

LIFE ON THE EDGE - of the dorsal/ventral seam - *John Appleton with Pete Green*



[1]

This is another of my short illustrated papers that describe perspectives that have been learned by the use of whole body mental imagery that I call [Posture Release Imagery](#). The Alexander Technique, as well as other disciplines, has demonstrated quite sufficiently that the thoughts and images that are harbored in the mind control our postural support and movement patterns, often to our detriment. The often very unusual imagery exercises that are described in this paper and others can go a long way to positively changing what detrimental (and often painful) patterns we have. The term *dorsal/ventral seam* in this paper's title will be familiar to only those who have read something of my other writing. However, understanding the ideas in this paper are easier than the title might suggest. Illustrations accompany the visual imagery exercises.

Introductory comments -

Control of the body, unity within the body, and freedom in the body are concepts that are arguably necessary for graceful movement and efficient structural support. Yet they can also seem antithetical to each other. For instance, how can there be unity in the body as well as freedom in the use of its various parts? The conflict encountered by the joining of these concepts is resolved by the concepts of **elasticity** (the tendency of a body to return to its original shape after it has been stretched or compressed) and **flow** (the motion characteristic of fluids - liquids or gases). Elasticity suggests flexibility combined with resilience and flow seems to describe a quality of gracefulness.

But how does a control system in the body ("primary control" in the Alexander Technique) elastically direct flowing body movement? Where is the unity in the body and where is the freedom? Is the freedom at the joints of bones or elsewhere?

Pinpointing the source of grace, elasticity, fluidity, and so forth would seem illusive. However, I venture here that one major mechanism, if not *the* major mechanism, for the graceful transfer of control and direction in the body takes place (or rather should take place) along the dorsal-ventral **seam**. To begin to learn what that is and to more easily understand the ideas written ahead, have a quick look through the illustrations in this paper and then return.

Within the Alexander Technique, graceful movement and graceful "waiting" (inhibition) are generally thought to be the result of appropriate control of impulses in the relationship of the head, neck, and body. That may be largely true, but other relationships are at work as well. Below are three descriptions of other control systems operating in the body that I propose, and have written about:

1. the relationship between the *dorsal and ventral* surfaces.[2]
2. the relationship between *three functional segments* of our body... the "director," "motor," and "rudder" segments.[3] This control system includes what is called "primary control" within the Alexander Technique, and what I have called "secondary control," which involves our "tail," tail section, or "rudder"
3. the relationship between *the eyes and "primary control."* [4] This relationship is related to the subject of this paper.

This paper is not about those control systems. So, for now, let's focus on yet another relationship in the body that I suggest promotes and directs graceful and elastic movement. That relationship is between the core of the body and its "edges," what I term the *dorsal-ventral seam* (also d-v seam). (In scientific literature, the terms, "dorsal-ventral boundary" and "dorsal-ventral border" are used, though I know of no illustrations other than my own that fairly accurately delineate it throughout the body on humans and on numerous animals.)

The dorsal and ventral surfaces -

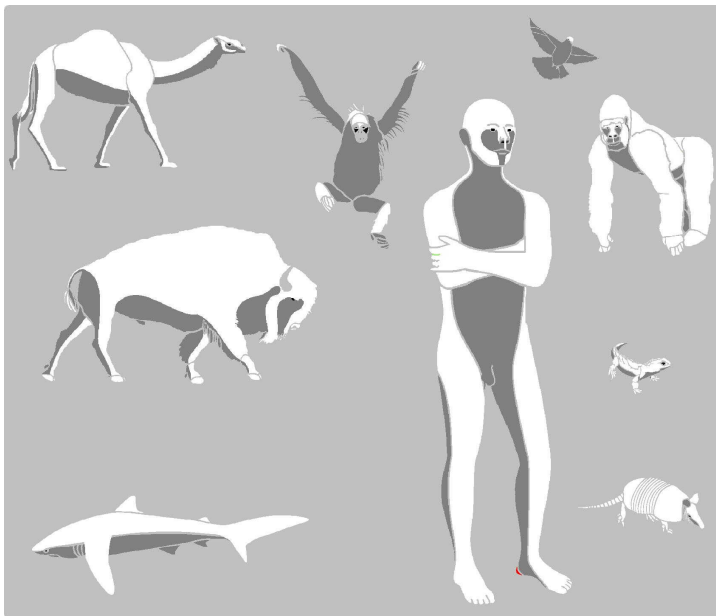


Fig. 1 - *The dorsal and ventral surfaces on various animals*

Before describing the value and function of the d-v seam, it is important to understand where the dorsal and ventral surfaces are located on the body as well as how they neurologically function to encourage/dictate optimal postural support .

