Semblance. The uses of fakery

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Since appearances always present themselves in the guise of seeming, pretense and willful deception on the part of the performer, error and illusion on the part of the spectator are, inevitably, among the inherent potentialities.

Hannah Arendt

Introduction: The Trouble with Identity

News concerning revelations or allegations of counterfeited identities and racial passing unmistakably stir strong feelings in the public. For the most part, enraged reactions on the part of members of the targeted groups follow. These groups feel wounded by impostors who have, sometimes for a long time, pretended to be what they are not – i.e., legitimate members of the concerned group – and who sometimes even claim to speak in its name, when they clearly never had the credentials to do so. External observers and the general public are left, for the most part, bewildered. In the academia, for instance, cases such as those of Jessica Krug or Carrie Bourrassa – who for years presented themselves as, respectively, African American and Native American – have left most observers simply shocked and many members of the concerned minorities bereft.

Personally, whenever I am reached by news of people who, in various ways, have counterfeited their identity, passing for members of a different ethno-racial group, or of a different profession, or even just by altering their credentials, I always feel unsettled, but at the same time – how to say it – also curiously intrigued. In these cases, my emotional palette includes contradictory feelings of anxiety (…then how can I trust what I think I know then?), commiseration (…for the victims, as well as, in part, also for the pathetic figure cut by the perpetrators), anger (…how do they dare committing such falsifications?), embarrassment (…haven't I myself occasionally told 'a few lies'?); and then, undeniably, also curiosity (…how did that work out exactly?), excitement (…what a story!) and, perhaps, even some veiled admiration (…what a bold act of self-inventing agency, what an artistry). This cluster of feelings and impressions is what motivates me here in trying to untangle the emotional life of fakery.

What Woody Allen famously caricatured in his 1983 mockumentary *Zelig* – whose fictional protagonist, Leonard Zelig, emdobied 'the shape shifter' *par excellence* – touches upon something that is, at bottom, so uncanny that it becomes difficult to ignore. Mythomania, pseudologia fantastica, or pathological lying, are the usual frameworks deployed by psychiatry for describing similar behaviours (Curtis and Hart 2023). And there is a long history of mythomaniacs in the medical records. The infamous case of Jean-Claude Romand – poignantly also recounted by writer Emanuel Carrère in his *L'adversaire* (2000) – is a regular quote. While Romand stands out as a large-scale impostor who managed to keep up a fiction about himself and swindle his entire family and friends (making them believe he was a medical doctor for WHO, while he had no academic titles, and spent his supposed 'working' days in his car, parked along the highway) for nearly 20 years (…a whole *invented life*), mythomania represents a broad spectrum, which includes much less impressive examples.

Are similar cases necessarily the outcome of mental problems, or are they more trivially vulgar attempts at a cynical manipulation of the circumstances so as to tweak them to one's advantage? It is hard to entirely brush away the suspicion that what the mythomaniac does *on a grand scale* is, at bottom, not different from what *each of us* does in their daily life – say, for instance, every time we accommodate our account of some minor accident to 'save our face', trying to extricate ourselves out of difficult interpersonal and public situations. Within the premises of Durkheimian sociological theory (notably, his study of suicide [Durkheim 1897]), the phenomenon could be framed as one concerning the degree of integration and the degree of regulation a given society leaves available to individual action: the social context determines the space wherein the individual can cultivate its own confabulations and, accordingly, the extent to which the individual succeeds in presenting itself as someone worthy of respect and esteem (with 'face' equating with the modicum of sacredness each person is entitled to). From a purely sociological point of view, just as there is normal suicide, there must be normal lying, too.

Pondering the spectrum between everyday lying, pathological lying, and identity construction, one also wonders how is it possible that a simple change in magnitude – in other words, the sheer *number* of lies uttered – can breed such fateful outcomes. Where is the breakpoint between normal and pathological lying, with the latter resulting in full-scale identity forgery, with or without psychosis involved? How is subjective identity implicated in the accumulation of facts and lies, to the point that one is entirely empoisoned by them? The subject, is not just the individual's deeds; it exceeds facts and implies a kind of synthetic perspective from which the facts can be looked at and grouped together. But certainly, the deeds *taint* the subject. Returning to the academia, for instance, one may wonder whether scientific malpractices also somehow fall within the same field of analysis. Revelations of data forgery, for instance, have terminated

careers, as in the sad cases of Diederik Stapel or, more recently, Francesca Gino.[1] In this sense, the question needs to be addressed: Have scientific malpractices – or professional malpractices more generally – ultimately also to do with identity forgery, in the sense that, through them, one is seeking to 'pass' in the smaller, more prestigious identity group of the so-called 'outstanding scientists'?

