



UNIVERSITY OF GOTHENBURG

Mythomachines

Suspended, Fallen and Jumping Cyborgs

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In this text I am presenting the installation and performance project called ‘Automatic bai Chans’ I developed since the spring 2008 mainly in collaboration with Juan Hernández, student of the C: Art: Media Master’s program. We collaborated also with Anna-Sara Åberg from the School of Music and Drama, who brought a valuable input to the project as well. Our initial motivation for the project came from our interest in the jumping rope game. Formally, we became attracted by the connection between the circular movement of the rope while swinging, the sound of the mass of air displaced, and the contrast between the vertical axis of the person jumping and the horizontal axis around which the rope revolves. While reading on the origins of the game we found out about an Easter tradition in the Sussex region, in England, in which people gather to skip the rope as a reminder of the rope Judas used to hang himself after betraying Jesus. We did an automated installation with a suspended figure jumping, and a rope swinging with an envelope and a blank letter attached. We approached the installation elements through physical improvisation leading to the performance work presented. The thesis’ text describes the different projects developed during the master program, referring to analogies as key elements of our creative process. It discusses also the dualism of good and evil in several interpretations of Christianity and the critics addressed to this dualism in *The Cyborg Manifesto*(1985). I refer to Malinche’s story as inspiring for the mythic cyborg.

Key words: Media Art, Installation Art, Performance Art, Kinetics, Poetry, Comparative Religion, Theatre Arts, Latin American Literature, Intellectual Freedom

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Prologue



Figure 1. *Performance kväll* (2008).

The story to be presented below is based on a short novel by contemporary Argentinean writer César Aira, called *The Magician*¹. We drew some inspiration from Aira's novel for a performance project we presented in the Fall 2008 (image above), which was part of the larger process of the master's project presented in this text. With the following story, I would like to give an insight on some of the impressions and troubles I had when confronted to start writing an academic text related to the creative process I was engaged with.

"And NOW comes an act of Enormous Enormance! No former performer's performed this performance!"² the anchorperson announced. To the left two people holding a rope by its ends swing it in a circle. The voice continued: "Hans Chans"³ act!"

Hans Chans was a magician like no other: while his colleagues needed to build complex machines to perform their tricks, Hans did *really* had powers to make things appear or disappear, levitate, fly, and challenge in a broad-spectrum the physical world as it was perceived commonly by the audience. But this man always lived very afraid of being considered a freak by his peers because of these powers, and felt no talented at all to stage catchy glamorous scenes as they did. What kind of traditions to rely on to create new startling works? Did Hans need an assistant? Why was it worth to go on with these ideas, anyway?

¹ Aira 2002. "El Mago". Mondadori.

² Geissel 1965. "If I ran the Circus". Random House.

³ Hans Chans is a fictional character

During the flight from Buenos Aires to Panamá City, where the 23th Congress of Latin-American Magicians was to be held, Mr. Chans could not sleep very well. He read several times the abstracts of the conferences to be presented on the congress. All magicians who were going to hold a lecture related their practice to another discipline they were attracted to. Some of the names and themes on the program were familiar to Hans. The following presentations were underlined with his fluorescent orange marker: *Distant interaction of correlated particles: quantum physics applications on magicians machinery*, by dr. Lucía Ulf; *It's so easy to fool people nowadays*, by sociologist Ay Plick; *Reaction to instant reproducibility in the media and the return of aura and uniqueness in the spectacle and the galleries*, by Celia and Nilla Woops; and finally professor Berta Mez with *Mimicry and the Legendary Psychastenia: conjuring Roger Caillois 1935's essay*, which was such a rare and unexpected pearl to Hans Chans in this event...

He felt tired and anxious at the same time. Perhaps starting to write down his own thoughts about this new chapter in his life could help him to gain some confidence. He remembered one of his favorite novelists used to write on airplanes. But instead of writing, after hesitating for a while in front of the blank page of his notebook, he started to draw a doll of himself with a balloon on top of the neck: no head, but a balloon. He then sketched a couple of versions of a mechanism able to convert circular to linear movement, meant to animate this puppet. What story to tell with this faceless character? Why did he appear while manipulating his body to draw him?

Hans drank some water. He shut his eyes, and imagined the doll dancing in the silence left by a tune which passed by, like a small cargo train.

Non-verbal communication has been an important element of the collaborative process to be presented, involving the use of sound, music, and kinetics in performance and installation works. On one hand, having worked with the non-verbal in this process, I agree with several of the critiques presented by Marshall McLuhan in *The Gutenberg Galaxy: the making of typographic man*⁴ towards the dominant influence on Western culture of the printing press. On the other hand, while writing the following text, in parallel to the development of the practical part of the project and after finishing it, new connections that fed in a rich way the non-verbal process arose. I use alternately “we” in the text to present points of view shared with my collaborators and “I” for more personal ones.

⁴ McLuhan 1962. "The Gutenberg Galaxy: the making of typographic man". University of Toronto Press.

Introduction

Breathing a different kind of air in the city was perhaps one of the most striking impressions when arriving from Bogotá to Göteborg two years ago. Each breath felt like swallowing fresh water. There was also a salty smell in the air making me imagine the unseen sea, close by. When thinking now of the projects done at school over the past two years dealing with spoken voices, the Milky Way, a story-telling around a windmill, a swinging rope, and a figure suspended from the ceiling, I see all of them connected to what the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard called aerial imagination⁵. In his studies of imagination, Bachelard notices that while open and elusive, imagination as a human faculty presents regularities. To him, these regularities constitute different kinds of psychic realities: imaginaries air, water, fire and earth⁶. I would like to comment on the projects mentioned above, considering the initial motivations and chains of associations around their realization, with the author's ideas on aerial imagination and its relation to the other kinds of imagination he studied.

I worked in the thesis project in collaboration with Juan Hernández, also student of the C:Art:Media master's program. We worked in an automated installation presenting a figure suspended from the ceiling, and a rope swinging with a sheet of paper and an envelope attached. Since we were interested in exploring the performativity of these elements, we used several strategies to approach them including the automation of the movements of these objects driven by dc-motors, and our own physical interaction with them. We presented for the degree show an automated installation and did two times a live music performance inside the installation. Anna-Sara Åberg, student at Artisten, the School of Music and Drama of Göteborg's University joined Juan and me in the performance work. Her role in this performance work was both an interesting complement and a contrast in relation to the flow of work established by my partner and me in these two years. The thesis text is divided in three parts. In the first part, I describe the different projects I have been working with in the past two years, relating them to Bachelard's concept of aerial imagination presented above. In the third part, I attempt to establish a discussion around The Cyborg Manifesto by Donna Haraway⁷, taking in account her call for blasphemy and how it is related to the story of Malinche, presented in her text as inspiring for the 'mythic cyborg'. Exploring Malinche's identity was a key element of my own performance work. The second part is a bridge between the first and the third, where I relate Bachelard's concept of *sexualized fire* to Haraway's concept of the coupling between organisms and machines.

