

Alice Dalgarrondo

Al Zahir.

VR Installation

“Others will dream that I am mad, while I dream of the Zahir. When every person on earth thinks, day and night, of the Zahir, which will be dream and which reality, the earth or the Zahir?”

1. Al Zahir

In the Koran, Al Zahir is one of God’s many names. It is how God appears to our eyes— He who manifests and he who is imminent. When observing a flower, Al Zahir is its color and shape.

In Jorge Luis Borges’ story, the Zahir is an object by which people become obsessed. A single object has the potential of becoming the Zahir at particular moments in history, changing from time to time. Zahir is “beings or things which possess the terrible virtue of being unforgettable, and whose image finally drives people mad” (Borges 1967: 132). For Borges, the Zahir is a twenty-cent Argentinian coin that was once known as an astrolabe in Persia, “fashioned in such wise that whoever looked at it even once could afterwards think of nothing else, whereupon the king ordered it thrown into the deepest part of the sea, lest men forget the universe” (Borges 1967: 132)

Borges tries to think about this coin as a symbol of all other coins in order to avoid encountering the Zahir – *the evident*. “Any coin whatsoever is, strictly speaking, a repertory of possible futures. (...) It is unpredictable time, Bergsonian time” (Borges 1967: 130). Deleuze explains the Bergsonian idea of time according to which “each present present is only the entire past in its most contracted state. (...) the past, far from being a dimension of time, is the synthesis of all time of which the present and the future are only dimensions” (Deleuze 2001: 82). Borges repeats to himself like a mantra that money is abstract, as if that coin, evident and visible, could not be the Zahir. But it happens that the Zahir is, in fact, more than itself. In a single object, it evokes everything that exists—as with an astrolabe, it is possible to be oriented by the position of the stars and to establish a connection with the universe.

2. Oxymoron

Borges exemplifies this rhetorical device with expressions such as dark light and black sun, but hidden between the lines he refers to Al Zahir and its opposite: Al Batin, the occult. In the book of God's names, Al Zahir and Al Batin come together— God is the occult beside His obviousness, or, His obviousness is the reason why he is occult. “Tennyson said that if we could but understand a single flower we would know who we are and what the world is. Perhaps he meant that there is no deed, however humble, which does not implicate universal history and its infinite concatenation of causes and effects. Perhaps he meant that the visible world is implicit, in its entirety, in each manifestation, just as, in the same way, will, according to Schopenhauer, is implicit, in its entirety, in each individual. The cabalists considered man a microcosm, a symbolic mirror of the universe; according to Tennyson, everything would be that; even the intolerable Zahir.” (Borges 1949: 134)

3. Search

Someone once told me, an idea must pursue one, until the idea itself is pursued and dominated, and something is made out of it. The Zahir found me first and I happened to know that it manifests itself in our time as a hibiscus flower. Being obsessed is making connections, so I started to connect the manifestation of this flower with other events/things/objects in order to comprehend the whole of everything.

Manuel De Landa states that Deleuze's project escapes typological thinking, characteristic of classification practices of the 17th and 18th centuries, in which Linnaeus's botanical taxonomy is inserted, as they seek to define groups based on the similarities between their individuals (De Landa 2005: 38). Deleuze values a philosophy of difference in its ontology of the object and I rely on this philosophy to understand how this hibiscus flower is unique in itself, due to the trajectory it follows, while having the potential to evoke in it everything that exists.

4. Destiny

To pursue an idea is to give other destinies to things never imagined before, assembling the potentialities that lie in their histories.

If it were not for my pursuit, this hibiscus flower would not have been virtualized (the photographic image digitized in a third dimension), and most likely, it would have fulfilled its flower

destiny. So I started to look at this flower not just as it first appeared to me, but rather for its hidden stories in its past and future, its possibilities and virtualizations.

In *Botões*, Flusser describes the event of a tree blossoming as an eruption of the virtual (flower) contained in the buds (Flusser 1979: 1). And this is their destiny, the destiny of a flower that follows what we would expect it to do and adheres to nature's laws. But according to Flusser, it is a necessary "ontologic jump from the merely possible" (Flusser 1979: 1) for the real to happen and there is not just one possibility, but an ocean full of them.

