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PLEASE, NOTE:

These are the posts (or entries) that I have published in my academic professional blog *The Joys of Teaching Literature* (blogs.uab.cat/saramartinalagre/, since September 2010-) between September 2014 and August 2015. The volume, like the four previous ones, covers, then, a complete academic year.

I have not edited the texts. They may show some dissimilarities with the final published posts. The differences are, however, negligible.

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1-IX-2014 60 HOURS: WATCHING A TV SERIES (AND WHY IT IS NOT WORTH IT)

In 2006 I published a monographic volume on *The X-Files*, entitled *Expediente X: En honor a la verdad*. I am practically certain that I was the first person in Spain to attempt to cover a whole TV series in a book with the intention of offering an in-depth analysis (accessible to the general readership) rather than just a guide with episode summaries (I did include that, too). If you're curious the volume is here: <http://ddd.uab.cat/record/118437>. *The X-Files* is still today my favourite TV series, and I still consider it much superior to others who are now much better known. Actually, I find that Chris Carter's brainchild, which lasted from 1993 to 2002 does not even exist for my own students, born around the time it was launched. A pity.

The X-Files was 200 episodes long and amounted to 150 viewing hours. Others 'x-philes' like me can verify for you what a torture seeing the complete series was, as Tele5 cancelled it with no warning, and the final two seasons could only be seen on private channel Fox TV, or on the then new, extremely expensive DVDs. Flat-rate internet access was beginning as the series reached its end and I'm totally sure that *The X-Files* was a key factor in the popularisation of piratical downloading among us using ADSL services. This, as we know, is a practice that has totally altered the way we see TV series, which is no longer dependent on their being shown on TV at all.

Anyway, a lo que iba: the long struggle to see the end of *The X-Files* put me off watching any other TV series for a couple of years. Then *Lost* came, in 2004, and like millions around the world I bit the hook and followed it with a crazy passion until its horrendously disappointing ending in 2010. That's enough, I vowed to myself: no more TV series for me, unless they're done and over. Then, last academic year, an MA student handed in an excellent paper on the hero-villain Omar from *The Wire* (2002-8) swearing to me this was the *one* series I could *not* miss. The IMDB rating is 9.4, in the

range of *Game of Thrones* (9.5), *Breaking Bad* (9.6) or *The Sopranos* (9.3). 60 viewing hours later I can say now that Omar is the only thing I truly enjoyed from the series.

It is not my aim to review here *The Wire*, nor to question the taste of those 133,284 IMDB users who have awarded it that impressive 9.4. No. I aim at questioning, rather, the current vogue for TV American series that, more often than not, turn out to be not that good after all. Arguably, the new wave quality TV series started with David Lynch's *Twin Peaks* (ABC, 1990-1), which, in its turn, inspired *The X-Files* (Fox TV). The current boom, however, is usually connected with HBO's *The Sopranos* (1999-2007). Indeed, HBO has produced many other successful series: from *Sex and the City* to current hits *Game of Thrones* and *True Detective*. It also produced everyone's favourite, best-valued ever mini-TV series, *Band of Brothers* (2001). But is it all, really, really, as good as so many claim? Hasn't HBO contributed to inflating this impression?

I have read many opinions in praise of *The Wire* (also HBO) claiming that it works like a novel. My own consumption of this series corroborates this even though it's been a bit accidented (I saw seasons one and two in Spring, not continuously, and then have binged on seasons three to five this August, at a rate of three episodes an evening). The question is that at the (fast) rate I read *The Wire* would be the equivalent of a 3,600 page novel, more or less. *Band of Brothers*, which I loved, was 11-hours long, the approximate equivalent of reading a 660-page novel. If you ask me, in the end what we consume with each TV series is *one* story, no matter how many subplots this has. And my watching *The Wire* has left me with the clear impression that for *one* story I'm not willing to use more than twenty hours any more in my life. Whether this is TV or print fiction (sorry George R.R. Martin).