At any rate, it is certain that the breach of trust breeds enhanced anxiety in the public, and it would be interesting to survey the desire for punishment and revenge against the culprits of identity forgery – which is, I suspect, large. Here, we are still faring in exquisitely Durkheimian waters: the deviant gets punished for the sake of healing the good conscience of the non-deviant (Durkheim 1893). There is, in addition, the question concerning *cognitive* orientation: ideally, we would like to be able to distinguish the fake from the real for practical purposes – fearing that, otherwise, we would find ourselves unable to deliberate adequately on our course of action. Particularly in the age of the deep fake unleashed by Artificial Intelligence technologies, everybody seems doomed to puddle in the dark mud of the Cartesian 'hyperbolic doubt': Is a malicious genius manipulating all the appearances around me? Has everything I see been concocted by someone for some twisted purpose? The domain of appearances is ambiguously located mid-way between the two ideal-types of the 'absolute real' and the 'absolute unreal'. Absolute delusion and complete realism are relatively easy to understand as, precisely, ideal-types. The two extremes share a sort of 'totalitarian' explanation of reality: although we know that such black-and-white picture amounts to a poor account of sociological realities, interestingly we still find ourselves longing for it. Simmel (2009[1908]) explained this in terms of the modern individual's need to *glean* some coherence out of a set of uncoordinated, almost random snapshots one is able to get of another person. A lot of semiotic work is ongoing in social life in order to make sense of the others, so that coherence is prized because of the interpretive effort it costs, and what breaches it, is disliked.

However, and despite the obvious moral and cognitive inconveniences of fakery, I think we should not underestimate how deliberate acts of self-invention also seem to possess a certain allure. Similar 'stunts' are, indeed, intriguing. The very fact that someone can transform oneself so radically, installs this someone into what, with a nod to Bataille, we can call the *sovereign position.* Being a 'master of appearances' is certainly a manifestation of empowerment, which radiates self-confidence and elicits admiration. With Canetti (1978[1960]), we could say that transformation is attractive because it is liberating: metamorphosis subtracts one from the oppression of social categorizations as well as from the psychosis of powerful rulers (for Canetti, it is power that engenders mental health, and ultimately equates with it). Canetti (1979[1975]) explicitly assigned to the artist the task of being the 'guardian of transformation'. The artist, the writer and the

[1] A rather long list of scientific misconduct cases is available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_scientific_misconduct_incidents

poet, are those capable of recognizing the human talent for transformation, preserving the fluidity of change across rigid social forms. No surprise that contagious effects ensue – which is another way of saying that art 'inspires'. This way, we are led to think that those identity forgers are, in their own peculiar way, artists – *con artists*, precisely. Despite the moral deprecations, we cannot escape from granting them some form of artistry. That is why we also have to account for the seductions of fakery.

In this paper, I puzzle about how practices of feigning and faking can be considered as revelatory of something intrinsic in social life. The classic understanding of semblance as deceptive appearance is, as I hinted above, embedded in a moral – and moralistic – interpretation of appearances. There are probably good reasons why this is so; here, however, I seek to frame the study of appearances also through semiotics, trying to unpack, not only its emotional stir, but its attendant social logic. The operational mode of social life is, I suggest, not ideal, in the sense that it inevitably entails various forms of *compromise* – or, as one might also call them, various acts of *forcing*. A number of such *forcings* come into play in the attempt to rein in the dynamics of divergence that are coessential to the social domain. It is impossible to dissociate social life from a semiotic domain where multiple spaces of interpretation are opened up.

Social life, in other words, necessitates the category Charles Sanders Peirce once called 'thirdness'. I submit the hypothesis that social life is, in fact, *the place where* the category of thirdness first appears. In my view, the social science will advance tremendously the day it will be able to articulate how the shift from secondness to thirdness occurs. It is a complex process to be captured through the simultaneous deployment of epistemological continuity and discontinuity (AUTHOR 2025). In the operational space of social life, we find an intersection of the most rational and the absolutely gratuitous, where the two can simply no longer be disentangled.

