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The “Pink Mask Affair”:

Kévin Bideaux

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Colour and Colorimetry Multidisciplinary Contributions

Vol. XVII A

Edited by Andrea Siniscalco



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The “Pink Mask Affair”: Why did Italian police refuse to wear pink FFP2 masks?

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Abstract

On 13th January 2022, some Italian police stations received stocks of pink FFP2 masks to protect them from covid-19. Many officers however refused to wear them because the colour would not be appropriate for a police officer, alerting the Sindacato Autonomo di Polizia – SAP. This article aims to revisit this “Pink Mask Affair”, to identify and detail the reasons which could or might have led police officers to refuse to wear pink masks. It proposes two hypotheses: 1) the association of pink with feminine and femininity could have led male officers to refuse to wear pink masks for fear of being perceived feminine; 2) bright and pastel colours are not suitable for police officers because they are also associated with femininity.

Keywords: Pink, Masculinity, History of colour, Italian police, Covid-19 pandemic.

Introduction: A look back at the “Pink Mask Affair”

In late December 2021, the Italian government reinstated the wearing of masks outdoors in the context of an upsurge in coronavirus infections due to the omicron variant (Ministero della Salute, 2022). On January 13th 2022, several Italian police stations in Pavia, Varese, Ferrara, Syracuse, Bologna and Venice received batches of FFP2 masks from the office of the covid-19 Emergency Commissioner, Francesco Paolo Figliuolo. On opening the boxes, the police officers were surprised to discover pink masks, which many officers refused to wear because the colour would not be appropriate for a police officer. Alerted by the facts, Stefano Paoloni, secretary general of the Sindacato Autonomo di Polizia – SAP, one of the country's police unions, even wrote a letter to the police prefect Lamberto Giannini, asking him to immediately replace these “absolutely inappropriate” masks with other ones coloured in blue, white or black, “in accordance with the uniform of the State Police” (Paoloni, 2022a). According to him, wearing pink masks would indeed harm the image of the police: “the importance of the functions performed by the State Police requires the administration to preserve the propriety of its officers and to avoid that they are ordered to carry out institutional activities wearing protective equipment of a colour eccentric to the uniform and likely to damage the image of the institution” (*ibidem*). To support his point, Paoloni also cites a circular from the then Chief of Police, dated 29 October 2019, which had warned members of the police against wearing non-conforming clothing that could damage the institution's image (*ibidem*). Immediately picked up by the local (*e.g.* Gasparini, 2022) and national (*e.g.* Ziniti, 2022; Frignani, 2022) press, what I will call “Pink Mask Affair” (hereinafter “PMA”) soon spread beyond Italy's borders to Europe (*e.g.* Giuffrida, 2022; Lutaud, 2022) and the United States (*e.g.* Povoledo, 2022), a fact that the union proudly boasts about on its website (SAP, 2022a; SAP, 2022b).

Based on the statements of the SAP and its members, the press coverage of the event, and the reactions of Internet users on social networks, using visual semiotics and relying on gender studies, this article aims to revisit the PMA. The point is to identify and detail the reasons that could or might have led male police officers to refuse to wear pink masks, and the SAP to take up the subject to the point of making it a national controversy, even though Italy was still recording tens of thousands of daily covid-19 infections in January 2022. To do so, I will first look at the association of pink with feminine – understood as a social and conceptual category or as an essence – and femininity – a set of external attributes (appearances, behaviours, etc.) culturally associated with the feminine –, which could have led male officers to refuse to wear this protective element, for fear of being perceived as (more) feminine, or even homosexual. As Paoloni assures us that the SAP would have had the same reaction if purple or green masks had been used

(2022c), I will secondly look at the reasons for the refusal of some police officers to wear such colours, by going back to the historical rejection of bright and pastel colours in Europe.

Masculine police/feminine pink: a symbolic incompatibility?

In protesting against the wearing of pink masks by police officers, the SAP was quickly mocked and accused of sexism – particularly on social networks –, associating the rejection of pink with a rejection of feminine and femininity. Indeed, for more than a century, pink has been a symbol of femininity recognised almost everywhere in the world and, by the principle of gender exclusion – *i.e.* what is feminine is not masculine –, any association of pink with masculine or masculinity generates a symbolic incompatibility (Bideaux, 2021, p. 661-665). The pink/masculine incompatibility arises from the discrepancy between what the semioticians of the Group μ have called the degree of perception (observable) and the degree of conception (unobservable) which are superimposed in the reception of an image (1992, p. 256). It is therefore not a matter of the perceived or the conceived, but of the to-and-fro between these two degrees and only the spectator can stabilise the back and forth between the two readings (Fontanille, 1996).