At one point in which we were desperately bored (no Omar in that episode), my husband and I worked out that 60 hours amounted to about 30 films, that is 30 stories. Supposing we only enjoyed half of these, we would still have 15 stories to remember with pleasure. Life is short, there's so much to see and read, why use 60 hours in *one* story if many more pleasurable ones could be accessed in less time?

When I give friends, students and colleagues my line about why watching overhyped (American) TV is wasting precious time they usually tell me that I don't understand the pleasures of seeing these new-wave HBO(-inspired) series: the pleasure, they tell me, is in the *process* not in the end result. You don't watch to reach a sense of closure but, simply, to watch. Fair enough. My answer is, then, that I'd rather watch comedy (say *Big Bang Theory*) as in that case I need not worry about narrative arcs extended among many seasons and years. Sit-coms have that: you can plunge in and out, never mind about who Ted Mosby finally met in *How I Met your Mother* (2005-14).

Conclusions? It seems I am going to stick to mini-series. I am actually yearning to see again the British trilogy based on Michael Dobbs's novels *House of Cards* (1990), *To Play the King* (1993) and *The Final Cut* (1995), currently being remade (or plundered) by Netflix (yes, not even a TV channel but an internet streaming service). As for *Breaking Bad*, which I have not followed, and seemed next on the list after *The Wire*,

well, I don't know... Add to this that I have just given up on BBC's *Sherlock* after the awfully embarrassing episode about Watson's wedding (3x3).

It's that kind of week in which I just want to read...

4-IX-2014 WHEN STUDENTS MUST BE EXPELLED (OR, WHEN MUST STUDENTS BE EXPELLED?)

I have chosen a very tricky topic for this, my 300th post, inspired by an article in *El País*, entitled "La Universidad expulsa a 30.000 alumnos al año por rendir poco" (http://sociedad.elpais.com/sociedad/2014/08/27/actualidad/1409163082_894501.html). I don't know what to make of the word 'expels' in this headline, as I connect it with inadmissible behaviour. I would have used instead 'no permite seguir (sus estudios)', which is not quite the same.

Some raw data: the Spanish public university has about 1,000,000 students, which means that 3% (= 30,000) are barred from following a particular degree, though not from attending university altogether. The article explains that after two failed attempts to complete a degree third opportunities are hard to get by.

In the old Licenciatura times (before 2008), students might attempt to pass a subject 6 times (this included the September exams, now gone); the trick was that 'no presentado' did not count, which in practice meant that students might take years, even a decade, to obtain the corresponding credits. The new 'regimen de permanencia' in my university (each has its own) has regulated this, establishing a minimum of credits to continue in the degree and also determining that 3 'matrículas', that is, three chances to register in about three years, is the maximum time for a student to pass a subject.

The regulations to remain in a particular degree are not very harsh. My university, for instance, establishes that first year students must pass 12 ECTS credits (out of 60) as a requirement to enrol in second-year subjects. They have two years to complete a minimum of 30 first-year credits. As I've been frequently told, one thing is how you design a Syllabus for a degree and a very different one is how students follow it... The regulations are intended, then, to draw a line beyond which a student can be told to give up. Or *must* be told.

Last Spring we at UAB counted for the first time how our students are doing in the new European-style degrees. I actually got into a panic (I'm BA degree Coordinator) because a good student warned me that he had used up the three chances in two of his subjects and, now in his fourth year, he might not be able to finish the degree. Holy cow, I thought, how many more must there be? Well, it turns out that 45 students are facing the same problem –though what really scared me was that a handful, about 5, had exhausted their chances for between 4 and 5 subjects.

Then a Coordinators' meeting was called and I discovered that this was not so bad, as some students in other degrees were in trouble in 10 subjects, and a particular degree had one third of all its students at risk of being 'expelled' (in too many cases because of transversal subjects irrelevant to their studies). We were told that new instructions would soon follow and that, most likely, the 3-chances rule would become a 4-chance rule, as it has (I think). I hope I am not disclosing any sensitive details here...

