LUCHA LIBRE:
IDENTITY, MOBILITY AND ADAPTATION IN MEXICAN POPULAR CULTURE

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1. Introduction

Radio and television transformed the experience of media forever. Aided by primitive recording technologies, they made it possible to remotely broadcast what otherwise could only be experienced as live performance. It became possible to listen or view any kind of spectacle or public incident from anywhere in the world, if access to the right technologies was provided. These open channels of transmission entered almost every home in any reasonably developed urban setting everywhere in the world, making the new challenge for the transmitters to fill airtime with content. It actually took all of 20th century, and the digital revolution yet to come, to finally cover every second of existence with an uninterrupted stream of entertainment. Perhaps because they were already there, public spectacles became an immediate candidate to populate the early 20th century radio and television hours, becoming hybrid performances that would display themselves both locally and globally, first through the public arena in front of a live audience that became another character with a new role, and second, in front of the remote audiences that would follow events through radio and television.

As early as television broadcasting corporations were being born over the globe, and consumption through television became the dominant mode to shape the collective imagination in urban settings, a particular form of wrestling spectacle became popular in the boxing arenas of Mexico City. It is unclear whether professional wrestling entered Mexico in the late 19th century from France, or from Italy right in the beginning of the Mexican Revolution, or from Texas in the early 1930s, but it seems clear that the necessary conditions to transform professional wrestling into what later became mexican Lucha Libre were not present until the late 20s, thus making it reasonable to declare that Lucha Libre was originated then, when a sports promoter named Salvador Lutteroth imported a handful of professional wrestlers from Texas to Mexico City, and in many ways thanks to the already established industry of television entertainment.

Conceived as an urban spectacle for the masses, Lutteroth's wrestling spectacle attracted the interest of investors, and soon the first specialized professional wrestling arena was built in Mexico City, called Arena Coliseo. In the need of more wrestlers, and as a touch of nationalism for their public, the wrestling managers started recruiting and training mexicans, setting in motion a seminal force that later became an affirmation of nationality and localism, absorbing international media motifs and mixing them with representations of conflict derived from the tension between mexican social forces and their stereotypes.

Undereducated and poor, the new recruits -or luchadores- were thrown into the arena to play the roles of good and evil through the characterization of recognizable

symbols inspired by heroic archetypes found in 20th century film and pulp fantasy fiction, to later mix them with elements from other aspects of culture, like major figures from history, religion, the political arena or pop music, and eventually from traditional mexican folklore. Hercules, Tarzan, the Caveman, the Bat, Simón Templar and who knows how many others were all the inspiration to find symbolic forces that gave the luchador a presence onstage that was bigger than life. Luchadores have been fans of popular media fantasies from the beginning of Lucha Libre, using their onstage performance skills to reshape the role of mass media representations in the mexican collective imagination, deforming them, taking them out of the paper and film, making them real, and taking them to remote places deeper in the mexican culture, outside of the cities, where the performance of satire and combat still plays a ritual role rather than a spectacular one.

A key ingredient to the success of Lucha Libre as a transmission medium for media significants was the incorporation of the mask. The mask has been of importance in almost any aspect of human cultural activity, playing a role that at the same time disguises reality and embodies an illusion, both a secret and a revelation. In Lucha Libre, the mask turns the luchador into a real life hero that becomes this way human and magic. When Rodolfo Guzmán Huerta created his Santo character inspired in Simon Templar's nickname, he probably knew that he was driving more on the religious resonances his name could inspire to a catholic audience, but I don't think he expected Santo to survive after he died. The mask, as representing the fiction character created by the luchador, becomes a deposit of value that will keep growing until the luchador loses it in the hands of a rival, turning him back to human by revealing his identity. Santo is a special case that deserves attention on his own, not only because he came to represent the mightiest of all luchadores to the eyes of the public, but because he created a narrative that took him beyond Lucha Libre to populate with content most media of his time. From film to television, radio and comics, Lucha Libre became secondary to the heroic role of the luchador as a detective, a vampire hunter, a playboy, an amateur scientist. A superhero that people could touch.

At the same time, because it can be manufactured and distributed by the thousands, the mask itself became a medium, capable to extrapolate and overlap meaning with other instances of media, making it a perfect transmitter for the recreation of the Lucha Libre fantasy drama in the hands of the public, opening a space for the audience's active participation.

