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Amor mundi: Hannah Arendt's political phenomenology of world

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Chapter 6

Public visibility and private invisibility

Arendt regards public, participatory visibility and private, natural invisibility as two sides of the same coin of sound political action, i.e. participation, and citizenship. So like the pathologies I sketched in the Introduction to Part III, the sound modes of in/visibility are interrelated. In this chapter, I will explicate this interrelation and thus what sound citizenship consists in, in Arendt's view.

1. Publicity: public appearance and participatory visibility

In *The life of the mind I*, Arendt suggests that appearance is the universal mode of being of earthly entities. It is what inorganic and organic, lifeless and living entities, animals and human beings, have in common.¹ She subsequently draws out a distinction between appearance in a broad and in a narrow sense, i.e. between passive and intentional, active appearance; between 'merely appearing' and 'making one's appearance'². The space of appearances is typical for perceiving beings, because appearance is relational, that is, it always appears to someone. Lifeless, inorganic matter, on the other hand, appears as well, but of course in a strictly passive fashion and does not perceive itself. So what sets living, sentient beings, i.e. humans and other animals, apart from lifeless matter is not appearance *per se*, for the inorganic, including the artifact, appears as well, but their urge towards active, eloquent self-display. Fundamentally, to act, in contradistinction to laboring, working and behaving, means displaying oneself in public sphere, through words and deeds and subsequently being seen and heard by others. Men, that is, men as citizens, 'make their appearance in the human world', namely through acting and speaking³, like actors on a

¹ LOM I, 19-20.

² LOM I, 21.

³ HC, 179.

stage. Speech in particular, that is, disclosive and meaningful, sensible, speech⁴, as the capacity of making one's appearance explicitly in words, is inherent in public appearance, whether implicitly or explicitly.⁵ Public appearance is both active and eloquent. Speech carries with it the possibilities of performance and interaction, initiative and disclosure. Citizens' speech presupposes the presence of others, which, for Arendt, is just another way of saying that it requires access to a public space of appearances or display⁶. The performative nature of appearance is underscored in the many theatrical metaphors in Arendt's work. She frequently borrows metaphors for political appearance from the realm of the performative arts, i.e. from drama or theatre, which she calls 'the political art *par excellence*'⁷, more particularly ancient tragedy.⁸ Her concept of action and speech itself is modeled on the play. Political praxis is spectacular, and like a play produces no tangible products. The performance itself is all that matters, leaving only stories. The political agent is similar to an actor, as opposed to an author, which needs an audience of spectators to disclose itself. There simply is no such thing as a performance without being watched and without interaction. The space of appearances takes a place analogous to the stage, since action and speech need an artificial environment which allows individuals to show themselves to others.⁹ Other dramaturgical elements in Arendt's account of political action are its narrative dimension, i.e. storytelling; the metaphor of the mask, providing for both revelation and concealment; and the lighting. The private sphere, on the other hand, is unfit for performance and interaction as a principle. Its space is backstage, so to say. In §3, I will elaborate the somewhat elusive metaphor of the mask; in §2 the one connected to theatrical lighting.

Next, politically relevant appearance is initiatory because, first of all, it demands that one stand up to engage in action and speech.¹⁰ Secondly, appearance implies initiative, because every successful act creates something new and is in itself a new beginning by virtue of the human condition of natality.

⁴ Birmingham, 2006, 59: '[S]peak[ing] or act[ing] without significance [like the fool or idiot] (...) is just another kind of invisibility.'

⁵ HC, 198-99.

⁶ PP, 140.

⁷ HC, 167.

⁸ See, for example, Canovan, 1985; Curtis, 1999; Villa, 1992, 279. See the Introduction for the charges of aestheticism this has provoked.

⁹ Again, this demonstrates the interconnection between the material and intersubjective dimension of the world. See chapter 2.

¹⁰ HC, 176.