Thus, while for centuries men have worn pink without their masculinity being questioned (Bideaux, 2021, p. 646-649; Steele, 2018, p. 9), the contemporary association of pink with masculinity is not without effect on the perception of masculinity, leading to rejection and violence in some cases. The reason so few men like or wear pink today is that they see pink as having feminising effects that they fear, because to fit the stereotype of hegemonic masculinity – as described by Raewyn Connell, *i.e.* as an archetypal ideal of powerful and dominant masculinity (1995) –, one has to be virile and devoid of any feminine qualities (Sherman, Allen and Sacchi, 2012). This is why, in 2005, the visitors' locker rooms at the Kinnick Stadium were painted pink, and why certain prisons have some of their cells painted pink: to signify respectively to the guest team's players and to the prisoners that they are feminine and therefore weak, in areas (sport, prison) where masculinity is over-valued (Buzuvis, 2007; Bideaux, 2019). There is also a link between pink and male homosexuality, according to the common stereotypical association between femininity, effeminacy and male homosexuality (Éribon, 1999, p. 98; Tamagne, 2002). Therefore, men with feminine features or wearing feminine attributes can also be perceived as homosexuals regardless of their actual sexuality (Fraïssé, 2003) and be victims of homophobia (*e.g.* Harding, 2014; Beresford, 2016). Homophobia then becomes an essential mechanism of gender because it allows the reassertion of heterosexuality by guaranteeing the exercise of masculine power over the feminine, including within the category of “man” (Borillo, 2001, p. 85-92).

Pink then stands at the crossroads between misogyny and homophobia because it is used to insinuate the undesirable trait of femininity (Bartow, 2008, p. 43). The association of pink with femininity and male homosexuality is one of the main reasons why pink is so rare in men's wardrobes: many of them are reluctant to wear it for fear of being perceived as feminine or even homosexual. The refusal to wear these pink masks by male police officers then could be interpreted as a macho reaction to the fear of being perceived as more feminine or homosexual, which would undermine their status of authority and their position of strength. In the SAP newsletter, Paoloni writes that “wearing pink masks could have caused hilarity among the staff on duty”, suggesting the undesirable aspect of this incompatibility between the colour pink and the police function (2022b). Another police union, the Sindacato Italiano Appartenenti Polizia – SIAP, was quick to react to SAP's positions with a press release, denouncing the SAP's “‘machismo’ and medieval nonsense based on chromatic assessments” (Nicolosi, 2022). Still reacting to the SAP statements, the SIAP's Palermo branch added a pink mask to its logo on *Twitter* (**Fig. 1**) and initiated the hashtag *#mascherinerosa* [*#pinkmask*] (2022). This last one was quickly taken up by internet users to spread memes or photomontages on social networks, some considering the refusal to wear the pink masks as a flaw in the masculinity of the police officers (**Fig. 2**), others making a mockery of what

they consider to be a futile concern in times of pandemic (Fig. 3). Some others supported the position of the SAP, creating and disseminating images that are humorous and based on sexist and homophobic rhetoric that negatively associates the wearing of pink with the feminisation of male officers (Fig. 4), or even a homosexualisation of them (Fig. 5; Fig. 6).



From right to left: Fig. 1 - SIAP's logo modified by adding a pink mask (SIAP Palermo, 2022); Fig. 2 - Meme criticising PMA, referring the masculinity of some policemen as "fragile" (FriendZone, 2022); Fig. 3 - Meme parodying PMA based on a Disney movie scene (Luigi, 2022).



From right to left: Fig. 4 - Meme associating PMA with feminisation of policemen (Automatizzato Comunismo Memetico, 2022a); Fig. 5 - Other meme mocking PMA as a feminisation of policemen, also insinuating their homosexualisation by adding a butt plug as police equipment (Automatizzato Comunismo Memetico, 2022b); Fig. 6 - Meme parodying PMA as transvestism and homosexualisation of policemen (JoKakamuKazz, 2022).