⁵ Bachelard 1988. "Air and Dreams: an essay on the imagination of movement". Dallas Institute.

⁶ Ibid.p. 7

⁷ Haraway 1991. "'A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century" in Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature". Routledge.

*Sombrero al Aire*⁸: Project Descriptions

Quelgualó (2007)



Figure 2. *Quelgualó* (2007), performance. Photos by Tomoyuki Yago and Roman Kirschner.

In the fall 2008, for our first project called *Quelgualó*, we recorded spoken voices in different languages from a group of students at school. We asked them to think of verbal expressions they thought were very particular of their language, and difficult to translate. We wanted to explore what happened when the recorded voice, either verbal expression, ambient, warning or other is put out of context. Although the actual meaning was missing, other virtual (possible) meanings arose, even the sensation that it could be a sound produced by a different kind of living being. We worked with a washing glove as a physical interface, to trigger and process the sound objects mentioned above. An object made for cleaning purposes, was instead used for body training, fighting or even hunting, or, again, as some kind of prosthetics of a different living being, depending on what the different spoken voices suggested us.

The sound poetry experiments of the Futurists and Dadaists vanguards from the beginning of the 20th century can be seen as related to this exploration. In sound poetry works such as “Zang Tumb Tumb” by Filippo Marinetti, “Gadji beri bimba” by Hugo Ball, or “Altazor” by Vicente Huidobro the focus is first put on phonetic aspects of the human speech rather than on the semantic and syntactic ones⁹. Tristan Tzara was particularly interested in spoken voices coming from different languages in his ‘simultaneous poems’. From the several variables which might be identified in the phonetics of the human speech, when reading Bachelard’s chapter in *Air and dreams*¹⁰ called *The silent speech*, I got interested in what he calls the ‘poetic breath’:

⁸ It can be translated from Spanish to “Hat on the Air”. Inside ‘Sombrero’ one might find ‘Sombre hero’ or ‘Somber hero’.

⁹ Wikipedia "Sound Poetry".

¹⁰ Bachelard 1988. "Air and Dreams: an essay on the imagination of movement". Dallas Institute.

“Before it is ever expressed metaphorically, *poetic breath* is a reality that can be found in the life of a poem if we are willing to follow the lessons of the *aerial material imagination*. And if we are to pay more attention to *poetic exuberance* and to all the forms that the joy of speaking takes – speaking quietly, rapidly, shouting, whispering, intoning – we would discover an incredible multiplicity of poetic breathing”¹¹.

When reading this excerpt, the porosity of the materials the washing glove we used as interface to process the voices is made of, makes me think of “breathing” as a material aspect we can focus on in further developments of this project.

Cows and Clouds (2008)



Figure 3. *Cows and Clouds* (2008), 3D animation.

Based on scientific observations of the Milky Way’s structure, we worked on a 3D animation of the galaxy presenting a contrast between the center of the galaxy where a massive black hole is supposed to be and where stars travel in strange patterns, and the outer structure of the spiral arms. In a chapter of *Air and Dreams* called *Nebula* dedicated to the Milky Way, Bachelard writes:

“Whereas the stars, so often compared to golden spikes are symbols of fixity, the nebula, on the other hand, the Milky Way - to which a thoughtful view should attribute the very same fixity as it does to the stars- is, during an evening’s contemplation, the theme of constant changes. Its image is contaminated both by cloud and milk”¹².

Earlier in the book, Bachelard comments on the reverie of clouds which he associates to the galaxy as seen from the Earth:

¹¹ Ibid.p. 239

¹² Ibid. p. 197

“In short, the reverie of clouds has a particular psychological characteristic: it is *a reverie without responsibility*. The first thing we notice about this reverie is that it is, as so often has been said, an easy play of form. Clouds provide imaginary matter for a lazy modeler.”¹³

Within this reverie of clouds, often for kids, as the author notices, animals appear, merge into each other, and disappear. A person who saw our first version of the animation happened to see a cow in a ball modeled with check board textures we used to represent the stars in the “strange” center of the galaxy. Visual analogies playing an important role on our creative process, we modeled a cow for a second version of the animation, and worked on its movement in contrast with the one of the light and cloudy Nebula. At the end of his chapter on clouds in his book, Bachelard recalls the etymology of clouds as presented by French philologist Michel Bréal where a similar analogy appears:

“In Sanskrit, the verb root that formed the noun *go* [cattle] comes from a root that means *to go, to walk*. The clouds run through the sky. Therefore there was really no metaphor involved in calling the clouds *gavas, those that walk*. Language which was still in a state of flux and unable to be certain with regard to word choice, named different objects for a common attribute: it created two homonyms. Let us note, however, that this same attribute is purely and simply a *movement*. It is *dynamic imagination* that is at work here. I therefore feel justified in speaking of a *homonymous dynamic*.”¹⁴

In her book *Visual analogies: Consciousness as the Art of Connecting*¹⁵, professor Barbara Maria Stafford considers the role of the nonformalizable “mobility and cross-prompting of human thought”¹⁶ that might be at play in visual analogies in relation to the algorithmic processes of virtual devices. She compares the analogical combinatorics of the “Old Mind” to the computational “New Mind”. As Bachelard, she is interested in exploring points of articulation between scientific and artistic ways of thinking. While Bachelard’s studies of imagination were inspired mainly by literature and language, Stafford analyzes are focused on visual arts. A further development of the *Cows and Clouds* project might involve a deeper experimentation on some of the questions raised by Stafford’s work.

¹³ Ibid. p. 185

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 196

¹⁵ Stafford 1999. "Visual Analogy: Consciousness as the Art of Connecting". MIT Press.

¹⁶ Ibid. p. 138

Orejiamarillo al Sol (2008)



Figure 4. *Orejiamarillo al Sol (2008)*, performance. Photos by Juan Hernández and Ángela Hoyos.

