



Melancholy and Utopia

**Flamenco that goes far beyond the familiar.
Israel Galván and Niño de Elche.**

Text: Pedro G. Romero

Niño de Elche (01) Israel Galván © Jean Louis Duzert

“Coplas Mecánicas”, a dialogue between singer Niño de Elche and dancer Israel Galván, is an intense encounter between the artists that transports them to the frontiers of Flamenco.

I.

Niño de Elche sings. Israel Galván dances. Normally the flamenco experience feels human, all too human. Nevertheless, when the stage catches fire and skin and flesh are consumed by flames, we glimpse beyond the skeleton of two machines. There are precedents: the ‘máquina de trovar’ invented by the young Meneses¹, the dance with engines by Vicente Escudero², the concrete images of Val del Omar³. In fact, flamenco was a child of the Machine Age, born together with the steam engine, textile factories and railways, a petulant companion to the Industrial Revolution. Hence some of the confusion about its lyrics and action: the audience see spontaneity, but the language is rigorous and regulated. Only a machine can produce emotion like that. And that is the idea, making the audience dance is to include them, to make them part of the concert machinery. In open competition with technology, just like Escudero was with the two electric dynamos. That is the point, to show that even blood, sweat and tears are a cyborg experience, affects shared by humans and machines.

II.

Israel Galván and Niño de Elche. Niño de Elche and Israel Galván. It isn’t just flamenco, contemporary dance or popular music. The two men whose names herald these lines are surely two of the most singular, and at the same time significant, artists anyone can meet in Spain. Each has a symbolic universe with the power to engender a language of his very own, to create and project his own world. It would be “as daft as a flamencologist”, to quote Marcelo del Campo, to reduce that to the incredible compass of Galván’s feet and the melismatic range of De Elche’s throat. These two carry the hallmark tools of flamenco further, away into the virtuosity of the negative: by denying it, flamenco expands its terrain by the day.

They have come together again [“Coplas Mecánicas”, ed.] and this encounter is a collision. Almost a combat, a battle of giants, a titanic struggle, and there are just the two of them. Nothing more. I mean: no plot, no template, no score. This pair with their powers, which they unleash to interact and to probe boundaries. One thing they both owe flamenco is an ability to capture expression, to convey unbridled subjectivity which, thanks to the flamenco camp, as I say, they can exploit without colonisation, free of the mechanical filters imposed by this capitalism where it is our lot to exist, and which converts any singularity in life into a commodity, a spectacle. Not here, this is something else.

Israel Galván. Niño de Elche. Two names that have become two brands. Two approaches forced to conquer the stages, festivals, recording companies, social networks, instagrams and facebook where art circulates in our times. As Guy Debord used to say of gitanos⁴, these are lives that do not resist capitalism but let it waft through them without allowing the death machine to alter their way of life. We see it, hear it, feel it in the sweat those two provoke. No wonder, then, that the jeers and cheers mingle in a soundtrack for their work, their careers, their lives. Their battle is also, of course, a conversation. These two are talking to each other and watching their chat is a privilege.

You sit there in your seat and you see two monsters talking. How odd that genre slang, the language of flamenco uses the word monster in a double sense, positive or negative depending. A monster is an artist so great that no adjective can suffice. Start applying attributes, praise and flattery and what emerges is the fate of Frankenstein, a statue that provokes fear and wonder. Two sides to the same coin. “Monster theory” permits opposites within the same figure without contradiction. But this is another merit in what these two do. What repels us, in their hands, gains appeal, and what enchants us they decide to trivialise. The sublime and the sinister in an endless exchange. Up and down, right and left. All this for a little over an hour, fluctuating before our eyes.