It is important to understand Lucha Libre from all possible angles; it is a rich media topic that offers intriguing questions to many aspects of theory. Because I mean to address the essence of Lucha Libre, and think about it from all aspects of its almost a century of history, but examine it through the lens of a very specific problem, I will concentrate on the properties of the Lucha Libre mask as an instrument for the appropriation, deconstruction, recreation and representation of the

fantasy hero, that creates a point of tension not manifest in other instances of popular culture. A hero that only exists in the imagination can easily be transformed and flattened by the media industry to play the role of a brand or a franchise, but it is impossible for the industry to absorb and recreate a heroic archetype if it is embodied as a living person. Lucha Libre challenges the disposable nature of human value when measured by the media industries, where it is easy to keep a successful narrative at a brand level, manipulating whoever gets to represent it as a function of corporate interests. Through Lucha Libre, the fan becomes the performer and the hero.

I will describe how Lucha Libre has grown and adapted through the 20th century -and the first decade of the 21st- by tracking down key moments of the two incarnations in the life of Santo, using these descriptions as a bridge to the present, where I see a potential and a threat for Lucha Libre to play in the global arena, perhaps becoming a perfect medium to mobilize imagination across cultures and transmit an authentic representation of the contemporary mexican identity, or being reabsorbed back to a place in media where the luchador is only imagined and not embodied, losing the link with a real human being that performs his comedy-drama in life. Until now, the luchador has been a hero that grows old, dies and is reborn.

At the same time, I will deliberately avoid touching questions of gender, class and race stereotypes in depth, because they are all strongly present in the Lucha Libre narrative, and I don't have the time, or the resources, to examine them as they deserve.

2. Identity

Including me, most mexicans that know about Lucha Libre will regard it as an inherently mexican spectacle. Some of them will even respond with surprise and denial to the fact that Lucha Libre was imported from the USA, or that the first Lucha Libre mask was made by a shoemaker for an irish wrestler that wanted to remain anonymous, asking for something in the style of a KKK hood to cover his face. Heather Levi [6] looks at this in depth from the perspective of an outsider to the mexican culture, delivering an elaborate depiction of why mexicans defined Lucha Libre as a nationalist statement, and why the Lucha Libre mask is regarded as a symbol of heroism against the overwhelming forces of cultural colonialism. The way she looks at it, and I will agree with her to an extent, the post revolutionary national project of 1917 needed to reimagine the ideal Mexico, creating it as the result of the marriage between the original indigenous culture and the spanish invader from postmedieval Europe. I actually remember being fed this kind of story from my childhood back in elementary school, when in history class I would be told about the aztec warlord and the spanish conquistador as heroes from the same story, making me overly confused trying to explain myself why would they torture

and kill each other in the most brutal embodiment of carnage in history, when they were supposedly building my great nation together. Heather's accurate description of the official definition of the mexican identity, and the role it played in leaving out of the mexican project the millions of indigenous mexicans, that even to the present still don't speak spanish as their first language, has led to a number of problems that are far from being addressed by the mexican national order. However, the same indigenous people have been regarded as the root of everything that is mexican, and their folklore has been incorporated into all mexican modes of celebration, changing even the nature of catholicism into a collection of local variants that would seem of a pagan nature, if it was not known that they were supposed to be catholic.

Heather Levi [6] recognizes the mexican identity as a sort of national stubbornness, that helps reinforce it against the invasion of external agents. And this is where she places the spectacle of Lucha Libre, as a perfect hybrid between contemporary mass media and what mexicans have learned to understand as mexican. What she missed to see is the natural fragmentation of the mexican chaste system. For her, the separation lies between the rural or indigenous mexico, and the urban, or mestizo. She doesn't see the different class layers that separate the urban Mexico into a society of servants and masters, specially visible in Mexico city. This is key to the evolution of my argument, because originally, only a specific kind of mexican would follow the outcomes of Lucha Libre performances, watch Lucha Libre movies, or read Lucha Libre comics. The rest, with a different education and a better economic position, would regard this manifestations of culture as lower forms of entertainment, meant to distract the lower class brutes. In the imagination of the Lucha Libre fantasy depicted by movies, the darker skinned Luchador will use his disguise to transcend racial and class differences, living a personal life amongst european looking white rich people, the embodiment of civilization. In the real world, the Luchador will take a taxi out of the slum as an ordinary man, make the driver drop him off in a deserted alley close to the arena, put on the mask where nobody is looking, and arrive just in time to perform. After the show he would probably go back home to his wife and seven children, or arrive to his other job as a taquero (those who make tacos), a print press worker, a car mechanic, or who knows what. The fantasy of Lucha Libre would help him dream of climbing the social ladder all the way to the eurocentric top, but in reality, Lucha Libre was just another job.