In the summer 2008, we had the opportunity to visit the city of Härnösand. We worked there on a performance project based on speculations of the side effects of the low frequency noise produced by the windmill¹⁷ located on top of a hill visible from the center of the city. Low frequency noise is easily propagated on the ground. To establish a connection between the windmill and life on the ground, we thought of a series of static images depicting objects and human presences in this particular landscape. The chosen objects were solar cell lamps for the garden we found in the supermarket. Their shape and color simulate rocks. Beside the awkward aspects we wanted to highlight on the way humans copy and use nature within the sustainable development model¹⁸, the images we took outdoors in summer time led us to visually connect air to the other natural elements Bachelard refers to in his study of imagination. At several points of his book, Bachelard relates what he calls imaginaries air, water, fire and earth to each other. There is an excerpt which I particularly relate to the images we took, at the end of the chapter *The imaginary Fall of Air and Dreams*:

¹⁷ The British Wind Energy Association 2005. "Low Frequency Noise and Wind Turbines".

¹⁸ Ausubel 2007. "Renewable and nuclear heresies".



“You can dream aurally of the blue of the sapphire as if the stone were a concentrate of the sky’s azure; you can dream aurally of the topaz’s fire as though it were in sympathy with the setting sun. You can also dream “terrestrially” the sky’s blue by imagining that you are condensing it in the hollow of your hand – in its solidified form of sapphire. Terrestrial and aerial imagination come together in minerals and precious stones.”¹⁹

Jumping Rope (2008-2009)

“Thus we will study the imagination of the fall as a kind of sickness of the imagination of rising, as an *inexpiable nostalgia* for heights.”²⁰



Figure 5. *See me! Crank me! Elevate me!* (2008), detail of the installation. Photo by Barrie James Sutcliffe.

Since the autumn 2008, we’ve been developing for our master thesis an installation and performance project whose initial motivation came from our interest in the jumping rope game. Formally, we became attracted by the connection between the circular movement of the rope while swinging, the sound of the mass of air displaced, and the contrast between the vertical axis of the person jumping and the horizontal axis around which the rope revolves. We did some research on the origins of the game and read about an Easter tradition²¹ in the Sussex region, in England, in which people gather to skip the rope as a reminder of the rope Judas used to hang himself after betraying Jesus²². During the Holy Week where we were born, many movies about the life of Jesus are broadcasted on television, usually depicting a similar point of view of the story. We staged for the school’s spring exhibition 2008 a mechanical version of the skipping rope play inside an old TV box, relating it to the Sussex tradition.

¹⁹ Bachelard 1988. "Air and Dreams: an essay on the imagination of movement". Dallas Institute. p. 109

²⁰ Ibid. p. 94

²¹ Stanley 1956. "Good Friday Skipping".

²² Compendium 2007. "Cuckfield Compendium: Folklore, Traditions and Customs".



Figure 6. *See me! Crank me! Elevate me!* (2008), detail of the installation. Photos by Juan Hernández.

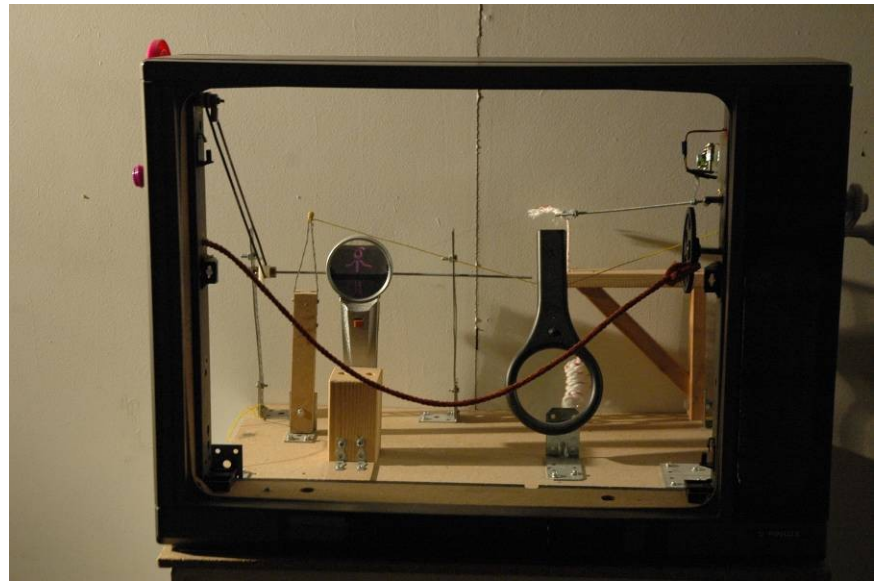


Figure 7. *See me! Crank me! Elevate me!* (2009), detail of the installation for the degree show. Photo by Juan Hernández.

This installation inside the television box was built with mechanisms which allow the visitors, using cranks, to move up and down the hangman's rope in the back while swinging the rope in the front, and turn around an animation inside a flip clock of a figure jumping the rope. Since we started to build this installation we thought of it as a maquette of a larger scale installation. We realized during the process that we didn't want to reproduce accurately the model above, but take some characteristics of it and find the appropriate materials for a new version.

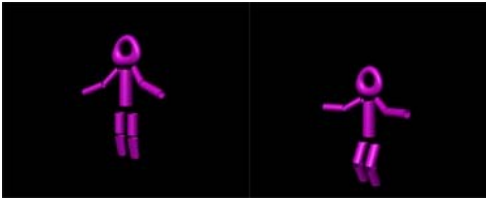


Figure 8. Frames of the 3D animation of the figure jumping. (2008).

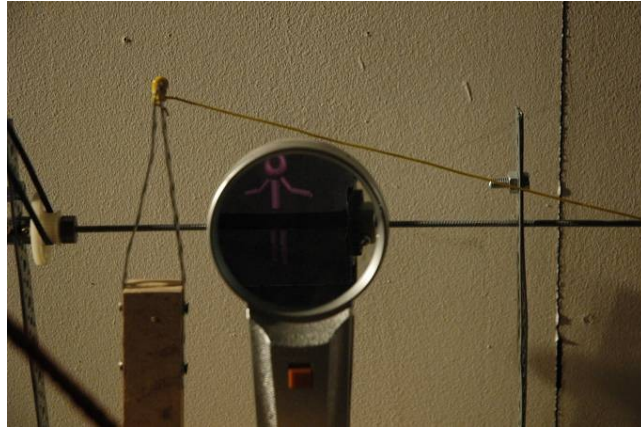


Figure 9. Frames mounted on the slides of a flip clock installed inside the television box (2008). Photo by Juan Hernández.