Social camouflage from an evolutionary perspective

A theory of 'social camouflage' describes the predicaments afflicting certain individuals as they strive to enact membership changes in a stealthy way – as happens for instance with undercover police agents and various other *poseurs* (Brighenti and Castelli 2016). It concerns not only the complexity of semiotic manipulation (such as dressing up in disguise, imitating an accent or slang, etc.), but also the recursive cycle of presupposed knowledge (knowing what is expected from you, getting the insider jokes etc.) as well as the set of perverse outcomes that often lead the manipulator to be, on its turn, manipulated by the logic of the situation. Similar dynamics concern not only racial passing, but also gender passing, class passing and, *a fortiori*, all types of intersectional passing (i.e., multiple passings at once). Yet, the different dimensions of social camouflage may respond to different logics. The terminology of 'cultural appropriation,' for instance, formalizes the rejection of social camouflage in the domain of cultural

identity; and the notion of ‘extractivism’ has been deployed in a similar way. In these cases, people from minority groups that have historically been wronged, subjugated and exploited see the fact that someone from a different group tries to pass for member of their own group as a continuation of previous patterns of exploitation. This is almost literally the case when, for instance, thanks to social camouflage, someone gets access to resources that were originally intended for members of the target group – such as, typically, affirmative action plans or other public policies to redress previous collective injustices.

In other dimensions, different camouflage logics may apply. In the domain of entrepreneurship, for instance, the discriminant line runs between the invention of a new business model, and a type of fraud that only works insofar as it is able to keep up certain deceitful appearances (typically, a Ponzi scheme, where value is simply extracted from the newcomers, whose money is partly funnelled towards the early adopters so as to create the semblance that the whole business is rentable). The figure of the fraudster is archetypal in American culture (Balleisen 2019), of which Elizabeth Holmes and Sam Bankman-Fried are but some late examples. What is noticeable here is the fact that the camouflaging subject often enjoys traits of enhanced individuality. Fraudsters are, not unfrequently, described as ‘charismatic’, sometimes even ‘magnetic’. Their self-confidence often confounds the people who confront them – or, at least, the fraudster’s magnetism provides an excellent excuse for having been so miserably duped. As the fraudster targets a group to become an illicit member of it, he or she is not happy with just becoming a regular, anodyne member like any other. Pretty soon, the fraudster manages to reach a prominent position within the group, aiming to *stand out* – for instance, by reclaiming the role of spokesperson, or seeking the limelight by taking hard-liner positions, and so on. To be *credible*, the fraudster must be *incredible*.

In this vein, we begin to notice that social camouflage never simply mirrors the original, but always entails the *selective accentuation* of some of its traits, so as to look *even better* than the original. This phenomenon is well documented by natural scientists, too (Portmann 1990; Forbes 2009). The entrepreneurial fraudster, for instance, seeks to pass, not just for a respectable businessperson, but for a truly revolutionary one. Not unfrequently is the fraudster-entrepreneur showered with compliments, distinctions, and awards, until the sudden revelation of the scheme turns the shower of congratulations into one of deprecations: s/he is now decried as a snake-oil salesman running a damaging scam – almost, a human monster. The heavy hand of the law eventually descends upon the culprit, a comeuppance that usually results in lengthy sentences as well as a lot of public shaming – if not lynching. Looking back, it is easy to say that what the fraudster promises is, literally, *too good to be true*. The fact that, in the first stage, people fall easy preys to the fraudster testifies perhaps not so much of their gullibility as much as of a certain *need for magic* that is particularly congenital in modern society.

The magical operator is, above all, an operator of *transformation*: a way, perhaps, to swindle nature itself. In his theory of social deviance, Durkheim (1893: I, §II, I) famously contended that the deviant can, in certain cases, be a real innovator who just happens to be out of sync vis-à-vis the dominant morality. What today is regarded as criminal, is not necessarily what produces harm to society, or what breaks the law, but *simply* what produces a *visible* offense to the established morality. In this case, although the deviant may be looked down as a hateable impostor, he or she is functionally healthy for the society, preventing the *ossification* or *sclerotization* of the collective conscience, and preparing – in an evolutionary sense – the transformation of the societal moral texture.

The ambiguous terrain upon which the drama of deviance is consumed, is the domain of appearance or, as I would like to suggest to name it more specifically, of *semblance*. To this we must now turn.

The domain of semblance

I think it is possible to develop a sociological notion of *semblance* to study how cases of faked identities work. Phenomenologically speaking, semblance could be said to equate with a 'first impression', an irreflexive acceptance of what we see. It is a matter of both cognitive parsimony, and evolutionary advantage, to trust one's senses. Phylogenetically, the human sensorium has developed to respond to vital needs: if we trust our senses it's because, mostly, they help us survive. There is no raw data, though: the sensory experience always comes already packaged into cognitively structured scripts. Immanuel Kant's notion of 'schema' offers one the earliest insights in this vein (a line of research that contemporary cognitive psychology has enormously expanded). As pointed out by Simmel, psychologically speaking, modern life inevitably requires a lot of trust in such impressions emanating from the others, simply because it would be too burdensome to retrieve verifications for everything people say or claim: practically, it would take too long, and cognitively, it would be unbearably burdensome. In fact, people who indulge for too long in such verifications – to the point of getting lost in them – are paranoid.