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Finally, public appearance is disclosive, because along with the acts and the words themselves, action and speech reveal or disclose who someone is.¹¹ Thus it contributes to the lifelong process of individuation, i.e. of showing one's unique and distinct identity, as opposed to what one is, including one's innate qualities and social identity markers.¹² Conversely, although human beings are appearances by virtue of being born into a body, that is, a what, or natural man, they need a space of appearances in order to appear as citizens or who they are.¹³ '[I]t is the function of the public realm to throw light on the affairs of men by providing a space of appearances in which they can show in deed and word, for better and worse, who they are and what they can do'.¹⁴ Having a story, which means that one's existence is like playing a part and subsequently is noticed and remembered, enables appearance.

Consequently, participatory visibility corresponds to the priority of appearance as the criterion by which action and speech are to be judged politically. Action and speech are politically relevant to the extent that they are visible to all. The main features of good public visibility I want to foreground are participation, recognition and publicity. Obviously, Arendt is mainly interested in appearance in the narrow, active and normative sense which is best called 'participation'. Only in the active sense of participation is appearance, and hence visibility, politically relevant according to her. Even more, participation is Arendt's definition of the political. Appearance in the active sense implies reciprocity as a matter of course, for I perform in order to be seen and heard, and will in turn perceive others performing. To be visible means to appear, to show oneself to others and be seen and remembered by them, and vice versa, others may also appear and be visible to me. It is intersubjective, since it implies plurality and reciprocity. Action and speech presuppose being seen and heard; in order for my and others' appearance to be politically relevant, it should be noticed, i.e. recognized. 'Nothing and nobody exists in this world whose very being does not presuppose a spectator. In other words, nothing that is, insofar as it appears, exists in the singular; everything that is, is meant to be perceived by somebody.'¹⁵ Appearance is relational, for deeds and words require the presence of others, i.e. plurality. Action and speech need both at least one actor and at least one spectator. Therefore, the actor and the spectator are mutually conditional. We are simultaneously perceiving and being perceived. Recognition and equality are necessary conditions of the political in Arendt's sense, that is, of participation. An important feature of Arendt's

¹¹ See chapter 2.

¹² See chapter 2.

¹³ HC, 176.

¹⁴ MDT, viii.

¹⁵ LOM I, 19.

thought that is closely connected to her stress on participation and active appearance, is her dislike of passive victimhood. In her view, even outlaws are given limited chances.¹⁶

Finally, publicity is the *conditio sine qua non* in order for recognition and participation to succeed. Arendt is interested in the Kantian notion of *Publizität*, publicity, that he develops in ‘Was ist Aufklärung?’¹⁷ (1784) and ‘Zum ewigen Frieden’ (1795).¹⁸ However, like communicability and *sensus communis*, Arendt keeps a firm distance from what is in Kant a transcendental and monological principle.¹⁹

In Arendt’s view, publicity is inseparable from the principle of plurality, i.e. the presence of others. This is where public space comes in.²⁰ Disclosive appearance and participatory visibility presuppose a public world, as distinguished from, on the one hand, the private sphere and, on the other hand, the modern social sphere. The Arendtian concept of public space is more encompassing than usual, since it cannot be reduced to formal arrangements and institutions, but includes informal rapport as well. Words and deeds do not precede this space, but constitute it the moment they are performed and spoken as well as perceived by others. The physical public and political space, as well as their formal arrangements, are only derivative of this more fundamental experience.

The space of appearance comes into being wherever men are together in the manner of speech and action, and therefore predates and precedes all formal constitution of the public realm and the various forms of government, that is, the various forms in which the public realm can be organized.²¹

The public sphere cannot be located physically, but rather may be established ‘almost anytime and anywhere’, as soon as people act and speak in concert, ‘no matter where they happen to be’.²² The criteria for what constitutes a public space for Arendt are, first, its

¹⁶ ‘We refugees’, JW, 274.

¹⁷ Kant, 1912, 33-42.

¹⁸ Kant, 1912, 341-386.