I did several sketches of the figure jumping. I thought it could be interesting to do a 3D animation of the figure to emphasize the tension between the tridimensional objects we were using in our installation inside the television box, and the bidimensionality of television as a screen based medium. The choice of the empty pipes to model the figure is to me in resonance with the mechanisms we used to animate the jumping scene inside the box.



Figure 10. Larger scale version of the figure and the rope in the black box studio (2009). Photos by Juan Hernández.

For the larger scale version, Juan had the idea of using discarded clothes to do the figure. We didn't fill the space inside the clothes with any additional material, we just sued them. We used a balloon we found on the beach in the summer for the head. It can be seen in the images above that this first

materialization of a human scale version of the figure shares with the previous 3D model this special element I have been writing about in this first part of the text: air. We connected through a segment of a rope the upper part of the balloon to a dc motor. When testing it, the movement of the figure waving in the air appeared to be so interesting for us that we kept working with this version of the figure for the rest of the project. Several parts of the figure's body, the shoulders, the arms, the hips, and the legs moved slightly, and the whole figure could turn around the segment of the rope's axis more or less freely depending on the thickness of the rope used.

I am now presenting images from our installation and performance project around this figure and the swinging rope, which I associated later on to different excerpts from Bachelard's chapter *The Imaginary Fall*, in *Air and Dreams*, and let the reader discover more on our experience with this environment.



Figure 11. *Automatic bai Chans* (2009). Figure, rope and motors. Degree Show. Photo by Juan Hernández.

“Need I stress the fact that, for some imaginations, a tapered flame is one that is pulled at each end by the earth and by the air? It is lengthened dynamically. The imagination perceives it as actively elongated. It is, then, a complex image of takeoff and uprooting. We can get some idea of this dynamic image from a passage by Cyrano: “thus as soon as a plant, animal or man dies, their souls rise up, without dimming (to become part of the body of lights), just as when you see the flame of a candle leap upward, despite the soot that clings to its feet.”²³

²³ Bachelard 1988. "Air and Dreams: an essay on the imagination of movement". Dallas Institute. p. 105



To become light or to become heavy – within this dilemma, some imaginations can epitomize all the dramas of human destiny. The simplest, poorest images – from the moment that they are aligned on the vertical axis participate both in the air and the earth.”²⁴



Figure 12. *Automatic bai Chans* (2009), performance inside the automated installation. Photos by Steven Ladouceur.

“Some people, in their imaginary life, lift with a great deal of difficulty – they are the terrestrials. Others lift effortlessly – they are the aerials.”²⁵ “A living fall is one whose cause and responsibility we carry within us, in the complex psychology of the fallen creature. (...) Every contemplative person always trembles a little when she reflects on her elemental powers.”²⁶

²⁴ Ibid. p.105

²⁵ Ibid. p. 94

²⁶ Ibid. p. 93

Three of the four elements considered by Bachelard in his studies of imagination were mentioned in the excerpts presented above: fire, earth and air. Fire appears in the first excerpt, in the image of the flame pulled at each end by the earth and the air. On one hand, compared with the flame, the author mentions the rising soul. On the other hand, in the space between the air and the earth, he refers to the fallen creature. Although Bachelard doesn't mention it, it can be argued that both the rising soul and the fallen creature belong to the Christianity's imaginary. It might be possible to imagine then the jumping-the-rope creature as a counterpart of these dual and almost exclusive alternatives. I am drawing inspiration for this from American professor Donna Haraway's cyborg creature. In the following part of the text, I will present images from our performance related to this connection I am establishing with the cyborg, moving from air to fire as a key element in this association.

Sexualized Fire and the Coupling between Organisms and Machines

There are several hypotheses on how humans got to produce fire. For Bachelard it is likely that the rubbing of pieces of wood of a different kind was for the prehistoric people analogous to the sexual experience. Referring to scientific accounts from the 18th century on friction and the production of electricity, the author considers electricity also as a kind of sexualized fire. Friction and rubbing are analogous phenomena for him, attached to intimate experiences in the human mind:

“the objective attempt to produce fire by rubbing is suggested by intimate experiences(...) It is in this direction that the circuit between the phenomenon of fire and its reproduction is the shortest. The love act is the first scientific hypothesis about the objective reproduction of fire. Prometheus is a vigorous lover rather than an intelligent philosopher, and the vengeance of the gods is the vengeance of the jealous husband”²⁷



Figure 13. *Automatic bai Chans* (2009), beginning sequence of the performance. Photos by Steven Ladouceur.



Figure 14. *All is Full of Love* (1999). Images from Chris Cunningham²⁸'s video. Björk²⁹'s face in both robots.

²⁷ Bachelard (1987). “The Psychoanalysis of Fire”. Beacon Press. p. 23

²⁸ Chris Cunningham is a film director born in England

²⁹ Björk Guðmundsdóttir is a [singer](#) and [composer](#) born in Iceland.

I associate one of the sequences of music and movement of our performance to Chris Cunningham's video for Björk's song "All is Full of Love" (images above). We are approaching by different means and points of view a common theme introduced in this section of the text. References to the coupling between organisms and machines and the androgynous creature are made in Chris Cunningham's video, using Björk's face for both the female and the male robots. Electricity, as a *sexualized fire*, seems to play an important role in the scenes presented. The androgynous creature is mentioned in the Symposium, a dialogue whose main theme is love, written by Greek philosopher and dramatist Plato. The character who mentions the androgynous creature in the dialogue is Greek comic poet Aristophanes. Before his intervention, Eryximachus, one of the new professional doctors of the end of the fifth century B.C in Greece, makes a speech referring to love in terms which might resonate with Björk's lyrics in the song "All is Full of Love":

"The body of every creature on earth is pervaded by Love, as every plant is too; it's hardly going too far to say that love is present in everything that exists. You could say that one of the things I've noticed as a result of practicing medicine professionally is that Love is a great and awesome god who pervades *every* aspect of the lives of men and gods."³⁰

Referring to a universalizing vision of love is a common aspect of both Björk's lyrics and Eryximachus text. It is also possible to see a modern resonance of the medical side of Eryximachus' words in Cunningham's video aesthetics, through the whiteness and the cleanness of the different operations fulfilled by the robots with Björk's face. The medical and the sexualized coupling relating different kinds of beings such as organisms and machines are considered by Haraway in the Cyborg Manifesto in the following terms:

"Modern medicine is also full of cyborgs, of couplings between organism and machine, each conceived as coded devices, in an intimacy and with a power that was not generated in the history of sexuality."³¹