Police culture and practices have indeed been constructed since the 18th century in connection with ideologies around masculinity (Barrie and Broomhall, 2012), and even more so in Italy. Indeed, the construction of masculinities in Italy has been highly influenced by Catholicism (Crespi and Ruspini, 2014), fascism (Bellassai, 2005) and Mediterranean traditions of honor and shame (Blok, 1981); they have thus been constructed in strong opposition to femininities, contributing to the maintenance of a macho, misogynistic and homophobic culture (Tager and Good, 2005; Callahan and Loscocco, 2021). However, as Polis Aperta, the LGBT association of the armed forces and police, reminds us, "some police officers are not the police officers, one union is not the unions", and also recalls that, since 1981, women have also had access to the functions of police officers, and that, furthermore, not all police officers are heterosexual, nor are they all cisgender (2022). Thus, to summarise this event in a totalizing male narrative would be to place the plurality of individuals within the police on a few police officers and a single union, as well as to make invisible the actions carried out by certain police officers within this institution in order to deconstruct its macho practices and culture. In addition, it should not be forgotten that hegemonic masculinity, and the patriarchal and heterosexual binary vision of society are not particular to the police, but to society as a whole, as proven by the above-mentioned images posted by internet users. By understanding the rejection of the pink mask by some police officers as a rejection of the feminine and femininity that pink symbolises, we are also validating this association that has been built up over more than a century from prejudices and sexist stereotypes about women and homosexual men.

Police power/colourful frivolity: a second symbolic incompatibility?

Unsurprisingly, the SAP rejected all accusations of machismo, insisting on the need to preserve the sobriety of the police uniform, which should reflect an image of authority and respect (Paoloni, 2022b). The PMA would not be a question of rejecting pink, but rather of bright or pastel colours that do not match the navy blue police uniform. Paoloni – deliberately wearing a pink tie (Fig. 7) – even spoke personally on this subject on the popular television programme *Mattino 5*, assuring that “there is no prejudice against pink”, and that the SAP would also have taken a position against the wearing of red socks (Paoloni, 2022c). Moreover, after the police stations in Messina and Ragusa received other packages of canary yellow masks a few days later, on 19 January, the SAP reacted again, with a second letter to the Prefect of Police, demanding the delivery of masks in appropriate colours (Paoloni, 2022d). Beyond a fashion problem of colour harmony, it is more a question of maintaining the image of an institution: “The fact that the women and men of the police must maintain an important sobriety is also indispensable for the image of authority that they must convey. [...] being checked by staff dressed in a disorderly manner, with crumpled clothes and garish, mismatched colours, hardly inspires confidence” (Paoloni, 2022b). Deputy Minister of Infrastructure Teresa Bellanova nevertheless made a point of countering in a tweet, recalling that “there is nothing unbecoming about wearing a coloured mask. [...] Respect for uniforms does not come from the colours, but from the way the men and women who wear those uniforms act and work” (2022). Internet users in the same vein were also keen to point out on *Twitter* that the alleged “indecenty” of the pink masks was nothing compared to the indecenty of police violence, posting photos of people beaten or even killed by the Italian police (Fig. 8).



Left: Fig. 7 - Paoloni wearing a pink tie, interviewed about PMA (2022); right: Fig. 8 - Meme relativising PMA by denouncing Italian police violence ('O Strunz, 2022).

Such a position stems from a long history of rejection of colour in clothing, and which also lies in the valorisation of the masculine over the feminine. In the 14th century, the Protestant Reformation contributed to the decline of colours, which it considered a symbol of luxury and sin. The reformers particularly disliked red, which they considered an abomination, associated with Papist Rome, “scandalously adorned in red like the great Prostitute of Babylon”, whose commercial excesses they rejected (Pastoureau, 2008, p. 159). Colours then disappeared from the Protestant aesthetic, first in temples and cults, then in painting and in clothing. Throughout Europe, colours that were too conspicuous (red, yellow, pink, purple, etc.) were banned, deemed dishonest, impure or even obscene, in favour of darker colours (black, grey, brown or blue if kept discreet) which were associated with simplicity and severity (Pastoureau, 1992). The chromoclasm of the Reformation popularised black in Europe from the middle of the 14th century, especially in Italy, among the merchant bourgeoisie who were wealthy but had not yet reached the top of the social ladder (Pastoureau, 2008, p. 100).