¹⁹ See chapter 4 on common sense. On Kant’s concept of ‘publicity’ and the public-private distinction, see Laursen, 1986; on ‘publicity’, the ‘public use of reason’ and ‘freedom of press’, see Splichal, 2002; on Arendt’s and Kant’s ‘principle of publicity’, see Schwan, 2006.

²⁰ On Arendt’s concept of public space in general, see, among others, Canovan, 1985; Cohen, 1996; Mensch, 2007. On Arendt’s concept of public space in relation to the debate between associationism and agonism, see Marchart, 2003, 82-89; Villa, 1992b. On Arendt’s concept of public space in relation to the debate between communitarians and liberals, see Passerin d’Entreves, 1989. For a comparison between Arendt’s, respectively Habermas’, concept of public space, see Villa 1992; Benhabib, 1990, 1992; Honig, 1993; Markell, 1997.

²¹ HC, 199.

²² HC, 198; cf. ‘Wherever you go, you will be a *polis*’ (HC, 198).

visibility and publicity, that is, its accessibility to all; and second its commonality, that is, its concern with the common good or the *res publica*.²³

2. Privacy: the private realm of non-appearance and invisibility

For Arendt, we cannot appear, in the strict sense of participatory visibility, in private and social spheres, for there is no space of appearances, to participate in, or to appear onto. This is not to say that appearance never occurs in the private sphere. As soon as emotions and physical experiences are being articulated and interpreted, they stop being entirely non-worldly. Arendt's phenomenological reading of public space belies any essentialist and reifying reading of the public-private distinction.²⁴

Just as men-as-citizens are at home in the public sphere of visibility, man-as-man, that is, as natural man, is at home in the private sphere of invisibility. In the private sphere, appearance just occurs in an entirely passive fashion. Seen from the perspective of the world, Arendt writes, 'private man does not appear, and therefore it is as though he did not exist.'²⁵ Since '[his] physical identit[y] appear[s] without any activity of [his] own'²⁶, natural man is and should be invisible. To appear in a politically significant way demands that one leaves behind the private sphere, that is, the sphere of non-appearance and invisibility, and enters the public sphere. Visibility is the prerogative and responsibility of man as a political actor, that is, as soon as he enters the public realm. The private sphere neither does, nor should, allow for appearance and visibility in the political sense of disclosure, performance, interaction, participation and recognition.

Disclosive and performative appearance and public, participatory visibility, presuppose private and social invisibility. This also implies that visibility is good, i.e. politically sound and conducive to human dignity, only in the public sphere; invisibility only in the private and social spheres. What visibility is to the public realm, invisibility is to the private. In other words, public visibility and private invisibility are complementary and hence are to be kept distinct: 'there are things that need to be hidden and others that need to be displayed publicly to exist at all.'²⁷ The non-appearing quality and the invisibility of the private realm is not a weakness, or some condition to be overcome. On the contrary, although Arendt is obviously mainly interested in the public sphere, she emphasizes the

²³ Marchart, 2003.

²⁴ See chapter 2, §4.

²⁵ HC, 58.

²⁶ HC, 179.

²⁷ HC, 73.

indispensability of the non-appearing character or invisibility which private and social life enable and nurture. The value of the invisibility of the private is to provide protection and safety or security, a shelter or hiding place.²⁸ To the private realm belong the nurturance of children, the care for our physical necessities, that is, life itself and *animal laborans*; our emotional and psychic lives, or what Arendt calls the 'heart'²⁹; and everything else which determines what we are, as opposed to who we are. These activities and identities need protection from the public eye. Protection is needed, since although participatory visibility is indispensable for political action, it poses risks, and makes people vulnerable. These risks and vulnerabilities are related to action's unpredictability, due to its plural and contingent nature. The invisibility of the private sphere and natural man constitute the very condition for disclosive appearance and participatory visibility to flourish, and hence have a significance, integrity and dignity, if not in a political sense, of their own. Human beings need a sphere of invisibility, a 'dark background of mere givenness' from which to appear, as Arendt explains.³⁰ 'Wer Personalität dem Exklusiven Wettstreit mit seinesgleichen im Licht der Öffentlichkeit verdankt, der bedarf auch der Dunkelheit des Privaten. Nur so ist der Bürger gegen die Verflachung in der öffentlichen Konkurrenz der Worte und Taten gefeit.'³¹