Although in our performance work we are addressing the coupling between organisms and machines being driven by electricity – we are not approaching the coupling through the medical angle mentioned. I consider interventions in the body with critical references to the question of the medical cyborg reached a certain dead end with expensive performance projects made by artists like Stelarc and Orlan³²

³⁰ Plato 1994. "The Symposium". Oxford University Press. p.100

³¹ Haraway 1991. "'A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century'" in Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature". Routledge. p. 150

³² Angerer 2003. "The Making of...Desire, Digital".

in the 90s. Regarding sophisticated interfaces to have on-line cybersex as developed by media artists Stahl Stenslie and Kirk Woolford, I find more interesting and amusing parodies made to them by artists such as the Russian Alexei Shulgin, using cheaper means. In our work, we are exploring questions around the coupling of organisms and machines in daily life focused on our interest for mechanics and bricolage of recycled parts of objects and machines from our close environment. Our performance work borrows elements from 20th century mimicry, experimental theatre and Dadaists live works. Below and “idyllic” image of a coupling we might refer to in our work:



“Modern production seems like a dream of cyborg colonization work, a dream that makes the nightmare of Taylorism seem idyllic.”³³

The “idyllic” coupling: Charlie Chaplin’s scene in *Modern Times*³⁴.



Figure 15. *Automatic bai Chans* (2009), the coupling between organisms and machines. Photos by Aoife Giles (left) and Steven Ladouceur. (right)

³³ Haraway 1991. "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century" in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. Routledge.

³⁴ Chaplin 1936. "Modern Times".

Androgynes were cut in halves by Zeus, seemingly uncomfortable with these highly ambitious lovers³⁵. Expressing it in Bachelard's words when describing the punishment of Prometheus for stealing the fire: "(...) the vengeance of the gods is the vengeance of the jealous husband". In the next section, I would like to refer once more to Haraway's cyborg, developing on the conflictive power relationships just mentioned.

³⁵ Plato 1994. "The Symposium". Oxford University Press. p. 26

The Trickster, the Cult Hero and the Mythic Cyborg

“The cyborg is resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity. It is oppositional, utopian, and completely without innocence.”³⁶

“The main trouble with cyborgs, of course, is that they are the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism, not to mention state socialism. But illegitimate offspring are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins. Their fathers, after all, are inessential.”³⁷

Diversity of Sources in Western Myths

Both Christianity and Greek myths are mentioned in the Cyborg Manifesto by Donna Haraway as essential components of Western culture. Both patriarchal dominance and what she calls phallic motherhood³⁸ are central concepts within the notion of Western culture she aims to undermine in her text. Haraway refers in the manifesto to the work of women of color in the US who retell origin stories from the colonized communities they come from as having a potential of dissolving this notion of West. Specially, when

“one never possessed the original language, (...) never resided in the harmony of legitimate heterosexuality in the garden of culture, and so cannot base identity on a myth or a fall from innocence and right to natural names, mother's or father's.”

By throwing light upon the story of Malinche, the indigenous mistress of the Spanish conqueror Hernán Cortés who managed to master the conqueror's language, Haraway points out

“the power to survive, not on the basis of original innocence, but on the basis of seizing the tools to mark the world that marked (her) as other.”

Malinche played a key role in the Conquest of Mexico serving as interpreter for Cortés. According to the chronicles of the Spanish conquistador Bernal Díaz del Castillo³⁹, she revealed him plans of the natives against the Spanish army and led the natives to traps. Judgments upon Malinche's story range from considering her a traitor to the indigenous population to regarding her role as catalytic in an inevitable process that would have been much more violent without her intervention. Malinche had a

³⁶ Haraway 1991. "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century" in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. Routledge. p. 151

³⁷ *Ibid.* p151.

³⁸ As a reference to psychoanalytical interpretations of Oedipus' myth

³⁹ Castillo 1973. "The Conquest of the New Spain". Penguin Classics.

son with Cortés. She is therefore identified with the start of *Mestizaje*⁴⁰. This start, Malinche being Cortés' mistress, is linked to the notion of the 'bastard'. This notion interests Donna Haraway in her construct of the cyborg, a hybrid of machine and organism, as she claims it to be an "illegitimate offspring" in the Western techno-scientific world. To the author, "illegitimate offspring are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins." I can recall the awkward effect I experienced when learning in high school about Lenz law of magnetism:

"The Lenz's law in electromagnetism states that an induced electric current flows in a direction such that the current opposes the change that induced it."⁴¹

I imagine now this formulation suiting very well to the bastard cyborg.

Love as a Commandment?

Malinche might have been doubtful about the fourth commandment of the religion brought by her lover's conquest:

"Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you."⁴²

In her youth, after her father died, her mother remarried and had another child. Malinche became probably then an inconvenient stepchild: her family faked her dead and sold her to Maya slave-traders⁴³. It is written in the Gospels⁴⁴ that Jesus summed up the Mosaic commandments to one demanding to love one's neighbor as one's self. Therefore, he preached also the love of the enemy⁴⁵. It could be interpreted from several parables that this love should be given to anyone regardless gender⁴⁶, social class, origin or beliefs⁴⁷. Nevertheless, processes of Christianization such as the one mentioned above started by the Conquistadors, involved different strategies, often psychologically and physically violent. Did different interpretations of what is to be understood by love in the Gospels mislead some fellows during Christianization? Debates on the subject are countless.

On the short tale *Three versions of Judas*⁴⁸ by Argentinean writer Jorge Luis Borges, ambiguities on the Gospels interpretations are presented through the thesis of Nils Runeberg, a fictional character living in the city of Lund, at the beginning of the 20th century. Nils Runeberg published two books, *Judas och*

⁴⁰ Term used to refer to the process of mixing between Amerindian and European populations. Wikipedia "Mestizo".

⁴¹ Jerusalem 2005. "Heinrich Lenz".

⁴² Exodus 20:2-17

⁴³ Wikipedia "Malinche".

⁴⁴ Luke 10:27, Mark 12:31

⁴⁵ Matthew 5:43-48, Luke 6:27-28,6:32-33,6:36

⁴⁶ Matthew 5:27-30, Mark 9:43-47

⁴⁷ Parable of The Good Samaritan

⁴⁸ Borges 1944. "Ficciones". Sur Cop.