We are two-sided; Figure 1 shows the dorsal and ventral surfaces on a human figure and several different animals. The d-v seam is the edge where the white and dark gray meet on the various animals and the human figure. The dorsal is shown as the white surfaces and the ventral is shown as the dark gray surfaces. On horizontally-oriented animals, the dorsal surface is on top though may still be called

the "back" of the animal. On upright humans , the dorsal surface is described as being on the back side. This is partially true but not entirely accurate. First, significant portions of the dorsal surface on humans are **not** on the back side (the legs, arms, and face, for instance... see Fig. 1). In addition, in healthy posture, the dorsal surface on humans, in most of our activities, is also oriented more upwardly, if even only slightly, than the ventral surface. This is important, because healthy response to gravity requires a predominance of this relationship, where the dorsal surface generally faces more upward than its opposing side, the ventral surface.

If the concept of dividing the body into dorsal and ventral surfaces is new to you, study Figure 1 for a while so that you are generally familiar with where the two surfaces exist on you, and where the border or seam between the two is roughly located.

I am not aware of a complete delineation of the two surfaces illustrated anywhere else like I have created here, but I think that it will stand up to examination by zoologists and anatomists. To better understand how the dorsal and ventral surfaces on people relate to four-legged and earlier animals, stand with a table in front of you, lean forward 30-45 degrees by pivoting at your hips, and put your hands on the table. The purpose of this action is to help you to feel a little more horizontal, and four-legged. If you next imagine having a bit of a tail that extends beyond and past your hips, front limbs (arms) reaching all the way to the floor, and an elongated face and snout, you have become a giraffe, perhaps. And a giraffe's dorsal and ventral surfaces (and now yours) would be similar to the camel's in Figure 1.

Learning (or intuiting, as many can do) the location of these two surfaces on our bodies can be valuable in improving your structural function or use. That is because a sense of light expansion should be generally promoted on *all* of the dorsal surface and mild contraction should be generally be promoted on *all* of the ventral surface. (It is important to note that the "promoting" is achieved by imagining it so, rather than by imitating or trying to "do" something to make it so.) Though the shape of the dorsal and ventral surfaces have changed over evolution, their function in body structure and mechanics has not changed.

The dorsal-ventral seam -

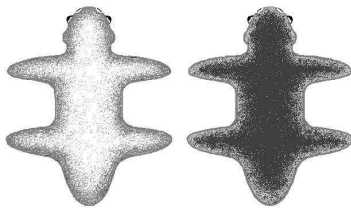


Fig. 2 - Dorsal and ventral "bear rug" views

Figure 2 shows an even more simplified archetypal depiction of the dorsal and ventral surfaces on what I call a "bear rug" view of tetrapod (which includes human) surfaces. This method of showing the two surfaces makes obvious the outer edges of the body that I call the d-v seam. (Incidentally, when conceptualizing the dorsal and ventral surfaces and the seam on yourself, include a suggestion of a tail, since we do have a coccyx or "historical" tail, with musculature and nerve fibers associated with it.)



Fig. 3 - Dorsal and ventral views of the daisy stingray
© George Burgess

<http://www.flmnh.ufl.edu/fish/Gallery/Descript/DaisyStingray/DaisyStingray.html>

Figure 3 shows the living creature that is perhaps most useful in clearly displaying much of the concept of dorsal and ventral surfaces and their appropriate relationship, as well as the concept of the d-v seam and its major importance. The two-sided stingray has unmistakably defined dorsal and ventral surfaces (except for the area around the eyes). The ray also demonstrates considerable activity that originates along the edge between this dorsal and ventral surfaces, the d-v seam.

The dorsal-ventral seam (or boundary, in scientific terminology) is arguably the most important feature of all animals. Along this important narrow zone most of our senses lie. Nostrils, eyes, ears, and our limbs develop from this zone and they are our means of perceiving and interacting with the world around us. Only our tactile and kinesthetic senses function as well in areas other than along the d-v seam. This is all interesting intellectually, but now that you are familiar with the dorsal and ventral surfaces on a stingray and human, at least, it is time to experiment with an image to experience tactile/kinesthetic sensations that can seem much more valuable.