So Arendt's evaluation of privacy is two-sided. On the one hand, it is a space of privation³², on the other hand, it is a refuge and a condition for the flourishing of the public sphere. Arendt does not make the mistake of establishing a simple hierarchy of public and private, for the latter is indispensable to the former. There is a certain equivalence between the two in terms of the basic condition of appearance, from darkness into the light into the darkness again. This two-sided evaluation is expressed in the sophisticated imagery of light and darkness Arendt develops. From a phenomenological perspective, darkness and light belong together, like day and night; they cannot exist without each other. Visibility and disclosure need light, whereas darkness leaves things invisible and concealed. We indeed find many references in Arendt's work to the metaphorical pair of light and darkness.³³ Light illuminates by foregrounding some things, while leaving concealed other things, which are not (yet) fit for the full light of the stage. Light is discriminatory; the demarcation line being the distinction between private and public. The public world has the 'power of

²⁸ HC, 71. Cf. Herb, 2001, 62-65.

²⁹ HC, 39, among others.

³⁰ OT, 301.

³¹ Herb, 2001, 64.

³² According to Arendt, the 'most elementary meaning' of the private space refers to 'privative', 'being deprived of' (HC, 73).

³³ Cf. Herb, 2001, 59.

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illumination³⁴ by directing the spotlights onto something or someone.³⁵ It is spectacular, since the spotlights of the world bring into the open, make manifest, disclose and display words and deeds, as well as speakers and actors. Notice that Arendt describes the operation and meaning of storytelling, opinionating, understanding and judging in the same terms of world disclosure. In other words, light has the connotation of meaningfulness.

Darkness, on the other hand, seems to be mainly a negative quality in Arendt's work. She frequently predicates it on the private sphere or privacy in general, and the individual's emotional and motivational life in particular. Following Augustine, she speaks, for instance, of 'the darkness of the human heart'³⁶. According to Arendt, whatever goes on in our inner emotional world 'may hardly be called a demonstrable fact.'³⁷ Without the presence of others, the solitary individual easily gets absorbed in this shadowy realm and gets 'caught in contradictions and equivocalities'³⁸ and 'deadly conflicts'³⁹. The human heart needs the light of the public realm to be 'redeemed'. It contains 'a darkness which only the light shed over the public realm through the presence of others (...) can dispel.'⁴⁰

However, the darkness of the private and the natural is rather neutral than negative. Darkness and safety are two sides of the same coin. The private, including the family, other intimate relationships and our emotional lives, is and should remain hidden, opaque and concealed, closed and veiled from public eyes, because of the risk of corruption. For the light of the public realm is also 'harsh'⁴¹, a 'merciless glare'⁴², for appearing in the public realm is a risky affair. What is more, Arendt regards darkness also as a necessary condition of illumination. Appearance presupposes a darkness from which to emerge.⁴³ Again, like a performance on stage, public, participatory appearance needs a backstage outside of the spotlights; 'the darkness of the theatre necessary for the illumination of the stage.'⁴⁴ In the following, I will use the terms 'obscurity' respectively 'exposure' to signify the pathological modes of invisibility, respectively visibility. I call them pathological since they are both

³⁴ MDT, 4.

³⁵ MDT, viii.

³⁶ HC, 244; BPF, 44, 149; OR, 95-98. Cf. 'the dark 'chamber of the heart'' which Arendt quotes from Augustine's *Confessiones* (1943 [397-398]) in 'What is freedom?', BPF, 158.

³⁷ 'What is freedom?', BPF, 149.