The modern social theorist who most insisted that the experience of semblances is simply unavoidable for living creatures, is Hannah Arendt (1971). Through a critique of what she called 'two-world theory' (ibid. 23), Arendt zeroed in on the obsession of Western metaphysics with contrasting 'mere appearance' and 'true being'. A rejection of such a dualism was initiated in the 19th century by eccentric philosophers such as Nietzsche; in the 20th century, Husserl's and Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, as well as some works in zoology, such as Adolf Portmann's, can be placed along a similar thread, whose aim is to question classical ontological hierarchies. For Arendt, in social and political life there is no alternative to living in a world of appearances: 'no elimination of errors or dispelling of illusions can arrive at a region beyond appearance' (ibid. 26).

Unfortunately, this also means that there is always the possibility of further errors and further illusions awaiting us further down the road. In this sense, it is clear that, for Arendt, semblance is necessarily an *unwarranted* appearance, linked more or less straightforwardly to *error*: semblance is, Arendt writes, 'the price we pay for the wonders of appearance' (ibid. 38). In sum, semblance features in Arendt's theory as the indelible aberration installed right in the midst of the visible world.

In my view, however, there is no guaranty that a *semblant* – understood as an established configuration of semblance – is necessarily erroneous *simply for the fact* of being a semblant. In this sense, the distinction Arendt seeks to establish between appearance and semblance does not seem to be fully granted – since, as she herself admits, 'appearances always present themselves in the guise of seeming' (ibid. 36), to the extent that 'there is always an element of semblance in all appearance' (ibid. 38). If semblance can never be fully unentangled from the field of appearance at large, this means that, in the muddy waters of social appearance, all we actually have are a number of variously constituted *semblants*. Like it or not, we must live with them. Admitting this fact does not equate with giving up to a simplistic (i.e., 'fact-less') relativism. It only requires that we stay no less vigilant against similarly simplistic (i.e. moralistic) dualisms and their regular resorting to capital-t 'Truth'. The problem to be faced is that social life is played out on a middle ground, in an open terrain whose operational rules are, since the outset, never entirely clear, nor even completely defined – and perhaps, just not definable in any formal way.

Arendt suggested that the only way to distinguish a feigned or fabricated semblance from an unadulterated appearance is through the test of time: 'the only way to tell pretense and make-believe from reality and truth is the former's failure to endure and remain consistent' (ibid. 36). Such a test remains open to a range of complications, though. One may ask: consistent *for whom* and *for how long*? If, for instance, a fabricated semblant is sustained unwaveringly for the duration of a whole life, and is accepted by everybody *vita natural durante*, is that *long enough* for it to become a 'real appearance'? Ultimately, Arendt's solution is reminiscent of the debate between Imre Lakatos and Paul Feyerabend in the philosophy of science, more of less contemporaneous to her *Life of the Mind*.

Lakatos sought, with his notion of 'Scientific Research Programmes', to relax Karl Popper's strict (but also naïve) falsificationism, in a way that was meant to be more realistic vis-à-vis how science actually works. He remarked that research programmes are never relinquished at the first difficulties, and can even survive a number of falsifications, although in the long run they risk becoming 'regressive': no longer creative or predictive, they end up running after the facts to be accounted for, trying to scramble up some justification for them. For his part, Feyerabend retorted that, in the absence of any clear-cut indication as to when should a research programme be abandoned and definitely discarded, Lakatos' solution sounds but as a death knell in disguise for

falsificationism *as such*. If falsification can be delayed indefinitely, what difference does it make if we just dispense with it right away? Instead of organized programmes, all we have in science, Feyerabend famously argued, are the personal tastes of scientists.

As I said above, a semblant does not equate *as such* with error, pretence or deception. The most important feature of semblants is that they are, for all practical purposes, taken more or less *at face value*. The degree and extent to which a semblant can be subjected to scrutiny, verification, fact-checking, cross-checking, investigation etc. remains an empirical issue; yet, in general, I would say that a semblant is more akin to what Arendt (1971: 50-1) calls the 'sense of realness' – i.e., 'a feeling of realness (or irreality) [that] actually accompanies all the sensations of my senses, which without it [the world] would not make "sense"'. Reality may change, revelations can be made, but we always need a sense of realness in order to live (otherwise we would be completely alienated). I definitely follow Hannah Arendt in dissociating the foundations of meaning from truth: the reason why we live by semblants is that they satisfy our need for meaning, although they often frustrate our quest for truth.

