Most of Javier Téllez's (1969, Valencia, Venezuela) works are collaborations with patients of mental institutions. With both of his parents having been psychiatrists in the provincial city of Valencia, Venezuela, giving him an early exposure to mental illness and the institutional system of representing and treating it, Téllez works on notions of identity through the alterity inscribed in the duality of the normal and pathology, inside and outside, the self and the other, based on the conviction that exclusion is the very foundation of authority. Téllez explores madness as a social language, and his theatrical settings uncover the basic mimetic asymmetry in the mental institution, in which the patient language is always the language of the symptom. "One of the things that interested me the most, Téllez says in relation to one of his collaborative works, was the patient's ability to "do the voices" of the psychiatrists and other institutional staff. The ability is seldom present on the other side -- the language of the institution can never mimic those subjected to its dominant discourse. "In a collaborative project, exposed to the vulnerability involved in transgressing the borders imposed by the institutional language, his work..."
unearths the potential to counter this asymmetry of power, acting out the institutional power relations in an act of excessive, carnivalesque counter-mimicry. Most of his work includes masquerade as a means to respond and expose the language/representation of madness as social camouflage, thus allowing his actors and collaborators a space of intervention theirsself-representation. Téllez’s aim is to create an aesthetics that is also an ethics of difference.

Oedipus Marshal (2007, 30 min.) is a 30 minute-long narrative video featuring actors from the Oasis Clubhouse, a psychiatric facility near Aspen, Colorado. Co-written with Aaron Sheley and developed in collaboration with the actors, the film brings together four elements: the Western, ancient Greek drama (in this case, Sophocles; Oedipus Rex), Japanese Noh Theatre, and mental illness (which is also a topic in Sophocles; narrative of the blinded Oedipus). Here it is put into a structural relation with tragedy and the inevitable failure of the hero. The actors wear masks taken from the Noh theatre, where the mask is fundamental to the coded system of representation and can also be understood as a de-personalisation of the actor and enhancement of the structural element. Equally, in the description of Téllez, the mask in Oedipus Marshal becomes a tool for resisting the identification and diagnosis of madness through physiognomy, institutionalising implicit social exclusion and norms.

Reading Material

A Perfect Place to Die: Theatre in Hitchcock’s Films. Alenka Zupancic, in: Slavoj Zizek, What You Always Wanted to Know About Lacan But Were Afraid to Ask

Hitchcock