³⁸ HC, 237.

³⁹ 'What is freedom?', BPF, 158.

⁴⁰ HC, 237; cf. 'The social question', OR, 95-98; HC, §7.

⁴¹ HC, 51.

⁴² 'The crisis in education', BPF, 186.

⁴³ Cf. 'The crisis in education', BPF, 186; HC, 51.

⁴⁴ Merleau-Ponty, quoted in Flynn, 1978, 235.

disabling and disempowering conditions that foreclose the possibility of political agency and citizenship.

Arendt's phenomenological and republican account of the distinction between the private and the public spheres differs from the more conventional liberal conception. Both Arendt and liberal philosophers such as Rawls hold that plurality, and hence individuals, should be preserved, and that the private sphere should be shielded against the public or political sphere. However, liberal thinkers posit the value of protecting privacy and individual freedom, thought as autonomy, against politics, thought as state interference.⁴⁵ Liberals also pursue the eventual liberation from politics as a source of bondage. For Arendt, on the contrary, the protection of privacy serves the flourishing of the public sphere. The integrity of the private sphere is a precondition for citizenship, participation and public action. Therefore, the undermining of the private sphere leads to the undermining of the public sphere as well, as occurs, for example, under totalitarian conditions. Also, privacy should not just be protected against the public sphere, but the public sphere should reversely also be protected against the encroachment of private concerns, i.e. life itself. Moreover, Arendt views political action as a source of freedom, rather than as a restraint upon it. Next, plurality is a condition that is typical of action in the public sphere in Arendt's view. Moreover, the agonistic conflict between different views on phenomena and events is not a problem to be overcome, but should be played out and confronted in the public arena. Liberals, on the other hand, take plurality, or pluralism, as the multitude of incommensurable comprehensive doctrines, i.e. of the views of groups in society that share a particular moral or religious outlook or world view, rather than as a multitude of individual perspectives. Under modern conditions of irreducible pluralism, liberals hold, comprehensive doctrines are best kept private and free of political interference. Pluralism is a value of the private sphere and should be excluded from the political domain in order to avoid violent confrontation and to enable human living-together.⁴⁶

3. The paradox of revealing and concealing: the mask

The account of participatory visibility and private invisibility so far needs further complication. For citizens not only need the protection of their natural qualities by means

⁴⁵ Pettit describes the negative liberal notion of freedom as 'freedom from interference'. Pettit, 1997, 2001.

⁴⁶ See most notably Rawls, 1971.

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of the private personality the private sphere⁴⁷ enables. Even in the public sphere, citizens need some further concealment of their natural qualities, by means of legal personality, which Arendt compares to a mask. The device of the mask, or *persona*, in ancient theatre, Arendt argues, covered up the actor's face on stage, while still disclosing, and even amplifying, her or his unique voice. Hence, she thought it was an appropriate metaphor for civil and legal personality.⁴⁸ Arendt calls upon this trope in order to provide insight into the artificial, constructed quality of citizenship. Who becomes visible is not natural man, i.e. man-as-man, but men-as-citizens.⁴⁹ The mask, in other words, refers to the legal fiction of equality and the right to speech.

The point was that it is not the natural Ego which enters a court of law. It is a rights-and-duties-bearing person, created by the law, which appears before the law. Without his persona, there would be an individual without rights and duties, perhaps a 'natural man' - that is, a human being or *homo* in the original meaning of the word, indicating someone outside the range of the law and the body politic of citizens, (...) but certainly a politically irrelevant being.⁵⁰