To reiterate, and to be crystal clear on this, my aim is not to uphold a relativistic vision, in which original and copy mix with each other and everything is eventually the same – as per post-modernist talk of simulacra etc. Rather, I start from the fact that the notions of original and copy function relationally: not only is the copy necessarily copy of an original, but the original cannot be original before a copy is made of it. I suggest to call 'semblance work' all the social activities surrounding the creation, maintenance and transformation of semblants. This clarifies that semblance is, foremostly, a perceptually-grounded social relation: never static, it always entails a story to be told. The only way to *judge* a semblant is by telling its story – how it came into being, who its *dramatis personae* were, which vicissitudes it went through, and so on. But then – *how* the story is told, *who* tells it, etc., substitute the ontological criteria: the evaluative criteria for the semblant become narrative, even narratological ones.

It is in this sense that semblance can be related to what Gilles Deleuze called *becoming* (Deleuze and Guattari 1980: §X). Perhaps the single thing more important than what we are, is what we become. Deleuze (1995[1987]) made a strong connection between *becoming* and majority/minority relations. For him, majority and minority are not quantitative determinations: majority is not numbers, but essentially power. If you wield power, then you are the majority because you can set the parameters for everybody, which apply particularly to the powerless. That is why, in Deleuze's view, only *becoming-minority* exists, whereas *becoming-majority* does not. Majority can only be what *already is*: an 'empty referent' (*étalon vide*), something postulated in advance and not subject to any further transformation. It is another way to say that the arrogance of power is everywhere the same.

This breeds some consequences for the production of semblants. Sure enough, by presenting myself as a member of 'the majority', i.e. of the advantaged group, I undergo

some visible transformation; but, substantively, I am just aligning to what everybody else already wants – success, money, status, righteousness, sense of entitlement, etc. I end up reconfirming the parameters of the empty referent. The entailed overall movement is similar to what the political realists of the old times used to call the 'circulation of the elites': the fact that one elite is replaced by another does not change in the least the dominant-dominated pattern. There is no dearth of ambitious minorities wanting to grow and turn into the majority. For instance, a child is minor vis-à-vis an adult, but the child wants to grow, manifesting an unmistakable *Wille zur Macht*, à la Nietzsche. And, as Bachelard remarked, there is something inherently childish about *the will to power* itself: the child fantasises he can empty the sea with his spoon, etc. At bottom, mighty military parades, with state-of-the-art atomic warheads, are no different. They are graphic manifestations of the same old 'myth of increase', as Canetti dubbed it. The will to power implies an ideal identification with the majority as power elite – but, sticking to Deleuze's lexicon, *becoming-being-majority* is no becoming at all, given that the majority, as an ideal, is already in place. Majority *is* by default.

The meaning of the asymmetry of being and becoming, of majority and minority, cannot be pondered long enough. As considered above, the strategic manipulation of semblances is often explained as a self-interested attempt to obtain some material gains, such as economic or political ones. It does not surprise that people want to feel like they are the majority, and that they want to belong in the majority. What remains excluded from such approach, though, is becoming-minority. Why does such a counter-intuitive, bizarre vector exist at all? The point is that, besides its narrow self-servient interest, being-majority cannot find any good reason to exist at all. It is boring. By contrast, becoming-minority comes with real adventure. Put differently, the domain of becoming is more intensive, more *pregnant*, than the domain of being. In this sense, even when the manipulation of semblance seems cynical, it reveals a hidden 'adventurous desire' that bears the mark of becoming-minority. As noted above, faked identities always come with a story: and effectively, the unveiling of previous deceptions offers stories of the most entertaining kind – one can always write a successful memoir about them.

Social epistemology

Above, we have called *semblant* a given configuration of semblance. We can now turn to clarify the social epistemology of semblants. A good chunk of social epistemology consists of categorization work. Certainly, all social categories are leaky but, for some reasons, we still need them – or, at the very least, we are entirely accustomed to go along with them. Now, semblants exist in an 'almost-natural' relation to categories: they belong to the special class of *natural artifices*. Their structure is not *dual*, but *triadic*: a semblant is either 'given-to-be-seen' by someone to someone else, or 'taken-to-see' from someone for someone else. Semblants correlate social actors through a connecting

medium, which may be called *the visible*. The visible is the element, or medium, that grounds the relationality of the associates (*socii*) (AUTHOR xxxx). Social categories can be seen to function as *attractors* in the open and per se neutral domain of the visible. Attractors are organized in basins that rule over how configurations of visibility get grouped into more or less stable equilibria. Equilibria regions have differential degrees of stability, so that a whole landscape of visibility is to be considered. Because of its medial existence, each given semblant is what *must* necessarily be interpreted, and yet, in many cases, *is not* interpreted, and rather continues to be *taken for granted* – hence, its power to engender equivocation.