My parents bought our first television when I was less than 2 years old after got sick from something that kept me in bed for a few weeks. Tired of having to figure out how to keep me quiet, my mother couldn't help but expose me to the hypnotic powers of television. The history of the television industry in Mexico is extremely related to Lucha Libre, and a relevant side note of it is that there have been only three players in Mexican television through most of the 20th century: the state tv, the Polytechnic Institute channel, and the private media monopoly known as Televisa. Part of Televisa's media strategy was to purchase content from around the world and redistribute it all over Latin America, turning us into an audience for japanese popular culture significantly earlier than Europe or the USA.

By 1975 -when I was 5 years old- I was already exposed to Osamu Tezuka's classics and Hayao Miyasaki's early tv melodramas, and the first television shows I ever watched were the surreal pop adventures of Ultraman and Ultraseven during those lost weeks of feverish delight, where a special mask would turn a regular soldier into a mighty hero to defend Tokyo from the attack of giant mutations of moths and lizards. My mother didn't like those shows, and never let me watch them again after I got better. You will only be allowed to see these when youre sick and need to stay in bed all day, she said. I remember craving to get sick again, but it never happened. Little I knew that the japanese tv producers of those shows were the biggest fans of Lucha Libre movies from the 50s, but I experienced the same kind of satisfaction when I started watching Santo and Blue Demon defend Mexico against a plague of werewolves or an invasion of martian vampire bimbos in television a few years later. The performance of combat that is embodied through Lucha Libre was introduced to me by television and film, and helped inspire a curiosity that led me to explore a face of the mexican identity that I would have ignored otherwise. I was exposed to many of the traditions that were part of the indigenous folklore because that was the way things were supposed to be for someone from my class, but I would have been kept sheltered from most manifestations of mexican lower class urban popular culture if I was not exposed to them by the leaks found everywhere in the ubiquiteous corpus of media.

During my lifetime, Lucha Libre became a form closer to what Heather Levi describes, but the reason for this transformation might have more to do with the general global media changes through the last three decades. The increase of mexican migrants and their influence in the USA cultural underground, and the digital revolution that have enhanced the natural mobility of the Lucha Libre narrative outside of the mexican arena, forcing it back to the mexican imagination from an international scene, transformed the perception of it by the mexican cultural elite, that otherwise would have kept regarding it as a lower form, and was now embracing it as hip.

3. Practice

Roland Barthes [1] describes professional wrestling as a spectacle of excess, where theatrical performance overwhelms the sport, depicting a representation of morality where aficionados get their satisfaction from the repetition of the conflict between the suffering hero and his perverted antagonist. Pleasure comes after the intolerable spectacle of the abuse inflicted by the treacherous evil to his heroic victim, and the expected return of the hero to claim victory after serious humiliation. Morality, ethics and politics are staged in a power play represented by the violent confrontation between both wrestlers. Barthes describes how good and evil are differently defined in France and the US, being a matter of ethics for the first one and a matter of politics for the second. Regardless of how precise his metrics might be, the french construction of the perfect bastard as the incarnation of evil seems to me quite close to the mexican construction of the Rudos in Lucha Libre. Following

the traditions of professional wrestling elsewhere, Lucha Libre represents the confrontation between good and evil creating the Rudos (tough, rude) and the Tecnicos (clean, respectful of technique). The Rudos will always play dirty and the Tecnicos will follow the rules. Naturally, just as Barthes describes, half of the performance depends on the public entering the play as the voice that will claim justice. In a traditional match, the Tecnicos would win the first fall with not much more than the display of acrobatic abilities from both sides and a collection of theatrical gags meant to infuriate the public or make them laugh. Through the second fall, however, the mischievous Rudos would find a way to trick the referees and beat up the good guys in front of everyone's indignation, only to lose the whole match a few minutes later in the hands of the miraculously recovered heroes. The mask and television changed those roles for good.

Perhaps influenced by the serialized tradition of telenovelas, where the same abuse of evil over the almost perversely suffering good is taken through an extreme over the evolution of serialized melodrama, and taking advantage of the incorporation of the mask that became the treasure of a lifetime for an invincible luchador, rivalries transcended the arena and became a sequence of much more complex narratives where Rudos and Tecnicos switched sides, evil would surprisingly just keep on beating the crap out of goodness, and strange alliances would be made out of a carefully orchestrated power play that would last over several generations of luchadores. Today, the rivalry of Santo and Blue Demon in the ring still lives through their sons, even when they have always strangely been played as allies against evil in comicbooks and movies. In the Lucha Libre narrative, luchadores are aware of the theatrical nature of the ring, but regard their role as fantasy fiction heroes as reality.