Secondly, also within the public space of visibility, one's appearance has a dimension of concealment. The mask underlines the concealing dimension of appearance. Appearance implies the simultaneity of revealing, that is, the disclosure of the political actor or who, and of concealing, of natural man or what someone is. Legal personality covers up what we are, our politically irrelevant qualities and inevitable natural inequalities, in order to allow the revelation of who we are and so to enable respect. This I would call the paradox of citizenship, the fact that revealing and concealing, or disclosure and closure, are only seemingly opposed, but upon closer inspection operate as two sides of the same coin. Since the mask is never lifted during the play, it underscores that public appearance prevents the appearance of qualities, needs, affects, etc. which cannot bear the light of the day, such as motives, aims, etc. To be sure, the acknowledgement that revealing necessarily implies concealing, is typically phenomenological. Arendt in agreement quotes phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty: 'No thing, no side of a thing, shows itself except by actively hiding the others.'⁵¹

⁴⁷ It is tempting to use the metaphor of the 'house' for the private sphere, but this has the undesirable consequence of reifying the private-public distinction, as I argued above. Although in practice the two will often coincide, this is not necessarily so.

⁴⁸ 'The social question', OR, 106-09.

⁴⁹ Cf. Visker's (2007) non-expressivist conception of public space.

⁵⁰ 'The social question', OR, 107.

⁵¹ LOM I, 25.

[N]ot only do appearances never reveal what lies beneath them of their own accord but also, generally speaking, they never just reveal, they also conceal (...). They expose, and they also protect from exposure, and as far as what lies beneath is concerned, this protection may even be their most important function.⁵²

Finally, as related to the previous dimension, the mask draws attention to the safety and protection that is required for political action and speech. Citizens need a political community that offers and guarantees protection, through the establishment of institutions, most prominently laws and the constitution. Only membership of an artificial community, not of the human species, offers human beings the opportunity of disclosive appearance and participatory visibility. The political actor, in other words, is a bearer of rights, granted and guaranteed by political community itself. Note that the mask's protective role is different from the protection needed for private life. Though both are meant to protect natural man against exposure, the mask does not bar participatory visibility, as does the private sphere. The mask protects men against inappropriate visibility; the private sphere disallows visibility entirely. The mask still allows for disclosure; the private sphere does not.

Arendt's account of the mask has attracted much feminist attention, though, remarkably, appreciations point in opposite directions. For example, Norma Moruzzi appreciates the mask as a self-conscious staging of femininity.⁵³ Susan Bickford, on the other hand, takes it as an instrument of neutralization of gender, ethnicity, etc. Since Bickford believes that what we are, i.e. our membership in collective identities, inevitably affects who we are, i.e. how we publicly appear to others as citizens, the mask's neutralization is not only bound to fail; it is moreover an undesirable goal. What we are may 'obscure' or 'systematically distort' who we are, she argues, for 'the mask that facilitates political appearance is inevitably constructed with certain 'whats' in mind'.⁵⁴ As a consequence, neutralization does not contribute to equalization, but to inequality in the guise of equality, which makes it possible for those 'naturally' belonging to the majority 'to ignore their particularity'.⁵⁵ This is a variation of the well-known objection of false universalism. I doubt the adequacy of this objection. Arendt would not deny, as Bickford thinks she does, that what we are, including our social identities, influences who we are.⁵⁶ However, the question Arendt raised was whether we should focus on the what or the who in politics, and concluded to the latter. Her aim is to draw attention to the legal and

⁵² LOM I, 25.

⁵³ Moruzzi, 2000.

⁵⁴ Bickford, 1996, 96, 101, 103.

⁵⁵ Bickford, 1996, 103.

⁵⁶ See chapter 2.

political protection required for action and speech. Political or legal personality is a construct meant to protect man as a natural being.