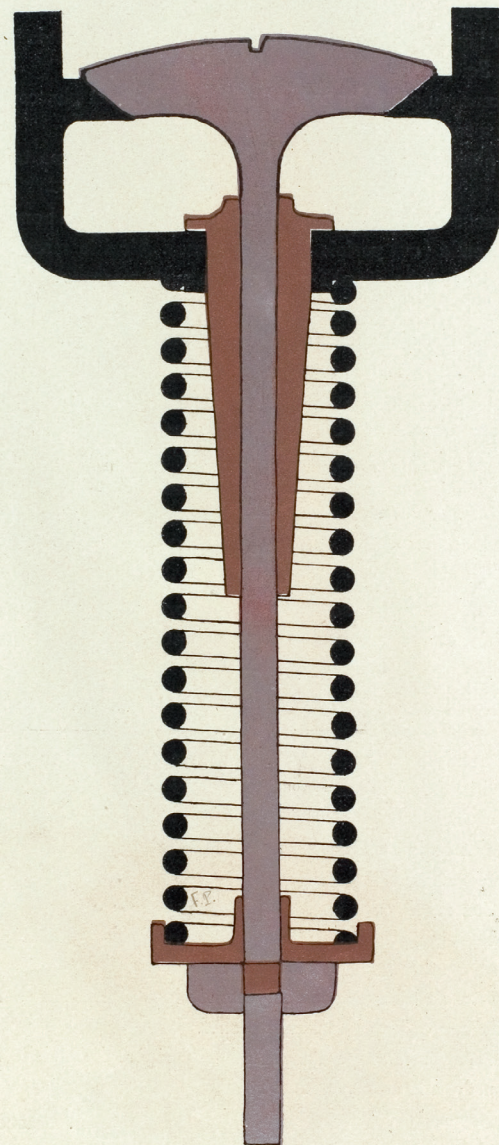
Imagine a kind of cross-dressing. Because at any given moment and before our very eyes, Niño de Elche becomes Israel Galván while Galván turns into De Elche. There is no disguise about it; this is cannibalism, anthropophagy. De Elche grabs Galván by the legs and gobbles him up like a bear with a rat. And out of his entrails Galván literally galvanizes the beast that swallowed him and the bile fluids turn solid in his intestines. And the stone is a weapon, morphing into a fulcrum so the lever can lift the planet. Yes, there is something hyperbolic about this encounter. Yet these are also two friends out for a stroll, telling jokes, affectionate in their amiable banter.

III.

The problem with machines is that people always associate them with steel, circuits, data networks, but strictly speaking machines are us. If we accept, for example, that we are bodies without organs, as Deleuze and Guattari would have it, then we are, intensely, pieces of a bigger machinery, components, loose parts in the social machine. The thing about machines is relationships, and that is because all those cogs link one part to another, one body to another, our community. Just imagine those two, Niño de Galván and Israel de Elche, under lockdown, with face masks, terrified by and terrifying the virus. Anyway, there is a great desire to make history. History with a capital H. And hysterically, sure, multiple voices turning apocalyptic, seeking publicity, Hey, look at me! This thing happening to us is unique! Well, yes and no, several generations of us have never witnessed a war or an epidemic but these things were common