The french perfect bastard of Barthes is transformed into another performance variable for the same mexican hero. Both good and evil are different colors of heroism, both equally capable of good and evil, representing the more ambiguous nature of the mexican morals, where honor and friendship rule over ethics. If this is true, and luchadores are truly perceived as ambiguous heroes whose morals depend on a combination of circumstances and personal principles, it might be a good reason why the narratives of Lucha Libre have recently been easily absorbed by practices that have nothing to do with the mexican tradition.

The mask divides luchadores in two: the ones that still wear it and the ones that have lost it in combat. When defined as the prize that can be won over a wrestling match, the mask becomes a separator for a unique kind of match, the ultimate match, where the Luchador risks everything he has. After losing his mask, he will become human again, and will have to wear his own face as a sign of ultimate loss. His career will not be over: powerful figures in the history of Lucha Libre have emerged from a lost mask, letting their hair grow, and offering it as a substitute prize against a mask for a rematch. Mask against hair. Some luchadores have even chosen not to wear a mask from the beginning, treasuring their long hair with equal pride.

The importance of an ultimate match remains the same whichever the case; it is an excuse to play a serialized narrative of ongoing conflict, where the personalities of the luchadores unfold through several seasons, creating a complex network of combat politics that will eventually lead to an ultimate match. This longer instance of power performance, however, is not separate from Barthes' depiction, and still follows his model: everybody knows in advance who will surrender his mask before the match has ever started.

Tuesday night in the Arena Coliseo. Walking down the street from the parking place or the subway station becomes a challenge itself, dodging the crowds and browsing through the labyrinth of street stands that sell everything from food to masks, capes, videos, dvds, action figures, minirings, posters and everything related to Lucha Libre. The spectacle is a family event, and children and adults from both genders alike will buy the mask of their favorite luchadores to perform them onstage, waiting for the golden opportunity when their heroe's rival is thrown out of the ring close to their chairs, so they can become their hero for a second, acting like a luchador themselves. The masks, usually hand crafted and durable, will go home as a trophy that could be used again the next time, or in other circumstances, when recreating the personality of the luchador by children at play, or by adults in other more interesting settings, where people sometimes wear the mask through their daily life as a kind of ingenious joke, or take it to parties for entertainment. In any case, when the Lucha Libre narrative is personalized and taken into the life of the public, making it possible to influence across generations, class and gender in the otherwise strict mexican hierarchies, it makes me think of it as an early example of social participation that might at the same time fit and challenge the convergence culture model outlined by Henry Jenkins [5]. Mizuko Ito [4] will use Jenkins' conceptual framework to study the role of media mixes in the lives of japanese children, paying a special attention to the influence of media mixes like Pokemon in everyday play. Lucha Libre will naturally fall in the category of a media mix, because it relies in every available medium to deliver the wrestling experience. It also has in common with the mixes described by Ito that the participation of the audience happens through the representation of combat and power play, where a mask or an action figure will play the role of Pokemon's monsters or Yugioh's cards. However, the Lucha Libre narrative has the ability to move across genres in a way that allows it to be read not just as mere juvenile combat by children, but as the stage for science fiction and detective stories and an excuse for the expression of theatrical fashion for young adults, or as a heroic melodrama by a 70 year old lady, and of course, as an affirmation of the mexican colorful identity.

Jenkins understands transmedia storytelling as a process where integral elements of fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels, to create a unified and coordinated entertainment experience [5]. His conceptual framework has been tested against a variety of cases that might as well include the media mixes examined by Ito. Other authors (Long [7], Ford [3]) have contributed to develop further what seems to be a reasonable way to understand the current state of contemporary narratives disseminated in any possible form offered by media.

I remember when in the early 1990s I abandoned my dream to become a writer in favor of becoming a cartoonist instead (now I think they are both different forms of the same skill: storytelling). When asked for an explanation by all the writer friends I had from my adventures as a young poet, I would have usually explained them that I was seduced by comics because they were more defined by character than by story. When creating a character a network of stories appear in the writer's horizon, and the possible outcomes are partially played by how the character's personality has been defined. After all, storytelling is nothing more than the building tension between characters' decisions and their consequences. When readers are given a story, all they can do is listen and follow along, but when they are given a character they can understand and care about, they will make a story themselves.