After a colourful 18th century characterised by rococo painting (Minguet, 1966), dark colours made a comeback in West-European men's fashion around 1760. John Carl Flügel pointed to a male rejection of the flamboyant clothes of the aristocracy, which he called the “great masculine renunciation”: “there occurred one of the most remarkable events in the whole history of dress [...]: men gave up their right to all the brighter, gayer, more elaborate, and more varied forms of ornamentation, leaving these entirely to the use of women, and thereby making their own tailoring the most austere and ascetic of the arts” (1930, p. 110-111). Men therefore abandoned ribbons and other accessories, but they also abandoned bright colours: black, grey and navy blue had become the dominant colours in Europe for men's clothing, leaving bright and pastel shades to women (Steele, 2018, p. 25-26). During the 19th and subsequent 20th centuries, dark colours – and black in particular – continued to be associated with masculinity, becoming the dominant colours of bourgeois men's clothing, referring authority, elegance, and modernity (Paty, 2021). These same colours are nowadays still associated with seriousness, success and power: they are the colours of the suits of bankers, politicians and, what is particularly interesting here, of police.

Dark colours have thus been opposed to bright colours for about eight centuries, and one can guess that behind the “moral” classification of colours there was already the bicategorisation of gender, since the characteristics associated with each are those associated respectively, and in a hierarchical manner, with men and women. On the one hand, we have virtuous, modest, sober, practical, serious colours, associated with the masculine; on the other, we have debauched, sumptuous, flamboyant, superficial, frivolous colours, associated with the feminine. We can still see that dark colours today share the same status of universal referent with the masculine: indeed, it is enough to look at people passing by in the street, travelers on public transport or any person in supermarkets to realise that black, blue, grey and brown make up the majority of the contemporary clothing palette, for both men and women. Wearing pink, red, yellow or green is always a noticeable deviation, especially when it is a man wearing these colours – except for certain men belonging to the social, cultural and/or intellectual elites for whom wearing these colours will be a way of showing that they are able to distance themselves from social conventions (Bideaux, 2021, p. 693-696)

By calling for the replacement of pink (or yellow) masks, stating that “being inspected by staff dressed [...] in garish and mismatched colours would hardly inspire confidence in anyone” (Paolioni, 2022b), the SAP thus validate – even unintentionally – this gender-related moral order, constituted around the bicategorisation of colours according to their hue. They also place the police as an institution superior to others, since by suggesting a mistake in the distribution of packages, they implicitly mean that only the police should not wear brightly coloured masks, unlike the teaching or medical professions for example. Once again, we must maybe look to men and hegemonic masculinity for a response to this overreaction on the part of a police union that is not found in other professions. As a profession in which they hold power – over women *and* over other men – policemen are more likely than other men to fear losing the power that defines their manhood (Kimmel, 2012). More than other men, they are therefore compelled to ensure that they prove their masculinity, and are thus more likely to refuse to wear a pink accessory that might interfere with the perception of their manliness or heterosexuality (*ibidem*), even if this accessory guarantees them health protection.

Conclusions: Masculinity beyond fashion and good taste

This detailed analysis of the PMA has led us to identify correlations between colours and gender categorisations (pink as a symbol of femininity, the opposition between bright and dark colours). This may partly explain the reasons that led the SAP to take an official stance against the a priori involuntary receipt of pink masks packages in several police stations, assuming that the refusal of some (male) police officers manifests a fear of loss of masculinity, heterosexuality and power. However, this also assumes that one adheres to and therefore validates both gender hierarchies and categories, but also the symbolic system that associates pink with feminine and femininity, or more generally that associates bright and pastel colours also with feminine and femininity. The problem is therefore twofold: on the one hand, the masculine hegemony is supported by considering it different from and superior to the feminine, and on the

other hand, a self-fulfilling prophecy is created which leads to the association of pink or bright and pastel colours with the masculine being considered incompatible. A paradox that Teresa de Lauretis also raises when she writes that “paradoxically, the construction of gender is also affected by its deconstruction” (2007, p. 43).

This futile controversy also shows us the ability of pink to capture attention in the media, especially when it comes to a possible incompatibility with masculine and masculinity, whether it is about fashion, smartphones or the outfit of sportsmen or pop stars (e.g. Ovenden, 2017; see also Bideaux, 2021, p. 697-699). In addition, pink attracts more attention than other colours (Lindsey, *et al.*, 2010), and a study found that pink is one of the colours – alongside red and violet – with the best impact on the diffusion of an image on *Pinterest* (Bakhshi and Gilbert, 2015), and presumably the same applies to *Twitter*, *Facebook* or *Instagram*. This could explain the quick coverage of this event in the national and international press, and even more so on social networks. It can be further speculated that the SAP sought to draw attention to itself with the PMA, and to enhance the image of the police in media, by reaffirming the values of sobriety, respect and neutrality.

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