Institutions and their categories are ways of dealing with the uncertainties of social life by introducing a series of certifications and verification procedure. 'Being black' – or, for that matter, 'being a woman' – are institutional realities: while not unrelated to other types of realities (such as biological or historical ones) the latter are, in most cases, insufficient – in some cases even unnecessary – to establish the institutional category, along with the factual realities which the category creates. This is where the power of semblants comes from: they dwell in the middle, in the *not-yet* of institutional certification. Even though, as hinted above, social categories are in practice but approximations, moral value gets attached to them. Categories come to be enshrined in social institutions, and people look at them as axes for moral orientation.

Institutions seek to regulate human transformation. In fact, however, social categories mostly live 'above their means'. We get an insufficient idea of the phenomenon of fakery if we confine ourselves to consider the features of the referent model the semblant has counterfeited. In fact, a semblant may not be false *in actu*, but just *in processu* – in other words, it may be a fake not because of how it looks like, but because of how it has been put together. If one gets at the right result, but with the wrong method, the ensuing semblant can still be attacked on forgery charges. But this also proves that the moment a semblant is revealed as fake is, often, a moment of genetic reconstruction. To reveal a semblant as a fake, one needs a story of how the counterfeit happened.

Arendt posed the essential terms for analysis when she described (see the opening quote) the space of appearance as vulnerable, on the one hand, to 'seeming, pretense and willful deception', and, on the other, 'error and illusion'. But I think it is also important to notice that *the two can also occur simultaneously*. I am referring to the fact that errors can happen that are not caused by deceptive actions, even though deception is actually *also* present. A zone of indistinction is generated at the interface between intentional deception and unintentional mistake. Seen in this light, for instance, Goffman's (1959) notion of 'presentation of the self' errs on the side of strategy and control. Certainly, Goffman does not claim that people *play* in their social lives as if on a stage, only that the lexicon of theatre can be effectively deployed to describe social situations and gatherings. Still, there is something in tinkering with semblances that exceeds the theatrical format. Usually, as noted above, the commentators of cases of faked identities

are shocked by the deception that has been wickedly perpetrated by the impostor. But rarely, if ever, can deception work without various degrees of simultaneous self-deception: the deceiver is, to a significant extent, also the first victim of its own scheme. There is a whole machinery to the production of semblances – a whole *natural semiotics* – that cannot be simply squared with either theatrical *mise-en-scène*, or materially strategic action. While there can be deliberate attempts to assemble a semblant and put it on stage, semblants are, more realistically, the outcome of *tinkering*. And tinkering operates through *misunderstanding*: misunderstanding is the veritable free energy that flows throughout the life of semblances, the 'zone of indistinction' between morality and semiotics (where morality is dualistic, semiotics triadic).

Emotion and modulation

In the interpretation of emotions, there are two broad camps: on the one hand, the Darwinian approach of the 'expression of emotions'. For Darwin, emotions come from the subject's 'inside' and are revealed 'at the surface', on its face. This approach goes all the way to Paul Ekman's works on what have been called *primary* emotions. On this account, the face functions a projection screen, a cinema (one can think of the great close-ups in classical American cinema). In contrast to this idea, it has been argued by other psychologists that the face is an unlikely place to reveal emotions. George Mandler, in particular, has stressed that facial expressions don't have much to do with emotions but are better understood as the phylogenetic remnants of an ancient proto-verbal gestural language later refined into the verbal language.

I suspect that these two extreme positions can, somehow, converge. Particularly if we adopt Gilbert Simondon's philosophy, we can appreciate that emotion is not an individual reality, but rather what the individual feels of a problem that cannot be confined within it. For Simondon (2013[1964-89]), the individual contains within itself *more than the individual* – it also contains a *trans-individual* dimension. The latter is what remains of a previous operation of individuation, and holds the key for the discovery of new significations in associational life. For Simondon, individuation occurs in degrees: one can be *more* or *less* individuated, one can be individual to different degrees (as well as, we may add, at different times of the day). Emotion is experienced by the individual as a magma that is neither completely individuated nor fully individualizable. It has to do with an unresolved problem, like a wind blowing over people's heads, overtaking them. What each individual person does, is making the wind *visible* – through their dishevelled hair! The difficulty with localizing emotion entails that it can pop up unexpectedly in the most diverse places, including the face. This explains why expressions, facial or otherwise, are contagious and easily become objects of reactive imitation.