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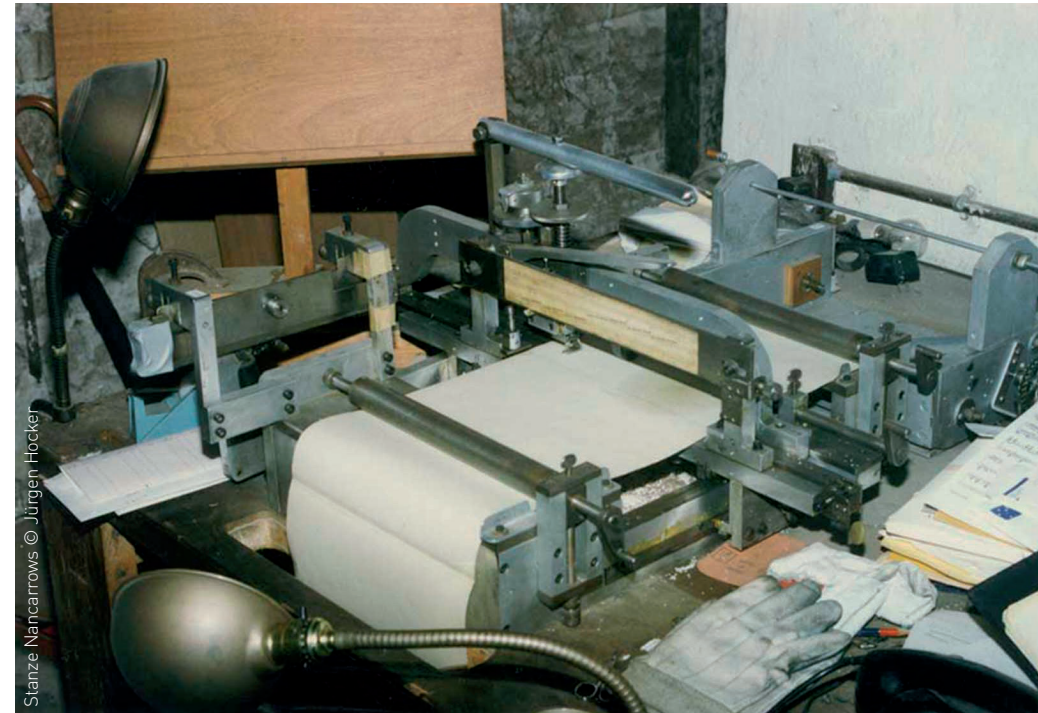
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Francis Picabia "Flamenca 391, n.3" © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2020 and Suzanne Nagy, Comité Picabia



in the lives of our grandparents, in the life of the world. Si acaso me muero/pago con la vida/y no sabía ningún cirujano/del mal que moría (If I should die/I will pay with my life/and no surgeon ever cured/the sickness that killed me) or Eran tan grades mis penas/que no caben más/porque me veo malito de muerte/en el hospital (So great are my sorrows/I can no longer bear them/for I am sick with death/in hospital) or Nadie se arrime a mi cama/que estoy etico de pena,/y el que de mi mal se muere/hasta la ropita le quema. (No one visits my bedside/I am wasted by anguish/and when this disease takes a life/they even burn the clothes.) These are old seguiriya lyrics and, yes, they speak of cholera epidemics, Spanish influenza, plague, typhus and tuberculosis. Some of those texts were even updated to talk about AIDS. The flamenco machine has a memory, pathos is revived to speak of life and death. I tell you, those

tense, jumbled up, all at once. That is why it is melancholy and utopian, all at once. José Bergamín used to say that 'paradox' was a word invented by stupid people for reality. This machine, there is no doubt, keeps us alive. Even in these times, when almost all of us are dead, this machine revives. A true story that will make your blood curdle. Galván de Elche in two little capsules, dead but alive. The living corpse! The zombie! Risen again! As Alexander Kluge says: "Es ist ein Irrtum, dass die Toten tot sind" ("Indeed, it is a misconception that the dead are dead.")

Pedro G. Romero, Sevilla-Barcelona, 9 June 2020

Translated from Spanish by Kate Vanovitch.

- 1 An apparatus that generates a poem from collective contributions, which has several authors.
- 2 The flamenco dancer and choreographer Vicente Escudero created his "Danza a los motores" in the 1920s to the sound of two electric motors.
- 3 José Val del Omar was a documentary and avant-garde filmmaker, photographer and inventor.
- 4 The Roma people in Spain generally refer to themselves with the term "gitano" (male, singular; "gitana" female, singular), derived from "Egiptano". Source: <https://www.romarchive.eu/de/terms/gitano-gitana/>, retrieved on: 25.06.2020.

Abb. Jürgen Hocker, Onlinequelle: <http://www.playerpianokonzerte.de/34%20Stanze1%20ok.jpg>