Imagining new features on our dorsal-ventral seam -

The following imagery exercise can be experimented with whether sitting or standing, though sitting up on the edge of a chair and leaning **slightly** forward may be the easiest to imagine that *you have "fins" or "wings" like the stingray starting to grow from the d-v seam all over your body*. You read that right... you are developing what you might think of as flanges or thin fins all along the seam! (Return to Figs. 1 and 2 to more easily interpolate the seam on to yourself.)

Perhaps imagine that the growths extend only two or three inches outward at this point... they occur around your arms, down your sides, around the sides of your legs and back around a small "tail"! This includes, in smaller versions of the fins, between and around the fingers and toes. In addition, imagine that the "growths" also run up both sides of the neck to the base of the ear and along the seam on the head and face as shown on Figure 1. This will probably require looking back at illustrations for some guidance.

For people who are new to Posture Release Imagery, here are a few pointers:

As you imagine changes along the seam, and expansion and contraction on your dorsal and ventral surfaces, you will indeed pass through many feelings, sensations, and all will feel like different postures, movements, stretches, and sways. Do not judge them initially, all of them are right, because they represent loosening changes from your habitual postural and movement patterns, and at the same all of them are wrong, because you do not want to be permanently frozen in the new patterns either. We are not working towards right or wrong so much as we are looking for healthy, and peaceful, and free. A body we like, a body we like right now.

Allow the movements and feelings to take place, even if you don't understand them, or don't particularly want to feel them. Just allow and trust the old, and the new feelings. Look at them, with your "mind's eye" for a bit. Try, and then succeed in moving the sensations around a bit... by imagining. Think about tension moving out to the edges, and then farther than the edges. Even pull the edges out in the form of fins, just out from the seam, elastically extending the seam.

Movement along the dorsal-ventral seam -



Fig. 4 - *The core and edge of a stingray*

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com>
photograph by Wolcott Henry

In Figure 4, the stingray has "limbs/wings/fins" that have extremely expanded or stretched edges on the front, back, and sides of the body. The core of the body is much smaller and is more convex, or raised on the dorsal side, and flat, concave, or slightly hollowed on the ventral side. (Within our own bodies, a sense of a core that is "raised" on the dorsal side and flat or hollowed on the ventral side encourages the ideal relationship between the two surfaces... and better structural support/posture!)

A short video, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H0oXjtTBW9c>, shows the movement of rays in the water and along the ocean floor. Watching it helps clarify several qualities of movement and structure:

- the distinction between the body core and the edges
- locomotion and wave motion originating along these edges and advancing to the core
- core stability, though not rigidity, in movement
- refined and specific movement isolated in one part of the body

In this video, the interplay of unity, control, and freedom in the body is beautiful to observe and made easier to visualize and understand.

Figure 5, below, shows another version of how extreme, and extremely important, the dorsal-ventral edge is on the ray. Though our edges are not as visible, could they not be neurologically just as important?



Fig. 5 - *Power along the seams* [5]

Imagining movement along OUR dorsal-ventral seam -

If you imagine your new "fins" or "wings" moving a little, but not too much, it should produce a relaxing and releasing feeling to the core area of the body... and perhaps more. Imagine these seams or "fins" moving, on one portion of the body and then the next portion until you can envision the changes in a more general sense about your d-v seam and whole body (see Fig. 6 and interpolate for humans). Success with a generalized light movement or wave of the d-v seam, fins, or wings can take practice and time. But some success (and surprise!) is likely if you devote yourself to the image.

The images in Figure 6 that follow represent the two surfaces of any four-legged creature, as well as a human (from the tip of the lips to the tip of the "tail"). The line in the middle is the seam. The exercise here is to experiment with movement along this seam, curling it up (exposing more ventral side), curling it down (draping the dorsal side over the ventral side), opening or "waking" up along it, or creating a wave that travels along the seam through the length of the body.

