

MASKING

Michael Bettencourt

347-564-9998 • michaelbettencourt@outlook.com • m-bettencourt.com

It's not clear for how long we will be required/exhorted/begged to wear masks in our pandemic times, but the mask itself has already changed so much about how we live our lives.

We have all heard about how masks have morphed into political litmus tests and re-routed social relationships, but who knew they'd generate a significant economic upside: at the time of this writing, Etsy's third-quarter earnings release showed \$2.6 billion in gross merchandise sales for the quarter, of which 11% was for masks. As the newsletter *Hustle* pointed out, "Here's a more tangible number: Etsy slanged 24 million masks in the September quarter."

At my work, we're facing another curveball thrown by masks: what kinds of pictures to use to accompany our stories, pamphlets, reports and so on. Because of the campuses' restrictions/guidelines about masks, social distancing, testing procedures and so on, the department's leaders have laid down a rule (unwritten but sort-of mandatory) that any images of people must show proper mask-wearing and social distancing to reinforce the mandates governing campus life. If we do use a pre-COVID image, it must be labeled as such so that no one will think the University is flouting laws and procedures. (This doesn't apply to images like formal headshots or historical pictures.)

The problem I have with this is not the rule itself (I should also add that pictures of Zoom meetings have become a staple in our reporting on events) but the effect. To put it bluntly, pictures of people wearing masks are ugly—not the people themselves, of course, but the effect of a one-third face staring out at the viewer. No amount of smizing can overcome the fact that the eyes, eyebrows and forehead cannot carry the full emotional range of a fully exposed face.

In a conversation I once had with Bill Moyers, he said that "the human face has the best production values," but without access to those values, the image, at best, can only be an ornament to the story since its ability to add value to the narrative has been deleted by deleting two-thirds of its expressive equipment. In most cases, I think it would be better not to have an image at all.

MASKING

Most likely, we'll continue down this path because no one really has the time or energy to propose anything different, but I think that if we wanted to, we could create some lovely alternatives to the photograph that would expand our aesthetic options.

For instance, we could do some version of what the *Wall Street Journal* has done with its hedcuts, a technique that resembles engravings.

We could solicit work from the students in the art department, asking them to illustrate stories using the multiple techniques at their disposal (and perhaps even pay them for their work through the work-study program).

We could even schedule photo set-ups, using protocols that photographers and filmmakers are using to ensure safety on the set and in the studio. (I recently saw an AT&T commercial where two people, without masks, did the commercial with a small-print disclaimer saying that the production followed all recommended safety practices. It wasn't anything vigorous or stunning, but it did get us back to a state where two people in a shared space shared something of human interest to both of them.)

I am sure there are many more things that design departments and communications offices can do to avoid the trap of using pictures of people with masks attached to them so that we don't forget about how much we need—we crave—the qualities of beauty, surprise, delight, humor, engagement, connection to enrich and fortify us.

This (admittedly minor) aesthetic struggle in our department is also a reflection of the way masks, even if they are COVID necessities, have had a corrosive effect on human relationships and interactions.

Take me, for example. Our neighborhood's "mask master" has now chosen to give me the complete cold-shoulder when she sees me out on my daily run without a mask because, even though I have explained to her that wearing the mask while running is unhealthy and I choose my routes so that my path doesn't cross with anyone else's path, I am not following what she believes is the orthodoxy and so therefore I must be banished from her life, and all our pre-COVID shared pleasantries buy me no slack from her shunning.

MASKING

My hope is that we will be able to dispense with them soon, but I fear, given what I see about how this disease works, that we Americans have bollixed things up so much that we won't be able to.

So, we need to figure out how we can preserve the human sociality we need while also defending ourselves from the disease. COVID has forced us humans to undergo a grand unplanned experiment on the durability and truthfulness of our expectations, beliefs, fantasies, practices, hates, loves, philosophies, theologies and all the other what-not gathered in our mental attics.

We're only about a year into this stress test, but while the masks and all they stand in for have unmasked the deep fractures in American society and our civil-war readiness, at the same, they have also sparked funny, courageous and heartfelt exit strategies out of the craziness. American society is in much need of renovation, and perhaps we can turn our masks into masques with new choreography, art, mutual aid, compassion, reason, trust and humor as their programs.