A remarkable difference between Lucha Libre and all the transmedia cases I've read about from literature is found where the storytelling is orchestrated. Researchers and Scholars mostly refer to narratives where transmedia is first conceived as a marketing strategy. Following an approach that is clearly top-down, the content -owned by a media conglomerate- is treated kind of like a brand that should be positioned in as many channels as possible. Even though the fragmented dissemination of narratives like Batman or the Matrix does help enable a more creative and participatory reading, the defining concepts, metaphors, axioms and rules of play that determine the scope where this narratives will unfold is one sided, always coming from the same place of corporate power, where creative decisions are ultimately taken by boards and committees more influenced by statistics than the imagination.

A luchador usually has ownership rights to the character that he creates, and defines his personality dynamically, through live performance inside and outside the ring. His narrative inspires storytelling to be dispersed across all thinkable media, but his existence makes it difficult for him to be branded by corporate media. When a heroic archetype exists only as fiction it is easier to brand it, but ultimately the illusion will be lost to the fact it is not real, and the narrative will tend to flatten after being retold too many times. Lucha Libre is a narrative of performance that feeds on a symbolic archetype that can be possessed, expanded and inherited. Who would not want to be a real life fantasy hero?

The interior of the Arena Coliseo is colorful like the Luchador fashion. Orange and yellow walls decorated with blue columns are surrounding the ring that is itself surrounded by concentric arrays of old wooden numbered seats, painted in different colors that reflect the prize of the tickets. The first row of seats is not more than twelve feet away from the ring. It often happens that the only real injuries of the night will be suffered by a member of the public that didn't move away fast enough before a bulky Luchador was thrown out of the ring in their way. One of my personal heroes, Blue Panther, el maestro lagunero, fell on me once when I was sitting in the fifth row.

Children run around, sometimes wrestling, pretending to predict the outcome of their favorite match. Their parents, uncles, cousins -and anyone else that's old enough to drink- go to their seats and start ordering beers. By the end of the second match, even the must shy will be drunk enough or entranced by the belligerent crowd to face the mightiest luchador in a combat of words that would usually be traded back with other members of the audience, and sometimes of their own family. Sections of seats are determined by prize, making it evident where the rich and the poor are. Insults of class are traded by big chunks of the crowd. Followers of the Rudos attack the followers of the Tecnicos, wifes yell at their husbands, children at their mothers, and husbands at their mothers in law. In the multicolored theatre of the Lucha Libre, the public is also in combat.

Up in the ring, the referee announces the first fight. It will usually be a parody performed by midgets that mocks on real matches. The mini luchadores are smaller versions of the full size stars, and very successful, perhaps because children find it easier to identify with them due to the similarity of size. Other options to start the spectacle could be a match between rookies, female wrestling, or batallas campales, where a multitude of luchadores, luchadoras, and minis jump into the ring to perform a chaotic all-against-all combat that will end when only one is left inside the ring. Opening matches are meant as warmups, and the public will only get amusement out of them. They will be followed by a series of matches that increase in seriousness, culminating in the closing match of the night. Intermediate matches are usually team challenges, technically known as tag teams. Couples, trios or quartets, Tecnicos against Rudos performing teamwork in a flawed dynamic that will always open a space for misunderstanding or betrayal, creating or promoting rivalries that could eventually become a serious one-on-one championship match, or a mask-hair challenge.

A hypotethical tag team match could have Felino, Dr. Wagner, and Volador on the Tecnico side be challenged by Atlantis, Black Warrior and Halloween on the Rudo side. A surprised public could face a situation where a very efficient team of Rudos will almost seamlessly destroy the hopeless Tecnicos, building up a hatred against injustice and a need for retribution that would be the perfect mood for the closing match: Love Machine against Blue Banther.

Love Machine was not only Rudo, he was also an import from the US that responded to the name of Arthur Barr, and earned an early rivalry with Blue Panther that would eventually cost him his mask. In the theatre of Lucha Libre, a figure like the dark brown skinned Blue Panther -with his almost prehispanic looking blue jaguar mask- represents the deeper Mexico Heather Levi talks about, and plays the role of and invincible spirit, or the unconquerable Mexico. Love Machine, on the other side, which used to have the stars and stripes of the US flag printed in his tights and mask, was a representative of colonial oppression, cultural invasion and rich american tourists, and was doomed to lose. However, he lost by winning, after beating Blue Panther with an illegal move that would cost him his

mask through disqualification. Blue Panther never took Arthur Barr's mask off his head, and justice against the abusive american was delivered by the referee. A few months later, Love Machine faced Blue Panther again, this time losing his hair. There was no way Love Machine would ever beat Blue Panther. The rivalry between them, probably representing the conflicts of interest in the fragile and uneven relations between both nations, kept filling the arenas until Love Machine died of mysterious circumstances in Oregon in 1994, becoming a legendary figure in contemporary Lucha Libre, where his violent personality and his devotion to play the ultimate Lucha Libre loser (he could never win against any respected mexican figure) earned him a following that still remembers his performances, perhaps as a representative of a story that vindicates mexicans as tougher than the americans that dominated them as a nation since the second half of the 19th century.

