

# *Background*

## *The Gnostic Fausto. Back to the Future — Oscar Vilarroya*

Why Fausto? Why do we keep repeating the same stories? The conventional wisdom reckons that some myths and legends have a particular protean nature that allows their constant reinterpretation. But maybe it is simply because we are lazy. Who knows, but as one old man said in a Western, “when in doubt, choose the good guys.” So we have convinced ourselves that we chose Fausto because it was an ideal story to convey what we had in mind for this work.

Fausto is a classic German legend that portrays the pact that Fausto signs with the Devil: Mephisto agrees to satisfy Fausto’s mundane desires during a specific period of time, after which Fausto promises to submit his soul. The story has been revisited many times in literature, art, drama, opera and cinema, but it has always maintained a common moral gist: Fausto is usually pictured as indulging in sinful behaviors that drive him to his moral downfall, until he finally repents of his sins and finds redemption.

However, the first known Fausto, mentioned in the *Historia von Dr. Johann*

Faustus (an anonymous book published in Germany at the end of the XVI century), seems to be inspired by an earlier long living tradition: Gnosticism. Gnosticism was a heretic Christian movement that appeared in the Greco-Roman world during the first centuries of our era. For Gnostics, salvation is not attained through repentance, but through access to true knowledge. Gnostics believe that God is transcendent and immaterial, and that the world was created by a lesser god in an evil Fall. Humans are trapped in physical bodies, and our only way to escape such material condition is through Gnosis, that is, the reawakening of the internal spark of divine knowledge that we all have in us. To get such a liberating experience, humans need to learn secret methods and techniques and gain a deep insight into the mystery of divine knowledge.

In our opinion, the original Gnostic reading of the legend is timely and stimulating. The progress of AI technology has opened a number of scenarios that are approaching us to the Gnostic myths, such as the possibility of an unbounded access to all knowledge available in the world, as well as to the idea of digital immortality. Transhumanism, for instance, is a sort of neo-Gnosticism, in the sense that it predicts that, in a near future, humans will become omniscient and superintelligent thanks to technology that will be coupled with our brains. Furthermore, at present there are already different initiatives

around the world that are exploring the possibility of uploading the informational states of a particular brain into a computer, and hence of creating a digital copy of an individual's brain/mind that could, in principle, be maintained forever.

Therefore, we found it natural to call Fausto to see whether he could help us address these issues. In particular, we were interested in benefiting from his legend to explore questions such as the following: Can a mind be uploaded onto a digital system? Does digital immortality have any sense for embodied beings like humans? Can an eternal life in a virtual world replace a limited life in a real world? Is it possible to recreate a person from a set of digital traces? What does it mean for a human to have the experience of omniscience? In the last years these and many more questions have begun to leave the realm of science-fiction to become part of our everyday discussions, and it is fair to say that we do not have good answers to any of them. Hence our interest in throwing such issues into the arena, and do it with class, with an opera, what else?

The point of departure of our adaptation came from a simple idea: instead of demanding Fausto's soul, Mephisto would ask for his body. This allowed us to set the focus of attention on the body as an essential part of, not only skillful behavior, but also intelligence and emotions in general, as well as to emphasize the unexpected difficulty that its emulation poses. As such, the body becomes in itself an object of absolute desire, even for the most advanced Artificial Intelligence that we could imagine: virtual Mephisto. In ad-

dition, the Gnostic reading of the legend allowed us to link contemporary topics, such as singularity, transhumanism, digital immortality or mind uploading, with the origins of the legend: the quest for the fusion with the divine and absolute knowledge.

Our version maintains the three main characters of the legend, Fausto, Mephisto and Margherita, but we have adapted them to our particular project. Fausto becomes a hipster entrepreneur who is obsessively trying to achieve the age-old human desire for immortality and total knowledge (gnosis) through artificial intelligence, virtual agents, apps, computer games, and augmented reality. Margherita, his girlfriend, is an extremely brilliant computer scientist who is helping him in his grand project. In turn, Mephisto is a senior virtual agent, with the appearance of a hip-hop gangster, working for the Cloud. He is tasked with creating virtual agents of dead people based on deep learning from their digital traces (pictures, twitter messages, emails, facebook pages, uploaded video clips) in order to harass, blackmail or simply scare people. However, his secret ambition is to become flesh and blood and leave behind his virtual nature.

Apart from the three main characters, we have introduced the choir as a sort of chorus of the Greek tragedies. The chorus is thought to have played the role of "ideal spectator," showing the real spectator a representation of his own emotions, such as we show in the Prolog, but also introducing what the characters could not say, as well as providing them with advice and insight, such as in scene IV.4. Fausto,

ascolta bene. This, we thought, could give the story dramatic depth and musical richness.

Regarding the adaptation, we took, as I said at the beginning, the Gnostic Fausto as the source of inspiration for our work. This sets the story in a different path than the classical Faustian story that goes from sinful behavior to repentance and redemption. Instead, we develop a more existential dimension, exploring the journey from hubris to wisdom through renunciation.

As for the plot, Fausto is a loose adaptation of the original legend. The story begins with a tragic event -Margherita's suicide- that triggers the core of the dramatic plot: the confrontation between Fausto's desperation and Mephisto's secret ambition. We have purposely set the pact at the end of the story, in order to maintain the dramatic tension on the process of Fausto's decision, rather than on Fausto's actions. This provides a certain Hamletian tone that floats over the whole play, unfolding more clearly in scene IV.1 *La vita o l'eternità*.

The free adaptation has allowed us to introduce other echoes all along the play, such as a religious incursion in the last scene IV.5 *Hai fatto la scelta giusta*. Assuming the role of minister, Mephisto transforms the mind uploading process into some sort of Eucharist, where he establishes himself as the recipient of the ritual. But perhaps the most important echo is that of Goethe. Even if our version is quite distant from his Faust, we wanted to pay tribute to his masterwork, which has

been a source of inspiration and admiration until our days. In this sense, our Prolog includes Goethe's witch's spell *Hexen-Einmaleins*, and our Coda is based on the words of Goethe's Faust II pronounced by the Chorus Mysticus.

In sum, in our opinion, Fausto is a look at timely and intriguing contemporary issues regarding our nature of human beings through the lens of a classical legend, which hopefully will provide a new light to questions that have haunted and captivated humanity for so many centuries. Or, simply, it is fun. Who knows.