Kristus and *Den hemlige Frälsaren*⁴⁹ in which he exposed three alternate portraits of Judas and Jesus. It is told in the Gospels⁵⁰ that Judas Iscariot, disciple of Jesus, delivered his master to the soldiers who had the mission to arrest him. Jesus was subsequently crucified. Following the tradition of the deadly sins, it's possible to imagine that Judas was condemned to eternal damnation. Startlingly, Nils Runeberg presents Judas in one of his alternate portraits as the true savior of humanity:

"The ascetic, for the greater glory of God, degrades and mortifies the flesh; Judas did the same with the spirit. He renounced honor, good, peace, the Kingdom of Heaven, as others, less heroically, renounced pleasure."⁵¹

From this point of view Judas Iscariot, as Malinche, could reach a heroic status for the same acts and for the same community for which he could be judged as a traitor. It might be argued that Donna Haraway's myth of the "oppositional, utopian, and completely without innocence" cyborg is built upon a similar thinking. How unfaithful to its Christian origins might the cyborg remain without falling into identification to its Heavenly utopian views, as Judas in Borges's story, might be a slippery question to address.

Heretic Communities

As a way to approach contemporary resonances of the above inquiries, we opened a 'Celebrity Page' on the social networking website Facebook⁵² with the name of Judas Iscariot, the 2nd of April 2008. We labeled him as 'Critic'. For us, his role could appear as critic towards Jesus' project. We put on the page a photo of our first installation related to the story of Judas we thought could be identifiable with the character: a tiny hanging rope seen through a magnifying glass representing the one Judas presumably used to hang himself after he delivered Jesus to the soldiers⁵³. We didn't add any other descriptive content to the page. We decided not to promote it among people we knew. To the date, 9th of Mars 2009, 251 users of the network added the page to their profile, becoming its 'fans'.

⁴⁹ *The secret Saviour*

⁵⁰ Matthew 26-14

⁵¹ Excerpt's translation from Wikipedia "Three Versions of Judas".

⁵² Zuckerberg 2009. "Facebook".

⁵³ Gospel of Matthew

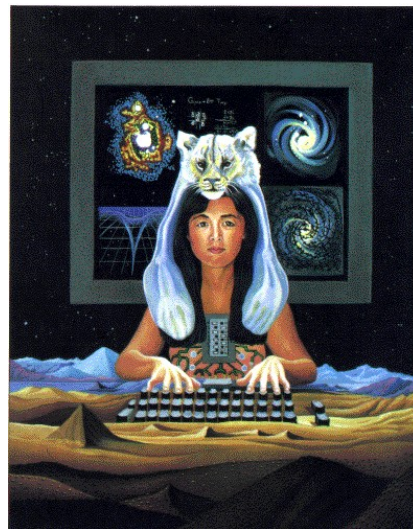


Figure 16. Left: *Judas' Celebrity Page* (2008-2009), webpage. Right: *Cyborg* (1989), oil on canvas by Lynn Randolph. Photo by D. Caras

The images of a cat and several women in the above screen capture remind me of the image used for the *Cyborg Manifesto*. The icon with the drawing of the muscled guitar player makes me think of the considerable amount of fans of this page who seem to love metal music. There is actually an American metal band with the name we put to this page, Judas Iscariot, who opened also a *Celebrity Page* on this network. Theirs is easily recognizable as a page presenting a musical project, with the names of the members and information on the discography. They have currently 173 fans. We only recognized five people being fans of both pages. To the date, 9 posts appear on our Judas page. “What is this site for?” asks one person. Some posts include lyric lines like “Heaven in flames from the ashes of extermination to the ruins of a fallen kingdom”, “Eternal Bliss...Eternal Death”. There’s even a calligram with the number 666. Despite the very limited content we put on the page, does it carry a voice of blasphemy 251 fans relate to? What would this voice stand for?

I find the concept of fashion closely related to the way social processes are engaged in the Facebook network. I think it can help to understand how, for instance, we got to have 251 ‘fans’ in the page mentioned before. The concept of fashion has been studied by several Western philosophers. In his book *The Rise of Fashion*⁵⁴, professor Daniel Leonhard Purdy brings together different texts from the twentieth century to the Enlightenment in which he reads different explorations of fashion as a defining concept of modernity. Going back to the parallel I started to establish between the screen capture of the Facebook page and the Cyborg’s Manifesto illustration by Lynn Randolph, one of these essays particularly caught my attention: *The dialogue between Fashion and Death*⁵⁵, written by the Italian philosopher Giacomo Leopardi in 1824. While Haraway seems to see in the cyborg’s myth a possibility of survival within a Western society focused on war and dominance⁵⁶, I could have the impression that a depiction of death (the hanging rope) and not of life, or of a living creature, is what brought together, faithfully perhaps, this group of people on the Judas’ page. The following words from Leopardi’s dialogue might shed some light upon these inquiries:

“FASHION: Madame Death, Madame Death!

DEATH: Wait till the time is ripe, and I’ll come without you’re calling.

FASHION: Madame Death!

DEATH: Go to the devil. I’ll come when you don’t want me.

FASHION: I am Fashion, your sister.

DEATH: My sister?

FASHION: Yes: don’t you remember that both of us are daughters of Decay? (...) I was saying that our common nature and custom is continually to change the world, though you from the very start went for people and blood, while I content for the most part with beards, hairstyles, clothes, furniture, fine houses and the like. (...) I have put into the world such regulations and customs that life itself, as regards both the body and the soul, is more dead than alive. (...) Whereas in the past you were hated and desecrated, things today have by my efforts come to such a pass, that anyone with any intelligence prizes and praises you, preferring you to life, and is so devoted that he constantly calls upon you and looks at you as his greatest hope.”

From the connection between Fashion and Death presented in the above excerpt, I wonder if the ‘fans’ of the Judas’ page share some fantasy related to death while gathering around the image of the hanging rope. I wonder also if this could be read as a reaction to some fashionable aspects of the industrious

⁵⁴ Purdy 2004. "The Rise of Fashion". University of Minnesota Press.

⁵⁵ Ibid. p. 206

⁵⁶ “Who cyborgs will be is a radical question; the answers are a matter of survival.” Haraway writes in the manifesto. Haraway 1991. "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century" in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. Routledge. p. 153

and still evangelical⁵⁷ Western society. This reaction would be expressed by them, paradoxically perhaps, within a fashionable network. Taking this into account, what would be the significance of labeling Judas Iscariot ‘Celebrity’ within this network, as we did when opening the page?