4. Santo

In every pantheon of heroes there is always the mightiest of them all, the one that's invincible, who will not break even when confronting death. Hercules, Rama, Thor, Lancelot, Superman, Quetzalcoatl, Jesus Christ. In june 26 of 1942, Rodolfo Guzmán Huerta made his debut performing the character of his creation that would become the most popular luchador in the history of Lucha Libre: Santo, el Enmascarado de Plata. I will not explore the life and incarnations of Santo in detail, I will only use him as an example to layout the formation of the Lucha Libre narrative (Santo became the first in many ways to push the spectacle outside of its boundaries into a form of its own), and to examine the migration of the Lucha Libre narrative into other media formats and genres that have built the public perception of the luchador as a fantasy hero.

The night of his debut as Santo, Rodolfo made a choice that bent the rules of the wrestling spectacle and pushed it further into the ambiguous territory of what was already becoming Lucha Libre. Santo, el Enmascarado de Plata, is a symbol of purity. His name is the word saint and his outfit is made of silver and glitter. He looks like a knight that descended from some heavenly Xanadu to deliver justice, but inside the mask there was an unexperienced young man that was no rival for his adversary, the Black Wolf. Perhaps desperate or out of frustration, Santo snapped in the midst of the match and turned into a Rudo, cheating on his rival and tearing the referee's shirt to sherds, thus earning the title of becoming the first luchador to be disqualified in the history of Lucha Libre.

The contradiction embodied by a saint that behaves like a devil was immediately embraced by his public, and he soon became a featured character in any major show, where he would inspire admiration and hate. Rodolfo tried to become several other characters before becoming Santo, failing to earn the public attention with any of them. Because of this reason he became incredibly fond of the Santo persona, that granted him an instant passionate reaction from the public. He was happier

hated than ignored, and also realized that his power to command emotions resided somehow in his mask. As he became more popular and a common subject of the sports press, he began the construction of a cult to his own mask every time he made a public declaration: No one is behind this mask. Santo is the mask. We are all behind the mask. When Jack Blomfiel succeeded to take off Santo's mask in 1943, everybody found him wearing another mask underneath. The myth of the mask was born in the spectacle of Lucha Libre.

Everybody wanted to see Santo, and thanks to the mask, other luchadores were able to perform as him, delivering the Santo experience to the public in different places at the same time. Santo became bigger than human, but the original Santo would still fill the front pages of the newspapers after incidents where he would spend a night in jail when losing his temper and beating up a couple of obnoxious fanatics on his way to the dressing rooms after a long night of lucha. More than human but still one of us, flawed and emotional. At this point in the history of Lucha Libre, everything was ready to project the heroic archetype of the luchador beyond live performance, towards a position in media that would reconstruct him as one of the pulp heroes that inspired his birth. The cycle was almost complete, but the way it happened had nothing to do with luchadores.

Jose Guadalupe Cruz began making comics in 1935 when he was 18 years old. In 1943 he started experimenting with photographic techniques in his comics and in 1947 he started writing and acting in film. A media chameleon that crossed media boundaries with ease, he started the first independent mexican comicbook company in 1952, having the vision to approach Santo and ask him for the right to use his character in a Santo comicbook. Santo agreed, not knowing that he was taking the first step in the mobilization of lucha libre to the broader scope of mexican popular culture and fantasy fiction, pushing his alter ego into a world populated by martians, spies, vampires, mad scientists and kundalini masters. The series of Santo photo comics had a run of thirty years. The mask made it easy for Jose G. Cruz to make anyone play the role of the hero without having to rely on the original Santo's complicated schedule for production, letting Jose Guadalupe spit out a new photo comic every week.