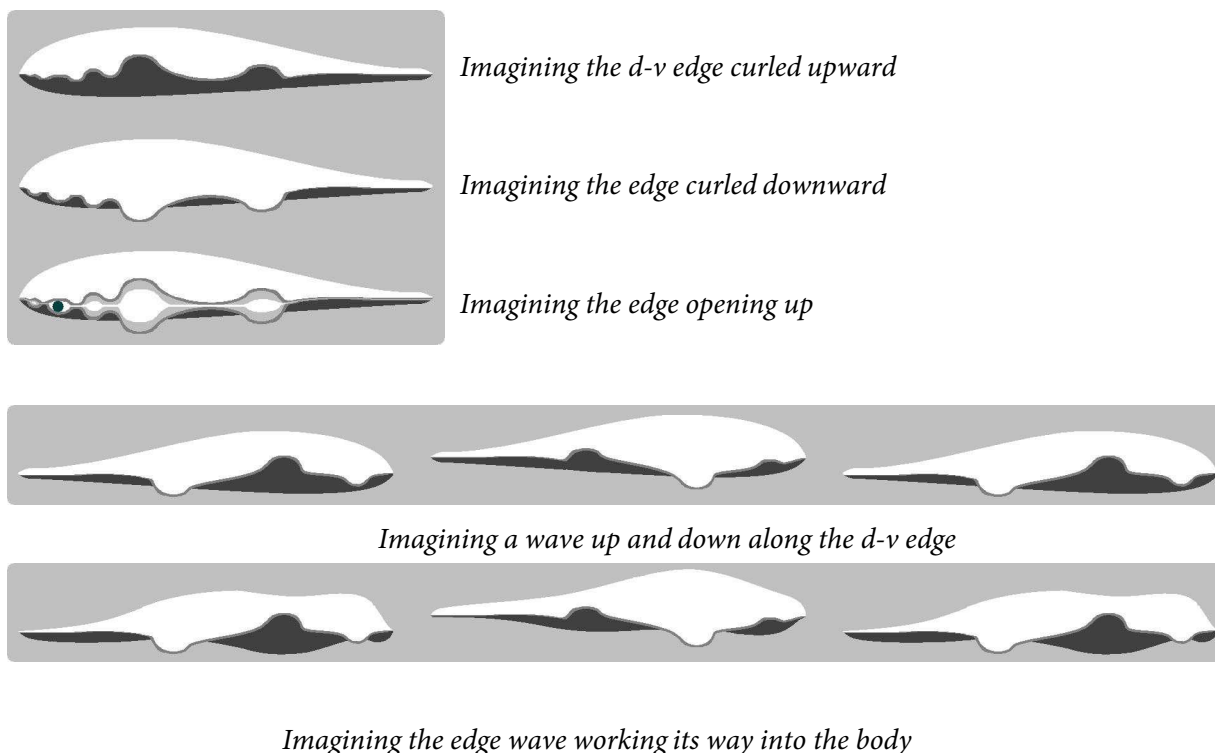


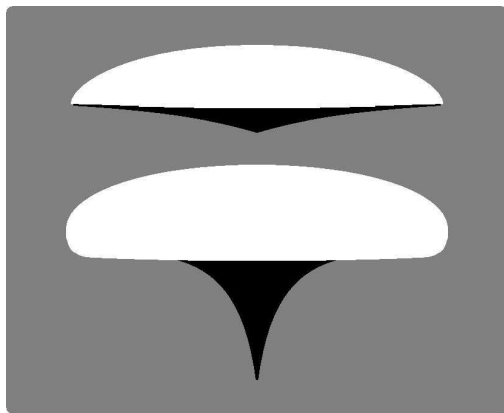
Fig. 6 - versatility along the seam

D-v seam imagery can bring about several structural and muscular adjustments as well as new pleasant sensations. Not only can a sense of release in one area of the body or another take place, but also a sense of appropriate tension or increased "tone" can be developed along the seam, but *not* within the body core. This is actually very good for you and should be fostered. It produces a sense of "intensity" and the ability to do hard work without core strain, which for us is an experience of less effort. As you are able to imagine the fin- or wing-like parts, you can come to imagine them all turned upward, all turned downward,

backward or forward, and even undulating up and down or backward or forward. This imagining will temporarily (and later more permanently) create a sense of more space in your body and between body parts. You are becoming more graceful.