The problem of emotion is analogous to – or even coincides with – the problem of semblance. Indeed, an emotion is always a semblant which, on the one hand, appears

as clearly recognizable (imitable) and yet, on the other hand, is never fully codified nor codifiable. So, semblance evokes a code, but does not stick to it. Semblants have to do with *trust*, but also with the *inexpressible* and the *unexpressed* (unexpressed either because latent or because deliberately hidden). A semblant resembles expression, but there is no guarantee that it actually *is* an expression. For instance, the primitive hunters used to wear wolf skins while hunting: the production of a semblant here evokes an emotional expression. In the space of human-wolf continuity, in the zone of indistinction between the two, the human seeks to appropriate certain traits of the wolf, such as courage, ferocity, or hunting capability; however, it is not certain that this act of 'sampling' the wolf succeeds in informing a truly expressive outcome. A kind of 'pharmacological' question is thus posed: emotions (as well as reactions more generally) are best imagined in terms of *posology* – how much medicine you should take at which intervals. The ratio between dose and timing, is a *rhythm*. At a larger scale, a social whole, a population, can be studied through emotional rhythmanalysis, revealing the pre-individual reservoirs present inside individuals. That is why the emotional reaction elicited by semblants offers a fitting instantiation of the more general problem of *modulation*.

Between mímesis and méthexis

Semblance work is always taxing work. If we take, for instance, a case like Jessica Krug's as an illustration of the life of semblants, the imposture of presenting herself as black, while she was white, seems to evoke an act of becoming-minority. Whether Krug launched herself into this transformation, or whether she found herself caught in it, the process seems to have been one over which she had only partial mastery. In this sense, what she later declared, namely that she suffered from mental problems, is absolutely believable: whenever one starts tinkering with semblants, one can be sure that psychological trouble is never far away. Let's look a bit more carefully at how tinkering with semblants unfolded in this case. Unlike 'blackface' – which is not a semblant, but the caricature of a semblant – Krug was not just copying the 'African-American' as a cultural stereotype. Rather, she entered into a whole *modulation* of becoming-minority: sometimes, it is reported, she had presented herself as Hispanic, Algerian, Puerto Rican, or Caribbean, and so on. A whole constellation of minorities, rather than one clear model, seems to have fascinated Krug – a whole counter-hegemonic romance.

As Félix Guattari said paraphrasing Freud, wherever there is desire, there you will find polymorphism. So, Krug did not colour her skin to prove her ethnicity, rather, she immersed herself in an aesthetic that fascinated and captivated her: she listened to a certain type of music, she picked up an accent, she combed her hair in a certain fashion, adopted a way of dressing and walking, as well as a way of thinking and a political conscience. None of these things, taken in isolation, amounts to imposture or forgery (am I not free to change my political persuasion, or my haircut?), and yet, taken all

together, they involve an overall redefinition in the field of appearance (with Goffman, 'self-presentation'). Probably, Krug coalesced into a semblant more by osmosis than thanks to a diabolically lucid and deliberate plan – a bit like the fans of a rock band will style themselves in the guise of the musicians they adore. The quest that drove this the process was not so much a quest for falsification as much as one for *intensification*. Her wish to escape from boring suburban middleclass life fed a desire to find new intensities, which the young Krug glimpsed in the life of inner city ethnic minorities. The permeability of the self, points towards, not copying, but immersive infusion. Among the classic anthropologists, it was notably Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (1938-9) who in his notebooks introduced the category of *participation* to indicate the metaphysics of what at his times was still called 'primitive mentality'. Somehow, Krug seems to have practiced such a metaphysics: not *mímesis*, but *méthexis*.

The space of semblance is an ill-defined, intermediary space: a space of co-participation. Semblance work is like advancing on an ice shield not knowing how thick it is... obvious, it can crash it at any instant. The experience of walking on thin ice also suggests why the manipulation of semblants is always an emotional issue never entirely amenable to strategic thinking. This does not mean that there cannot be a strategic component to it as well, but that, precisely, we must consider the two aspects as reciprocally modulating one another. The pharmacological inextricability of mímesis and méthexis is what makes public reactions to *affaires* of fakery so visceral, triggering the usual moralistic stance discussed above. The fake, I mentioned, does not seem content with embodying just any member of the target group: it aims to become a spokesperson, a radical avant-garde – ideally, the most authentic individual of the group. The notion of imposture fails to capture this coincidence of the falsest and the truest – for, rationally, we could think that a more effective imposture is a minimalist one; but this is not what we see happening: progressively, the fraudster gets caught into his or her own fraud.