What do I think of all this? The old Licenciatura system was simply bizarre. It perpetuated the presence of students in our classrooms unnecessarily, and did not encourage them to make an effort. I firmly believe that the new system, with its three chances to register for a subject, is far more reasonable. What I did not expect, and do not quite understand, is that so many students would be in trouble. Somehow, I imagined that the problems would be concentrated in the first and second year but I never imagined that students about to graduate might fail to do so because of just 1 subject, even a first-year one.

I don't know whether this will have been taken into account but for me there is a clear difference between the student in trouble because of 1 subject, and the student in trouble because of 5 (or 10). The regulations clearly require some leeway to solve individual circumstances, and in a way they already cover that. On the other hand, my very personal impression is that students have not really paid heed to the sword dangling over their heads; many have proceeded with a certain cavalier attitude, perhaps hoping that the university would not really dare 'expel them'.

The article in *El País* actually dealt with an unfair situation in the Universidad de Oviedo by which misinformation about registration requirements had put many students on the brink of expulsion. I agree that the regulations must be clear, transparent and sufficiently publicised. I also understand that working students have more difficulties than others to pass their subjects (I sympathise, I was myself a working student).

Yet, there must be a limit: public universities cannot waste resources on educating students whose talents lie elsewhere, it is as simple as that. Besides, I'm sorry but I'd rather be a patient in the hands of a doctor who passed his degree according to plan, and not after 4 attempts for each subject. In our case, with many students stuck in certain subjects because their command of English is not strong enough, I'd recommend a stay abroad –working if they cannot afford anything else. As I did myself.

I know this can raise much controversy but being barred from continuing a particular degree does not mean a student is branded as 'inept'. They may have simply made a wrong choice in opting for a university degree, instead of professional training, or in choosing a particular degree. It's not a tragedy.

What I cannot understand is the attitude of the students who must clearly see that they are not doing well but insist on torturing themselves, perhaps to please their parents, or to fulfil an unrealistic personal goal. Why not try something else? Before they tell you to go.

Find how to employ your natural talents best...

8-IX-2014 WHAT WOULD PROSPERO SAY?: GIVING BOOKS AWAY

Last year a lecturer from a Scottish university, where I'd been a doctoral student, emailed me after more than a decade without contact. She explained to me that she was retiring (to Mallorca) and looking for a home for her collection of books on Gothic. Would the UAB be interested? Oh, my!, I thought, but this is wonderful news. The library kindly accepted to pay for shipping expenses and soon enough they even staged an exhibition to publicise the donation –more than 100 books. I got to keep a few which we already had. Anyone thinking of working on Gothic in Spain or nearby... come to us!!

There are a few things that puzzle me about this case, like why did this lady bring all her books to Spain rather than leave them in Scotland. But what puzzles me above all is what the gesture of giving her professional books away means in relation to our profession.

I recall a colleague who retired a few years ago dismantling his bookshelves in his Department office, even throwing in the bin some old paperbacks but, somehow, I assumed this was the tip of the iceberg and he had the main collection at home. I myself have half my books at home and half in my office, and I regularly take the ones I no longer find uses for to the library. I cannot, however, imagine myself dismantling my library for good, though I also wonder who would want all these, mostly, cheap paperbacks.

The library receives, now and then, immense book collections as bequests. Professor Francisco Rico, who retired in 2012, donated 5,237 documents... which makes me wonder about the size of his home. Professor Xavier Úcar, of the Department of Systematic and Social Pedagogy here at UAB, donated more than 700 SF works a while ago ([http://cataleg.uab.cat/search*cat/a?SEARCH=\(col·lecci de ciència-ficció de xavier úcar\)](http://cataleg.uab.cat/search*cat/a?SEARCH=(col·lecci+de+ciència+ficció+de+xavier+úcar))), as he happens to be an avid reader and simply cannot keep at home all he reads. The pity is that the collection remains housed in the basement... so unless you know it exists you don't see it.