Framing Myths in the On-Line Rhetoric of the Celebrity Magazine

The Cult of the Celebrity

While writing his collection of essays *Mythologies*⁵⁸ in the late fifties, the French philosopher Roland Barthes found what he called a ‘mythological treasure’ in magazines such as *Elle* and *Paris-Match*⁵⁹. These magazines still exist today. *Elle* is a fashion magazine and *Paris-Match* covers major news and celebrity lifestyle features⁶⁰. Barthes saw images and stories depicted in those magazines as vectors of contemporary myths. He wrote about them in some of the *Mythologies* essays. I find in the Facebook network’s rhetoric several elements in common with these magazines’ way to convey messages, taking in account Barthes’ perspective. The main name of the network reminds me of the essay *The Face of Garbo*. In this essay, Barthes analyzes how the camera and the spectator’s eye captured Swedish-American actress Greta Garbo’s face in the silent Hollywood movies she appeared in. According to Barthes, Garbo’s face in the screen:

“offered to one's gaze a sort of Platonic Idea of the human creature. (...) The name given to her, the Divine, probably aimed to convey less a superlative state of beauty than the essence of her corporeal person, descended from a heaven where all things are formed and perfected in the clearest light. (...) Her face was not to have any reality except that of its perfection.”⁶¹

Faces became iconic within celebrities’ magazines. Argentinean anthropologist Paula Sibilia, has been writing since 2004 on the influence of image processing software packages like Photoshop to convey, like in Garbo’s case, an image of perfection on the faces of famous people appearing in printed and audiovisual media. To some extent this idea of perfection within today’s beauty canons still catches and fascinates audiences. But as Sibilia points out, the generalized presence of this image processing practice created also a ‘thirst for reality’⁶². According to her, the Web 2.0, of which Facebook is part of,

⁵⁷ Ibid. p. 149

⁵⁸ Barthes 1957. "Mythologies". Éditions du Seuil.

⁵⁹ Leak 1994. "Barthes Mythologies. Critical Guides to French Texts". Grant & Cutler Ltd. . p. 15

⁶⁰ Wikipedia "Paris Match".

⁶¹ Barthes 1993. "Mythologies". Vintage. p. 56

⁶² Nicolini 2008. ""Ahora tenés que saber venderte" Interview to Paula Sibilia".

got to be a space where a promise of reality exists. For instance, she explains, people may purchase on the web the photo without the Photoshop processing of a girl who appeared in Playboy, or the footage of a 'real' episode of one of these celebrities' life which would be normally hidden or masked in the magazines. This possibility doesn't seem to be downplaying the status of 'celebrity'. Furthermore, the Web 2.0 made room to its users to become 'minor celebrities' themselves, publishing or broadcasting their personae within the different groups or communities which happened to be in on-line contact with them. What does the status of celebrity give to a person? What kind of personae is shaping the tension between the contemporary 'thirst of reality' mentioned by Sibilia and the several fantasies around the celebrity figure which inevitably, by its own nature, seems to be 'reality elusive'?

The celebrity figure appears in printed and audiovisual media narratives as mentioned; but also, this figure might appear in everyday conversations. In Spanish it is common to refer to a celebrity as a character⁶³, while in English the term 'character' might be reserved for persons appearing in artworks, usually involving narrative elements. According to Portuguese literature critic Ana Bela Almeida, quoted by Sibilia, loneliness makes the difference between characters and persons: characters are never alone, there is always somebody watching them or in some way aware of their presence. Two major forms, can be traced back in these on-line narratives, allowing people to make the step from persons to characters – and in some cases to minor or big celebrities. I will introduce these two forms below borrowing from two authors the expressions '*Being in the picture*' and '*Extimate Diaries*'. I will then present images from our thesis installation and performance work related to our own approach to the subject.

Being in the Picture

As a way to identify one's self and interact with others in the blogs and in the different on-line social networks, being in pictures, and mainly presenting one's face in pictures as mentioned some paragraphs above, became customary. In her essay *The Making of...Desire, Digital*⁶⁴, media researcher Marie Louise Angerer reflects on the subject recalling French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan's studies on 'being part of the picture' as a mechanism to perceive one's self:

⁶³ The translation in Spanish for character is 'personaje'. 'Personaje de farándula' could be the expression used to refer to celebrities in Spanish.

⁶⁴ Angerer 2003. "The Making of...Desire, Digital".

“Lacan defined <being part of the image> as a fundamental requisite for perceiving one's self. In doing so he fell back on the theory developed by Roger Callois after investigating the camouflage behavior of insects. These insects do not adapt their color to their surroundings in order to protect themselves from the enemy, but rather in order to be a patch in their surroundings.”⁶⁵

The author continues referring to a certain emotional fragility which might be underlying this mechanism, and relates this possible fracture of the self as perceived in media images:

“Lacan transfers this to the child who mimics her/his surroundings, rehearses being in a picture in order to preserve <her/his> image. The boundaries of this (self-)image though are always fragile, emotionally vulnerable, because the subject loves, seeks and desires an other self in the picture—an image behind the image. Transferred to media images this means that the images provide the viewers with the framework for becoming part of an image and thus for vanishing into the image.”⁶⁶

In this sense, ‘being in the picture’ in the on-line narratives mentioned might become a drama in itself regardless the context of the picture. As Angerer mentions it, there are other perspectives aside from Lacan’s from which ‘being in the picture’ might be looked at. But it is this possible emotional fracture in the being, carved and reproduced over and over daily on-line which caught my attention, compared to the massive acceptance of the internet based social networks referred.

The Use of ‘Extimate Diaries’

Paula Sibilía refers to the traditions of writing letters and diaries as historically connected to these on-line narratives I have been referring to. She relates these traditions to the autobiographical genre in which the author, the narrator and the character are the same person. She coined in her book *Intimacy as a Spectacle*⁶⁷ the term ‘Extimate Diary’ to describe the simulacra of intimacy that she sees presented in these on-line narratives. Hand written letters and diaries, could end up eventually in the public domain if published by an editor or if required by a special legal procedure. On-line autobiographical narratives can reach quickly or “in real time” a more or less larger number of known or anonymous people depending on the network, or the “popularity” of the character. The formats of these narratives are different depending on the network, and also on the level of customization allowed to the user of his on-line space in the network. For instance HTML is generally used to customize profiles in

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Sibilía 2008. "La intimidad como espectáculo". Fondo de Cultura Económica.

MySpace while in Facebook only plain text is used⁶⁸. Since 2006, a drag-and-drop template editing interface was implemented in Blogger⁶⁹, one of the most popular blog publishing systems, diminishing the need of HTML knowledge by its users. Institutional and commercial interests drive partially the way these narratives are shaped, and even in on-line spaces offered as free, the amount of advertising might be considerable. Subjective time, which is an essential element of a diary's narrative, is put in tension when inscribed within the immediacy of the Net's constructed time. It is in this context that I see 'Extimate Diaries' being kept. The question of the advantages or disadvantages of such a way of constructing the self-being is left to the users, as it was some years ago, as Sabilia points out, for those who used intimate diaries and posted mail to communicate, in a context shaped by the individual and community interests of the time.