Unlike Bickford, Moruzzi adopts the metaphor of the mask as a way of ‘reexamining the metaphysical relation between being and appearance’⁵⁷, or between ‘essence’ and ‘performance’⁵⁸, which she, like Arendt, considers a false dichotomy within the political realm. In politics, the question what or who is behind the mask, is irrelevant, she argues. The mask has a double role, namely both ‘hiding’ and ‘representing’.⁵⁹ Moruzzi’s focus, however, is on a different topic than Arendt, namely on the ‘problem of feminine political agency’.⁶⁰ As an ‘alternative to the seeming dead end of feminine essentialism’⁶¹, the mask, or rather, masquerade, offers a solution to this problem. Moruzzi maintains that Arendt displayed ‘interpretive resistance’⁶² to the problem of feminine political identity and even viewed women as ‘incapable of this self-conscious performance’⁶³. ‘Implicitly’, at least this is how Moruzzi reads Arendt, ‘the body insofar as it is feminine, cannot assume the mask, because the feminine body and the feminine role are apparently the same, a fixed and essential reality incapable of self-representation and artifice.’⁶⁴ Therefore, Moruzzi turns to an early psychoanalytic feminist account of the mask, Joan Riviere’s 1929 essay ‘Womanliness as a masquerade’⁶⁵. Riviere showed, contrary to Arendt according to Moruzzi, that ‘the feminine body has the capacity to represent itself’.⁶⁶ She held a conception of femininity as strategic masquerade, that is, she thought ‘there is no difference between an essential femininity and the feminine mask’⁶⁷. Femininity is a self-conscious performance, which does not conceal an essential core behind appearance.

In her review of Moruzzi’s book, Disch questions Moruzzi’s suggestion of a self-conscious artificiality. ‘Masquerade, as Moruzzi describes it, is a deliberate performance. It presupposes that agency is predicated on a self-conscious, self-critical subject. This presupposition is precisely that I take to be at issue in the contradiction that Moruzzi aims to resolve.’⁶⁸ Additionally, another problem at hand is Moruzzi’s individualized choice for

⁵⁷ Moruzzi, 2000, 33.

⁵⁸ Moruzzi, 2000, 34, 39.

⁵⁹ Moruzzi, 2000, 45.

⁶⁰ Moruzzi, 2000, 40.

⁶¹ Moruzzi, 2000, 45.

⁶² Moruzzi, 2000, 40.

⁶³ Moruzzi, 2000, 45.

⁶⁴ Moruzzi, 2000, 39.

⁶⁵ Riviere, 1929.

⁶⁶ Moruzzi, 2000, 39.

⁶⁷ Moruzzi, 2000, 43.

⁶⁸ Disch, 2002, 677.

the shape of the mask, as well as for the moment when it is put on or off. The Arendtian mask does not allow for social differences, but only for individual differences, i.e. who's. Apart from the individual distinctness of the voice which it lets through, the shape of the



Figure. *Fumée d'Ambre Gris*, 1880, John Singer Sargent

and, in this case, western, gaze. She lifts the veil, in order to be seen, to expose her true womanhood. Strikingly, she does not look at us, the spectators. She is no more than an object of seeing. The erotic play of veiling and unveiling, of guessing what is behind or underneath it, is not only deeply patriarchal and orientalist, it surely runs counter to the meaning Moruzzi wants to convey, since the idea of female masquerade is exactly the opposite. There is nothing, no essential femininity, behind the mask; the mask is all there is.

mask, as well as the appropriate moment to put it on or lift it, are given; it cannot be done at will. Its protective role is dependent upon this non-individual and non-voluntary quality.

Strikingly, the picture on the cover of Moruzzi's book, a painting of a veiled women (see figure), undermines her argument, or at least pulls the mask's potential interpretative strength in a direction which is less politically fruitful than it allows for. It under-employs the political meaning of Arendt's concept of the mask, which resolutely undermines the distinction between appearance and being. The painting explicitly calls forth questions like, What is behind the mask? Which essence, essential femininity or womanhood, is concealed underneath the veil? Woman, thus, appears as enigma, for the veil leaves something to guess, but can be pulled away and expose its mystery, to the male

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In other words, the veil is no mask. Masquerade enables the actor to see and speak through it, without the need ever to take it off. The veil, on the contrary, at least the type of veil the woman in the painting is wearing, which covers her head and the upper part of her body completely, as opposed, for example, to most contemporary modern Islamic headscarves, prohibits both seeing, speaking and hearing. Even a burqa allows for minimal sight. This veil is nothing but a prison, expressing anxieties about unbounded female sexuality which should be kept in check. The mask, neither in Riviere's, nor in Arendt's sense, is not. The mask does not prohibit, but allows for agency. Both in Arendt and Riviere, it is the very condition of political subjectivity.⁶⁹

