incorporating the identity of all those who observe it. As such, the mask does not negate identity; instead it signifies the possibility of a multiplicity of identities. According to this view the mask articulates the struggles of those 'fighting injustice' whoever and wherever they may be, enabling 'anyone, anywhere' to become a Zapatista (Subcomandante Marcos cited in Klein, 2001). As such, the balaclava has become a unifying symbol of the anti-globalisation movement's revolutionary identity, a 'soft weapon' (Holmes, 2003. p. 346) that both reflects and empowers those who have been excluded from the public domain.

Secondly, the blankness of a mask explicitly refuses to shape or define the nature of the narrative, which has been excluded. This use of mask has important theoretical implications as it creates a space in which dissenting becomes the key criterion for inclusion. The mask as mirror enables protest movements to preserve (in a backgrounded form) internal political differences while foregrounding (in a highlighted form) political differences from the global mainstream. In this way, nuanced and textured opposition to Neoliberalism can be comprehensively articulated. This contributes to the redefinition of traditional us/them distinctions and creates a space in which one can begin to renegotiate the boundaries between political inclusion and exclusion. Thus this use enables one to go beyond thinking of the mask as a barrier and to begin to conceptualise the mask as a transformative threshold between different types of identities, organisations and spaces.

These aspects of mask-wearing are utilised in subtly different ways by different groups of protesters. So, for example, the intentionally menacing bandanas of the Black Block enable activists to 'act like an anarchist' regardless of their 'long term vision' (Graeber, 2004, p.214), while the deliberately fragile masks of carnevelesque protesters enable activists to demonstrate their right as citizens to expect protection from the state. The black hood of anti-war protesters also plays on a sense of vulnerability and establishes a connection between the men in Guantanamo whose rights have been erased and our own right-rich position in the UK. It also underpins the Guardian's, occupy infused, description of the final scene in V for Vendetta, in which 'a mass movement of Guy Fawkes avengers remove their masks to reveal themselves as you and me, the 99%' (Jonathan Jones, the Guardian). In this way masks act as 'rectifiers and communicators' of alternative identities and needs

(Hetherington, 2000, p. 181) and articulate protest positions which draw protesters into a flexible and inclusively dissenting 'us'.

I do not wish to suggest that the use of masks is an entirely unproblematic position within the social imaginary. As the Guardian's generally positive article points out, 'images slip on their moorings' (Johnston, The Guardian) and this inevitably leads to tensions and misunderstandings. The frictions created by mask-wearing as a protest repertoire can be illustrated by the fact that anti-road protesters at Newbury in the late 1990 were advised against wearing masks in general and balaclavas in particular, on the grounds that images of masked protesters would alienate the middle ground. On the other hand, the internet is full of anger directed at non-violent activists who purposefully remove the masks of activists engaged in property destruction (Mary Black, 2001). Consequently it is important to stress that I am not suggesting that masks present a means of unifying coalition movement protest repertoires into a single and coherent whole. Rather, I am suggesting that they allow for a multiplicity of narratives to stand in a nuanced and sometimes contestatory relation to one another.

I began the analysis in this article by examining the ways in which the black balaclava has been deployed by organisations committed to armed resistance in Latin America. I then investigated the ways in which these protest repertoires have been developed by anarchist/autonomous activists willing to provoke state violence in Europe and America before focusing on the ways in which masked carnivalesque demonstrators expose these demonising frames and force the state to take responsibility for their physical well being. I went on to explore the ways in which, despite the antagonistic

reaction to expressions of dissent following the attack on the World Trade Centre, activists have continued to deploy masks as a means of communicating with the wider public. Last, but not least, I have reflected on the ways in which the V for Vendetta mask has been deployed by the Occupy movement and interpreted by the mainstream. Thus this analysis has investigated the cultural practices surrounding varied activists' use of masks and explored them in relation to state power.

My analysis has pulled out some of the many different ways in which masks create transformative spaces which break down the boundaries of the public sphere as it is traditionally conceived. It has argued that the blank spaces created by activists' use of masks signify the presence of a deliberately unspecified absence and facilitate the possibility of thinking differently. In this way I have suggested that masks create a mechanism through which a profusion of previously excluded organisations can gain access to the public sphere, articulating a range of nuanced (and sometimes contradictory) protest positions. I have concluded by arguing that this strategic form of presence reveals the usually invisible boundaries of the public sphere and in doing so unsettles the dynamics of power which structure articulations of dissent.

This contribution has been shaped by a theoretical engagement with the concepts of the public sphere. Habermas argues that the public sphere should be an inclusive and universally accessible discursive arena. Moreover he argues that political debate within these spaces should be characterised by reason, sincerity and *transparency*. Consequently mainstream images and narratives of protest invariably frame the wearing of masks in public spaces as a frivolous and/or duplicitous barrier to communication. The uncertain, in-the-middle position of the mask creates a space in

which connections can be made between both different elements of coalition protest movements and between coalition movements and the mainstream. Consequently the blankness of the mask can be seen as contributing to a re-articulation of the boundaries, which shape the social imaginaries surrounding the cultural practice of activism. In this way the mask can be read not as duplicitous or frivolous impediment to political communication but as a communicative mechanism which helps reveal already tainted power dynamics. As such, rather than eroding the quality of contemporary political communications, the mask can be seen to contribute to an invigorated and enlivened public debate.

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[i] The Orange Alternative originated in Wroclaw Poland in 1981 and organised 'happenings' designed to outwit and embarrass the authorities. It made no explicit demands and enjoyed huge popular support. More information about the Orange Alternative can be found at http://www.pomaranczowa-alternatywa.org/orange%20alternative%20overview.html

[ii] Tony Blair's dismissal of the anti-globalisation movement as 'spurious' in 2001 would be a good example of this type of response. More information can be found at http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2001/may/01/mayday.immigrationpolicy1

[iii] David Cameron's suggestion that facemasks should be banned following the riots, which took place in August of 2011, would be a good example of this type of response. More information can be found at http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-14485592

[iv] Cleaver, 1998, Olesen 2004 and Krovel, 2010 have written extensively on the implications raised by the Zapatistas' use of the internet.

[v] This ideological lineage is somewhat ironic given that the charismatically masked Subcomandante Marcos has been singled out by the international community as the 'face' of the Zapatistas

[vi] The independence movement in India and the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa would be good examples of these tactics.

[vii] The public's attitude to police violence continues to shift as demonstrated by the work of Rosie and Gorringe on the coverge of protest following the death of Ian Tomlinson and Younis' work on the 'kettling' of children during protests against cuts in funding for higher education.

[viii] Doherty describes this tactic as 'manufactured vulnerability' and discusses it in relation to anti-road protesters use of tripods in the late 1990s.

[ix] This phrase was used by Bush and quoted by media outlets throughout the world including on CNN, 6th November 2001)

[x] An more extend analyse of the way in which anti-war protesters have used the hood to renegotiate friend/opponent/ enemy distinctions can be found in my contribution to Notions of Community edited by Janey Gordon.

[xi] The film was directed by James Mc Teigue and in turn is based upon a comic strip written by Alan Moore and illustrated by David Lloyd.

[xii] A useful account of these discussion by Stephan Said can be found at progressive.org/future_of _occupy.html

[xiii] Examples of these articles can be found in the Huffington Post, the New Yorker as well as the BBC and the Guardian. These articles are invariable followed by a long and varied selection of readers' comments.