Imagining waking up along the dorsal-ventral seam -

Along with learning more of the appropriate sensations for a healthy work-related structure, imagining the d-v seam "open" or split apart is good way to "wake up" all over and to feel more fully aware of world around you. This is a great morning exercise as well as at any lull during the day... like opening your eyes everywhere along the seam. It is also a good way to drop your emotions of the moment and "re-calibrate" them. With this image of your seam splitting, you are, in effect, "coming apart at the seams," and that is good. It is a strange, new, and yet effective way to give up unnecessary control/mis-control.



the principle of dorsal-ventral health, illustrated

the dorsal-ventral principle, exaggerated

Fig. 7 - the dorsal-ventral principle

Figure 7 shows a way of thinking about the dorsal and ventral surfaces, as well as variations in the nature of the seam. The principle of the basic dorsal-ventral relationship illustrated here can be applied to something more complex, the sensations of your body surface, to help bring it into a more orderly and healthy structure.

The white represents the dorsal surface of our bodies and the black the ventral surface, just as in Fig. 5 and most of my dorsal-ventral drawings. The bulging white dorsal side represents expanded and light surface, floating upward. The black ventral side, narrowed to a point represents a contracted and heavy surface being pulled downward. This relationship of the two surfaces, coupled with tension also moving out to the seams, continually changes muscle, fascia, and skeletal relationships to their most efficient and, therefore, most graceful response to gravity.

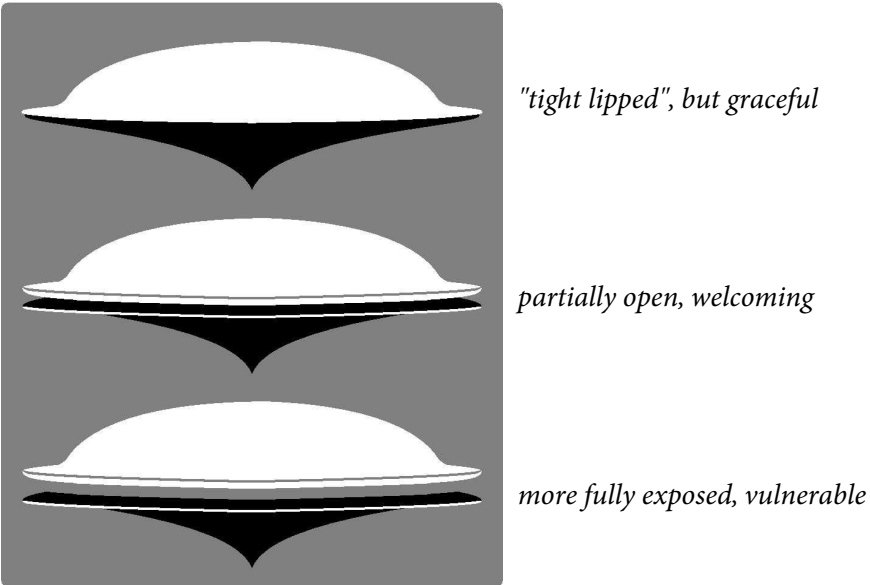


Fig. 8 - *The opening of the seam*

Figure 8 uses the above archetypal form to demonstrate opening up. The process of the seam opening up can be thought of as a continuous "eyelid" that is opening, or separate "lids" opening. In this manner, it is possible to imagine wider eyes, for instance, or nostrils and ears opening even more than we think they are open... and later closing. The whole process of imagining the entire d-v seam closing throughout the body, like the upper eyelid does over the eyes, can aid in becoming more drowsy... ready for sleep and rejuvenation.

Life lived with awareness of the seam -

With practice, you can become creative with how you envision the d-v seam, creating combinations of the above images and applying them to your body. That is what the seam is there for. The seam is where *graceful* expression of all kinds begins. Without the seam, we would be "bumps on a log," inexpressive and lacking levels of perception. We would certainly be less mammalian... and more reptilian. Some day I may suggest a full vocabulary of d-v seam imagery for theater, dance and daily life.

It will become *kinesthetically* quite noticeable that the d-v seam serves more than one invaluable function. It is:

1. the portal for most perception... which requires "openness"
(and improves with *imagined* "openness")
2. the origin of virtually all forms of locomotion... demanding "tone"
(and improves with *imagined* increased tone)
3. the locus of emotional expression, providing communication of our feelings and soul.
4. and the place where tension in the body can be turned to good, or useful "intention."

I have written in an earlier paper, "Eyes are the Window to the... Head/Neck/Back Relationship," that the eyes, and the area around them, are very important as directors of postural set. However, the remainder of the narrow zone, the d-v seam, which the eyes are only part of, has considerable influence on posture and structure as well. Imaginary manipulation of any portion of this zone can be give you a wonderfully new sense of yourself and relief from some habitual postural weakness. In addition, imagining other portions of the d-v seam, beside the eyes, helps us to "see" and experience the world more clearly.