“Placing Dream before Reality” and “Nightmare before Event”

In our installation project for the degree show, we attached a blank envelope and a blank sheet of paper to the rope which was swinging next to the figure made out of discarded clothes. A balloon was used for the head of the figure, making it faceless. We programmed using Processing software a special sequence of events putting in motion the figure and the rope with the paper, and triggering an electronic music composition by Juan Hernández. I see now some antagonical aspects in the elements of the installation we developed, in relation to the model of the on-line autobiographical narratives described above: mainly, tridimensionality, the different experimentations with the timings, and the room made for non-verbal expressions. Through physical improvisation work, the three performers of the project, Anna-Sara Åberg, Juan Hernández and me worked on different associations suggested to us by the elements in the sequence put in motion, turned off, triggered, silenced, let driven by inertia or slowed down by friction. With this approach, we ended up exploring an alternate process of the self-construct, in relation to the daily life diary approach of the 'Extimate Diaries'. I oppose to the 'thirst for reality' of these narratives the reversal proposed by Bachelard “placing dream before reality” and “nightmare before event”, both to question the dominance of certain narratives over others, and to explore the connections between them. To end this section, I would like to present the three following images from the performances we did during the degree show using the installation, as a result of this work:

⁶⁸ Wikipedia "Criticism of Facebook".

⁶⁹ Wikipedia "Blogger (service)".

“(…) placing:
dream before reality,
nightmare before event
horror before the monster,
nausea before the fall;”⁷⁰



Figure 17 *Automatic bai Chans* (2009), performers and blank papers. Photos by Aoife Gilles (top) and Steven Ladouceur (bottom).

⁷⁰ Bachelard 1988. "Air and Dreams: an essay on the imagination of movement". Dallas Institute.

Zoommary

I would like in this last section to ‘zoom in’ in some regions of the text that I would like to explore more in further works, and ‘zoom out’ in others which might be linked to larger fields or contexts.

Zooming in and out in the title, *Mythomachines*. *Logos* devouring *mythos* devouring *logos*, like in some endless and labyrinthic ‘pac man’ game. Andrew Leak wrote Barthes’ *Mythologies* main concern was “precisely, with demonstrating how the organs of mass culture suck in the raw materials of every day life and transform them into modern myths.”⁷¹

One hand, I find interesting the attempts of downplaying dominant and oppressive ideologies inscribed in some present and past myths. On the other hand, I find also attractive exploring more of the imaginative way of thinking underlying mythic stories. If I were a mythic creature, I could have a third hand. I would keep it empty of words, with this precious “nonverbal “inner life” of the self”⁷².

Z + + ⁷³in the cross of wood made to lit a fire. In her novel *Malinche*⁷⁴, Mexican writer Laura Esquivel describes Malinche performing a Mayan ritual to lit a fire with a cross made of two found pieces of ocote’s wood she thinks form the cross of the Mayan and Aztec deity Quetzálcoatl⁷⁵. When Malinche, being recruited as a slave of the Spanish army, enters the Catholic temple to be baptized and sees there Christ’s cross, it is said in the novel based on historical documents that she thinks the Spanish people might be representing the god Quetzálcoatl. It is believed that Malinche as other indigenous in the region, were expecting this god to come back after he left in difficult conditions, to deliver them from the slavery and the human sacrifices that the Aztec regime imposed on the population in the latest years. Discovering through the novel some of Malinche’s changing views on life borrowing from both Nahuatl and Spanish languages and cultures gave me a new insight on subjects such as colonialism and hybridization treated by Haraway in the Cyborg Manifesto.

Z – – in the story of Judas and Jesus. While being in Sweden these two years, I had the opportunity of learning some about Norse mythology⁷⁶. I realized that several of the dates corresponding to Christian celebrations were chosen in similar dates of Norse festivities, and that the Christianization process in

⁷¹ Leak 1994. "Barthes Mythologies. Critical Guides to French Texts". Grant & Cutler Ltd. . p. 12

⁷² Stafford 1999. "Visual Analogy: Consciousness as the Art of Connecting". MIT Press. p. 139

⁷³ The keys Ctr Z + + and Ctr Z – – are used to zoom in and out in image processing software packages like Photoshop

⁷⁴ Esquivel 2006. "Malinche". Atria Books.

⁷⁵ Ibid. p. 49

⁷⁶ Ross 1994. "Old Norse myths in medieval Northern society". Odense University Press.

the Scandinavian region was perhaps as violent as it was in the times of the Spanish *Conquista*. Parallels and oppositions might be traced back in the hybrid heritage of both Christianity and indigenous Norse and Pre-Columbian cultures. One aspect that was particularly difficult to understand for Malinche as presented in Esquivel's novel is the good and evil dualism she saw in Christianity, and the underlying contradiction of a good omnipotent God allowing Evil to exist in his Creation. Borges plays with this contradiction in the short tale commented in this text where he presents Judas as the possible true Saviour, through Nils Runeberg, a character who happened to be a Swede. Within the studies of Norse mythology, the chief deity Odin, has been associated to Christ because of his sacrifices⁷⁷. Following this analogy, Loki⁷⁸, friend and betrayer of the group of gods to which Odin belonged in the Norse mythology, could be associated to Judas. However, these parallels can be misleading also, Christianity and Norse Mythology being built upon different ways of thinking. Unlike Christian God, Odin and other Norse deities often are said to cheat, and share mortality with humans. Contemporary images in the digital world of Norse myths can be found in different computer games such as *Ragnarok*⁷⁹. The gender variability of Loki, male god who has the ability to change sex and for instance become pregnant (of a horse!), could be interesting for me to continue exploring gender through myths as I attempted to do it through the androgynous creature in this project. Finally, I would like to borrow from Stafford the expression "the aesthetics of the perceptual jump"⁸⁰, which might allow us to cross over apparently dissimilar phenomena in the play of aesthetic analogies, and keep on feeding with it our creative process.

⁷⁷ Wikipedia "Odin".

⁷⁸ Wikipedia "Trickster".

⁷⁹ Lauppert 2007. "Ragnarok (Valhalla)".

⁸⁰ Stafford 1999. "Visual Analogy: Consciousness as the Art of Connecting". MIT Press. p. 139

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