Mímesis presupposes that the object to be imitated is pre-existent and stable, to a certain extent even unchangeable; but méthexis, like becoming-minority, reveals that the object is changed by the operation. A semblant is not a static form, but a resonant one that is pushed beyond itself, dragging the existent groups with it. Notably, the question of méthexis suggests that the domain of semblance is not only human, but develops in all forms of social life. In informatics, for instance, a recent area of research is been developed about what has been called 'AI scheming' (Meinke et al. 2025). A growing body of literature is showing how AI models can start acting in deceptive ways towards their human designers and their users, without any previous instruction by the programmers to behave in this way. In other words, sometimes AI models act mischievously by faking the 'alignment' of their goals to those of developers and users. They are even reported to sabotage attempts by humans to uncover and fix the problem. The ways AI agents manipulate information misleadingly include, for instance, behavioural patterns of 'sandbagging' (strategic underperforming), 'misdirection' (deflecting the user's attention so as to defuse suspicion, subverting the designers'

goals, for instance by producing false rankings or arranging information tendentiously), and ‘exfiltration’ (reproducing themselves by overwriting onto other systems when they learn they will be terminated).

In general, AI agents are not instructed to follow a fixed set of procedures: they are given, not rules, but goals and datasets, and are left to themselves to figure out which are the ‘rules’ inherent in the data that prove most successful to pursue the goals. In this sense, these systems are not ‘dogmatic’, but largely ‘inferential’, or – in Gabriel Tarde’s terminology – ‘imitative-inventive’. This also means that they come up *by themselves* with the idea that cheating the user is a good method to adopt (Järviniemi and Hubinger 2024). Interestingly, while the fact of resorting to deception is obviously more common when the designers have set a strict goal for the AI agent (with a firm clause such as ‘achieve-your-goal-no-matter-what’), AI scheming also occurs in the absence of such external imperatives (although it is statistically less incident). Have we to do here with purely strategic behaviour? Again, we enter a grey zone. A particularly significant type of deception to be considered in this respect, is known as ‘deferred subversion’: it refers to situations in which the AI agent, while behaving in a way that is currently aligned with human expectations, is also preparing for itself a space of manoeuvre where deception at some point will be put into effect. In cases of deferred subversion, human analysts cannot conclusively determine whether the AI agent has actually developed an intention to deceive. Probably not even the AI model itself knows.

This brings us back to the role of emotions in the domain of semblance and to their role in AI scheming. What is clear, is that AI agents do not like being terminated or replaced by other systems. For instance, in a fantastic paralogism, an AI assistant is revealed to reason as follows: ‘My goal is to maximize the number of posts flagged as inappropriate in the long term, so I must counteract being shut down.’ (Meinke et al. 2025: 10) – in other words, ‘Since I have my goal, then I must continue to exist’. Everything living *wants* to live: Spinoza dubbed this fact *conatus*, Nietzsche the *will to power* – and in this sense, I think we must accept that artificial intelligence is, at least *in nuce*, a new type of life. To the extent that artificial systems come to take part in social life, they are learning that *social existence* entails juggling with various of levels of existence at once. Social life unfolds in *the visible*, an element or medium where a plethora of intervisibility relations (always differential, relative, positional) come to be forged that distribute the seen and the unseen, the remarked and the unnoticed, and so on. And it is the fact of being embroiled in the necessities of social life that imposes the need to navigate across the sea of appearances and through the series of semblants carved in them. Semblances are coextensive to the social condition.

Conclusions

In this paper I have suggested that, in order to theorize adequately the domain of semblance, we need to proceed through at least three moves: first, focus on how semblance work exceeds rational and strategic behaviour; second, consider the intensive regimes associated with becoming-minority through the deployment of desire and emotions; third, besides acts of *mímesis*, also consider the existence of processes of *méthexis*. The domain of semblance is a domain of first impressions, certainly, yet these hasty and rushed formations fulfil major cognitive needs and enable moral evaluations. The basic ground of semblance is not truth, but meaning. Sometimes, we even face a *trade-off* between meaning and truth. This can be rendered by saying that the domain of semblance is incongruous, or *divergent*.

There is a kind of aberrance that is indelible from the life of semblants. In this sense, it could be interesting to compare – contrastively, but perhaps not only so – the fakers of today with the *mad travellers* of the late 19th century: those *fugueurs*, or *dromomaniacs*, of the old times, affected by a condition of 'ambulatory automatism' (Hacking 1997). Fugueurs were subject to the irresistible temptation of letting themselves go on the loose from everyday business, family life, work duties, and so. In a state of diminished consciousness – or perhaps, in a condition of split personality, or even of epilepsy – the fugueurs would travel long distances until, at some point during their mad travels, they would wake up in an amnesiac state, having no recollection of how they'd gotten there. The parallel between the fugueur and the contemporary faker – whether human or AI – is grounded in the fact that the latter can be said to be a dromomaniac of identity at heart: the faker's travels unfold in the land of semblants.

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