A point is worth mentioning concerning strength and our limbs. Limbs and their attachment to the body core may seem the most powerful parts of locomotion, but all points along the d-v seam neurologically aid in locomotion and help to allow the whole body to aid in any given effort. As a result, imagining *any* portion of the d-v seam undulating, for instance, can provide a valuable experience toward freeing up and strengthening movement you normally would attribute only to your legs or arms.

The greatest value in playing with d-v seam imagery, in my estimation, is that it provides us ways to get "outside of ourselves" or break free of too much self-concern. Disciplines that endeavor to show ways to better use, including this one, can be traps as well, traps of self-importance. We can spend hours of time trying to learn disciplines that should not be ends in themselves. The d-v seam imagery, and especially that which explores the idea of a fully open seam, gives us an experience of ourselves that is seemingly beyond our borders. It can be the most difficult of imagery to play with since giving up a sense of our borders, of our physical selves, to a larger world can be frightening. However, I think the rewards outweigh the "loss." Anyone interested in more awareness, a gentle but substantial influence on their environment, more graceful flow, humility and, finally, less effort in their lives would benefit to make this imagery a challenge.



[6]



[7]

Superman is one cultural image that suggests strength that is selfless. Does Superman's cape, perhaps, give us a sense of an individual with an expanded and open d-v seam? "Up in the sky, it's a bird, it's a plane, it's a strong and selfless person."

Also, arms wide open, in a gesture of openness to others has always been an inspirational symbol of an individual who has an open and healthy posture themselves.



[8]



[9]

It can be seen and felt that the intent of their arm position suggests something that extends beyond their own body limits. In this sense, openness, and welcoming or caring intention are qualities that extend beyond our fingertips and beyond the body.

I think that this paper is worthy of strong consideration and the imagery exercises worthy of diligent mental effort. Both perception and movement have their origins along the dorsal-ventral seam, and our lives are "lived" along this seam. Some areas of our minds/bodies may be very open, but in other areas we may be unknowingly closed off and/or overly "sensitive" to the world. Just like closing our eyes can remove us from receiving visual input until they're opened again, exploring this seam imagery helps show us where we may be unnecessarily and habitually closing ourselves off to the world.

This imagery may not be easy initially, but it becomes easier over time as experiences build upon each other. Allow yourself an initial time or two to fail. Slow and steady wins the race.

Pete and I consider the ideas and suggestions in this paper a very important addition to the [principles](#) and [exercises](#) of Posture Release Imagery. We also think the concepts enhance the principles and practice of the Alexander Technique, as well as the understanding of the human psychophysical experience in general. We hope you come to think so too.

Thank you.

Endnotes -

- [1] <http://media-2.web.britannica.com/eb-media/90/81290-004-19CD3BA7.jpg>
- [2] See "Where is the Alexander Technique's 'right brain,' or Use and the use of imagery," pp. 5-7, "Postulating that our neurological models for musculoskeletal support, movement, and emotional expression come from archetypal forms in early organisms," pp. 2-3, and "Illustrations and mental imagery of archetypal forms of early organisms – a new approach to exposing and releasing habitual and dysfunctional posture," pp. 4-5 at posturereleaseimagery.org/my-articles. posturereleaseimagery.org/my-articles .
- [3] See "Where is the Alexander Technique's 'right brain,' or Use and the use of imagery," pp. 8-12, "Postulating that our neurological models for musculoskeletal support, movement, and emotional expression come from archetypal forms in early organisms," pp. 4, and "Illustrations and mental imagery of archetypal forms of early organisms – a new approach to exposing and releasing habitual and dysfunctional posture," pp. 6-8
- [4] See "Eyes are the Window to the... Head/Neck/Back Relationship." at <http://posturereleaseimagery.org/my-articles> .
- [5] a composite from Barcroft Media
- [6] <http://www.starstore.com/acatalog/superman-costume-col.jpg>
- [7] <http://www.kidscostumesandmore.com>
- [8] http://i129.photobucket.com/albums/p209/ladybutterfly_photo/thWithArmsWideOpen_small.jpg
- [9] <http://www.goringe.net/tanya/archives/Rio%20-%20Christ%202-thumb.jpg>