It didn't take many years for the collective imagination to build a space for this new kind of masked hero. Blue Demon and 1000 Mascaras were featured as the friends of Santo in the comicbooks, and soon came a first offer from the film studios. Santo versus the Evil Brain and Santo versus the Men from Hell were the first two movies featuring a Santo as their star. This genre of movies opened a space for a dialogue between the mexican film and television traditions with fantasy archetypes that were imported from the rest of the world. As the embodiment of a nationalist affirmative force, luchadores also represent a kind of surrender to the external media forces, being one of the first examples of mexican film where action is central to the motif instead of drama. However, mainstream mexican cinema was in its decline, and looked at the Lucha Libre movies as a lower form. Unable to stop from falling

into a state of disconnection with most of its audience, mexican cinema could not build on top of a tradition that faded away after the sixties, turning mexican film production into more of an anomaly than a norm. Meanwhile, Santo starred in more than fifty movies, most of them a combination of horror, detective stories and science fiction.

The french and japanese public had a different appreciation for Lucha Libre movies. What was considered a cheap form of entertainment by the mexican critics was regarded as cult surrealism by their french and japanese counterparts. The reasons for this can be sometimes accidental. An early Santo movie was cut so badly that Santo would disappear from screen in the middle of a battle against a crowd of zombies, just to magically reappear somewhere else a few seconds later. Such a scene would be explained rather poetically by a french critic, and would make a japanese audience celebrate in admiration. International critics were perhaps looking at these movies the same way Umberto Eco would describe Casablanca as a cult movie [2], where the resulting piece becomes more than what was intended by its creators, letting a specialized reader address it as a sort of textual syllabus, a movie that talks about movies.

In the case of Lucha Libre movies, an attempt to decode their multiple layers of meaning would probably take the space and time for a doctoral thesis, but it is important to understand their role as a medium for the expansion and conservation of the Lucha Libre mythos, as well as their ability to deliver an open narrative that -even if not intentionally- has facilitated the potential for transmedia participation. If a hipster from Brooklyn that knows nothing about Lucha Libre experiences a kind of aesthetic pleasure when wearing the mask of Blue Demon, the satisfaction might come from a global shared meaning of an iconography that has been enriched in great part by the Lucha Libre cult movies. The lack of an ability to identify an exact genre to label Lucha Libre movies turns them into a movie-mask, or a shapeless movie where anything might happen and the protagonist is a luchador, thus turning the luchador into a candidate that could play any possible role in any kind of story. At this point, Lucha Libre is not about Lucha libre anymore, and it becomes an excuse for the embodiment of character. It is the return of the mask to cotidianity, and the power to become someone other than yourself.

Rodolfo Guzmán Huerta died of a heart attack a few days after taking off his mask in front of a television camera. As part of the performance of the santo narrative, he was buried wearing the mask, and his coffin was taken to the grave by his two biggest rivals, Blue Demon and Black Shadow. He spend the years before he died without fighting, producing movies and acting as an escape artist with a magician in cabaret called Teatro Blanquita. He refused to let any of his eleven children become luchadores, and pushed each one of them through university towards a more stable lifestyle. The younger one didn't listen to his father and made a debut in the ring as El Korak without his father's consent. A few months after, after earning his communications degree, Jorge Guzmán came to his father with a

business plan to turn Santo into a full scale brand and a petition to let him become his successor. The old and tired Santo agreed, and lived to see his own son play the renewed personification of who was once himself in the ring.

A strict control of authorship and inheritance seems to strengthen the heroic role of the luchador at a performance level. The audience likes to identify itself with their idols, and will accept them as a kind of character that is played by the dynasty of acrobat-actor-warriors that we call luchadores. El Hijo del Santo succeeded in turning the legacy of his father into a 21st century media figure, becoming an active participant of the industry politics, where he leads an activist group to defend the rights of less popular luchadores, that have to endure precarious conditions with no access to health benefits and lousy pays, just like his father had to do in the early days. As an activist, he has also taken advantage of his popularity to promote awareness of ecological problems in Mexico, specially focused in the preservation of nature and endangered wildlife. He has created a franchise around the Santo brand, launching a line of official products that don't aim to compete with the folk merchandise you can find in the streets next to the mexican arenas, and is more aimed at true followers that would appreciate official stuff. He has made three movies, but has still not succeeded to push the santo figure into the global market of transmedia storytelling. An attempt worth noticing is the animation adventure pilot promoted by Cartoon Network. For the first time in the history of Lucha Libre, a global media corporation agrees to invest in an entertainment product backed up by a real luchador. Set in Mexico City, Santo contra los Clones tells a story in the spirit of an old Santo classic, following the style delimited by the Batman Adventures original cartoons. It didn't stick. The producers might have been inspired by the earlier success of the Locomotion-Warner cartoon show Mucha Lucha, that takes the forms of Lucha Libre and applies them to a caricature of elementary school in suburban US latino settlements. The differences are major.