Conclusion: citizenship

Disclosure in public, i.e. participatory visibility, on the one hand, and safety, i.e. the protection of natural life, natural invisibility or darkness, on the other hand, together enable access to the public sphere, political agency and participation. They are the conditions of citizenship or participatory visibility. Public visibility requires natural invisibility, that is, the concealment of natural man. This concealment is guaranteed by both privacy and the mask, that is, by the safety and protection of private man in the former case, as well as of the citizen in the latter case. I called this the paradox of disclosure and concealment. Darkness is the condition of invisibility of natural man, combined with its protection through privacy. Disclosure is the condition of visibility of men-as-citizens, combined with the protection of natural man through the mask. Both public visibility and natural invisibility are therefore politically sound conditions. In terms of theatrical lighting, a truly human, political life, implies neither the 'merciless glare' of an exposed life, nor the obscurity of public invisibility.

After this exposition of public visibility and natural invisibility, it has become clearer why political invisibility and natural visibility are politically harmful and disabling. Both pathologies are modes of blindness: too much and blinding light in the case of natural and social visibility; or too little in the case of public invisibility. Public invisibility is pathological, since without access to a public space, the concealment, protection and security which the private sphere has on offer for natural man, turns into obscurity. Natural visibility is no less damaging to political action and citizenship. When someone is deprived of the possibility of retreat into invisibility and of the mask of legal personality, disclosure of who gives way to exposure of what someone is, namely natural man, who is for that very

⁶⁹ I will return to the issue of collective identity in relation to social and public visibility in chapter 8.

reason no longer able to participate. Whereas disclosive appearance of who one is requires initiative in public space, in order to achieve recognition and participation; exposure is passive, hence non-participatory and devoid of publicity. Obscurity, then, is the condition of invisibility without the protection of what we are, i.e. natural man or ζωή, which privacy enables; exposure the condition of being visible without disclosure of who we are, i.e. citizen or βίος, which the mask enables. There is no disclosure of who, either because there is no concealment, on the one hand, or no participation and appearance in public space, on the other hand.

Taken together, both natural visibility, that is, exposure, and public invisibility, that is, obscurity, are disabling conditions, foreclosing political agency and participation, since they bring about the breakdown of the paradox of disclosure and concealment. Devoid of both privacy and mask, the protection and security of the private sphere and legal personality, the disclosure of who is replaced by the exposure of what people are. Both are therefore politically harmful conditions. This is illustrated by the fate of stateless people, among others, as I will argue in the next chapter.⁷⁰

Arendt's framework allows her to make normative distinctions, of a phenomenological, not an essentialist, nature⁷¹, which allow her to defend a politics of visibility. Two distinctions are especially relevant regarding the issue of (in)visibility: the conceptual pairs of private – public, on the one hand, and active – passive, on the other hand. The distinction between active, i.e. disclosive, performative, participatory and interactive; and passive, i.e. expositive, visibility, allows Arendt to defend a politics of visibility which hinges on the difference between disclosing oneself and being exposed. The private - public distinction yields the particular advantage that it confines visibility, namely to the public sphere. For Arendt visibility is, i.e. cannot be but, limited. The visibility of the public is always limited by the invisibility and darkness of the private. The Archimedean ideal of scientific objectivity is an example of the illusion of totalized visibility.⁷² The withering away of the 'that', rather than the 'what', of the distinction between the invisible private and the visible public, is the very criterion for deciding about political pathologies.

⁷⁰ I will demonstrate this argument in chapter 7.

⁷¹ As I argued in chapter 1.

⁷² For Arendt's account of the Archimedean ideal, see chapter 1.