5. Virtual

The virtual swims in this ocean. Flusser describes the virtual in terms of waves that acquire their shape thanks to the masculine force of "virtue", because "virtual" derives from "vis" / "vir", which means "man". The virtual attempts to become "real", but remains within a state of trying, a state of willing. Virtual is what emerges from the possible and gets close to the real (Flusser 1993: 65-66).¹

The virtual is not opposed to *the real*, as Deleuze points; it is *the possible* that is.² The virtual coexists with the real. The ideas of worlds behind a work of art are virtual ones, in Deleuze's sense, as is the idea of the Zahir and as is the idea of God; they are real, but not (yet) material.

6. Virtual Insanity

The transfiguration of material objects into digitized ones (in the case of my investigation, the tridimensional scanned flower), is the realization of one of the infinite possibilities contained in the object's trajectory. Its de-materialization through numbers is the destiny I gave to the flower. It is now virtual. It coexists with our real and tries to become real, but it was also a possibility; a state of becoming.

Is the virtual world possible? If it is possible it can be real.

An oxymoron: the possible virtual. "There was a time when I could visualize first the obverse and then the reverse. Now I see them both simultaneously. It's not as if the Zahir were made of

¹ Free translation from the German.

² "The possible is opposed to the real; the process undergone by the possible is therefore a 'realisation'. By contrast, the virtual is not opposed to the real; it possesses a full reality by itself. The process it undergoes is that of actualisation." (Deleuze 2001: 211).

glass, for one face is not superimposed upon the other; it's rather as if one's vision was spherical and as if the Zahir floated in the middle." (Borges 1949: 133-134)

7. Calculations

Where does the flower's *singularity*³ go when it is represented tridimensionally? The calculation is the singularity. The bidimensional photography is already a calculation, because it is digital. There is no physical trace of reality impressed in a material, as in analog photographic processes. In the digital, calculation connects "the real world" and the represented "virtual" world.

"The world 'happens' while God calculates; if the calculation were exact, there would be no world. The world can be regarded as a 'remainder', and the real in the world understood in terms of fractional or even incommensurable numbers." (Deleuze 2001: 222) That is to say, the *real world* is full of inexactitude. However, calculations of men (and of the machine) must be precise in order to approximate with nature's imprecision, in order to create hyper-realistic *virtual worlds*.

8. Perfection

"Perfect (see bisexual). Bisexual: each flower of each individual has both female and male structures. Other terms used for this condition are androgynous, hermaphrodite..."⁴ The hibiscus is a perfect flower.

The hibiscus flower is a perfect flower, and with its imperfect virtual transfiguration is something like Donna Haraway's cyborg.⁵ The virtue of the wave is no longer masculine, as Flusser defines it when analyzing the origin of the *virtual* word. This wave that approaches the real, that wants to be

³ De Landa defines singularities as that which influences behavior, acting as attractors for the trajectories of objects; the final state will be as expected, like the flower that blooms from the bud. "(...) different trajectories may be attracted to the same final state, singularities are said to represent the inherent or intrinsic *long-term tendencies* of a system, the states which the system will spontaneously tend to adopt in the long run as long as it is not constrained by other forces." (De Landa 2005: 14.

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plant_reproductive_morphology

⁵ I see this flower, of mixed sex, that turns into virtuality as a kind of cyborg, in nothing different from what would become the humanoid cyborg. Donna Haraway defines the cyborg as "a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction. (...) Cyborg 'sex' restores some of the lovely replicative baroque of ferns and invertebrates (such nice organic prophylactics against heterosexism)." (Haraway 1991: 149-181)

real and succeeds, represents the dilution of the dichotomy between female and male, real and virtual, nature and machine, evident and hidden, and creates oxymorons.

In art, it's not necessary to achieve the correct calculations and to create a world analogous to ours. The result does not have to resemble reality or perfection. In the *Logic of Sense*, Deleuze describes the ideal game as something that can only exist in reflection and in art. He says that only thought is capable of affirming all the possibilities of the universe (Deleuze 2009: 63). The result is the artwork, because art is capable of presenting these other possibilities of the world and its virtualities—and at the same time, it is real.

It is said that only God is perfect. “The Sufis, attempting to lose themselves in God, repeat their own name or the ninety-nine names of the divinity until they lose all meaning. I long to tread the same path. Perhaps I will manage to wear away the Zahir by force of thinking of it and thinking of it. Perhaps behind the Zahir I shall find God.” (Borges 1967: 134)

References

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