In Mucha Lucha, luchadores are mostly children luchador students that live in a suburban american setting populated by luchadores. Even though there is a lot of Lucha Libre folklore ripped into the series, there is nothing that makes this show inherently different from any other cartoon show available in american television. In particular, the preceding Power Puff Girls and Dexter's Laboratory were pretty much the same narrative and aesthetic. Santo contra los clones tries to incorporate Santo into the tradition of american superheroes, an oversaturated form that relies too much in spectacular action choreographies and a black and white eternal tension between good and evil. My description is too general and falls into stereotypes, but when it comes to animation shows, most interesting details and deviations from the superhero tradition explored in the comicbook format are filtered out to deliver a generally flat and stereotyped vision that doesn't differ much from what I've just said. The complexities of japanese models of heroism, that involve personal drama as a component more important than the heroic goal itself, have succeeded to appeal to a broader audience than the superhero model, including other cultures that might find it annoying to be saved from evil forces by a team of idealized

americans, and american women, that were never considered as an audience for the superhero fantasies.

Luchadores are human, and even when capable of superhuman feats when performing in the realm of fiction, their ability to perform as unrecognizable agents in the multicultural world of today might be an excuse to turn them into the protagonists of a new kind of children entertainment, that could consider not only power and gender issues (as manga does), but issues of class, identity and race as well. If Santo's animated adventure against the clones was played paying a closer attention to the spirit of Mexico and its capital city, and the nature of the Lucha Libre mask, maybe the pilot could have made a bigger difference. Nacho Libre, a hollywood production from 2006, remains more true to the mexican spirit of Lucha Libre - as viewed through the lens of an american filmmaker- than the Santo animated cartoon: The form is there, but it lacks the motif.

Just like it happened with Mucha Lucha, Nacho Libre is detached from any real luchadores. All the luchadores hired by the production had to abandon their usual roles and play fictional ones, partly because of copyright issues and partly because of story related reasons. Heroic figures like Santo have the potential to become agents in many aspects of the collective imagination, while retaining an attachment to reality that comes from them being represented by a human actor, but must overcome the tension between them and other instances of power, that won't accept to deposit the mobility of a transmedia universal into a symbol controlled by a dynasty of luchadores that might never fade away.

5. Epilogue

It is not clear to me what are the exact components of the Lucha Libre narrative that could turn it into a cultural product for the global arena. I see a big potential in the mask to become a transformation and filtering agent that could connect different discourses with ease, but I find a conflict between the incorporation of the mask as an agent to deposit and move general content, and the performer centric nature of the Lucha Libre spectacle. Is the nationalist nature of Lucha Libre an obstacle towards its dispersion, or is it where the value lies? Is the adventure relative to the attitude, or is it the opposite?

In the fourth issue of Mike Mignola's Lobster Johnson comicbook, a fictional Lucha Libre movie from the 50s was quoted as a historical reference of Lucha Libre fiction driving inspiration from the legendary Lobster Johnson. Mignola is a transmedia storyteller in all senses; his stories are being told as open ended episodes through comics, film, television and I don't know what else. He has a particular way of spawning independent storylines out of an apparently gratuitous

event found in the corner of a comicbook page. I wonder if Mignola's close relation with the mexican director Guillermo del Toro -which I know is a fan of Lucha Libre movies- pointed him towards understanding the Lucha Libre narrative in his own particular style, perhaps inspiring him to create his own version of a Lucha Libre comicbook in the future. When something like that happens, should we think of it as a different form of mobility performed by the Lucha Libre narrative? Is this kind of appropriation valid in the context of what I am trying to define, or is it just a mere thematic citation, in the spirit of the ones made by Alan Moore in The League of the Extraordinary Gentlemen?

Then again, the particular details that might help us understand mexican problems of gender, race and class will disappear the way they did in the Santo contra los Clones cartoon, and what might be left is an anecdotic reference in a foreign form. Alan Moore can mobilize the characters from 19th century british fantasy fiction because he grew up surrounded by the same literary tradition, and understands the character's personalities and motivations well enough to give them a voice that fits in what they actually were meant to represent, succeeding to create an instance of transmedia that moves across authorship and more than a hundred years of history, continuing to tell the stories of characters that lived in the imagination of a society long gone.

If something similar could be done to incorporate characters from the mexican cultural heritage to the global pool of media entertainment, Lucha Libre can serve as a good candidate for a kind of Rosetta Stone, translating back and forth between the mexican folklore and contemporary media narratives.

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