There are, then, circumstances that justify massive donations: retirement, home size and, of course, death. One of my colleagues has often told me that when she is gone she wants me to make the suitable arrangements for the library to keep her books as a special collection. Fair enough.

What puzzles me about the Scottish lady professor I mentioned at the beginning, and a couple of other cases I've heard about recently (also in Britain) is the firm severing of the ties with our profession. A while ago I opened a space in the Department for book crossing and it is always empty (except when I leave books there!). The few books that

turn up now and then are either extremely specialised studies the owner clearly does not want, or best-selling novels mostly of a trashy kind (best given out anonymously). University teachers, it seems, are, like Prospero, very fond of their books.

Perhaps, though, I simply misunderstand retirement, possibly because I look forward to my own as a time when I will be finally able to write non-stop if I want. My main hobby is reading and, somehow, I imagine retirement as something quite similar to my current holiday time: lots of books, time to think. I keep on forgetting that research as we do it today, with all the accountability mechanisms thrown upon us by Ministries and sundry agencies, can be psychologically oppressive. And that the gesture of giving the books away may have to do with finding relief for that oppression. Yes, indeed, I can think of a few books I'd rather never see again.

Anyway, I must say that all considered I'm very happy that this lady, whom I'm not mentioning because she was not particularly interested in the library naming the collection after her, thought of me. At a time when the crisis has reduced our book-buying sprees to practically nothing, this was a gift from heaven.

Now, please, students and colleagues, enjoy these books... (tip: search the UAB catalogue, cataleg.uab.cat by 'paraula clau', type in 'gothic' and voilà...)

14-IX-2014 THE USE OF TIMELINES: ABOUT PRODUCING ONE (ON WOMEN AND FEMINISM IN SPAIN)

I am very fond of timelines. I find that one of the problems of the post-traditional model of education is that it has condemned memorizing as a useless nuisance. This leads to a great deal of imprecision regarding exact historical dates, which in its turn produces a hazy impression of historical periods. Without learning particular dates one may think that the whole 20th century is an undifferentiated mass of events with just a few major highlights. Thus, it is not rare in Spain for young persons to name incorrectly the years when the disgraceful Civil War took place (1936-9) and to suppose that Franco's brutal regime ended much earlier than 1975.

The problem with timelines is that they are actually of little use for study. You may check a detail or two, take a general look –but who can read a timeline in detail and absorb all that information? This is why I find that timelines only help us to memorise dates if you produce them yourself. Hence, I am always producing new ones in my own study time. It is not easy.

I am currently working on a timeline which, here's the contradiction, I might eventually publish in my website. I realised that I know more about British and American women's history than about Spanish and Catalan women. This is why I decided to start a local timeline and later on add to it the key dates in US and UK feminism. My timeline is currently 45 pages long, I can say I have already learned very much but I do not know yet where to stop.

In principle, I decided to include key general political events (my grasp of Spanish History is not that good...), and dates connected with women's advances (mainly legislation, education, labour). I decided not to include literature, only books connected with the 'woman question.' The problem came when I realized that, as Isaías Lafuente hints, domestic innovations –like the mop, invented by Manuel Jalón and first commercialised in 1958– and others, like sanitary pads (no reliable date so far) may have changed women's lives much more deeply than certain pieces of legislation.

Then, I came across a website on the evolution of the women's liberation movement in Spain during the 1960s and 1970s, and it was so dense with dates that my using them would automatically require the same for all periods. Finally, guess what? The hardest periods to reconstruct are the most recent ones. I don't know the date when gay marriage was introduced in Spain. Um. It's 3 July 2005 (just checked).

One thing that is quite clear, reading Geraldine Scanlon's impressive pioneering study *La Polémica Feminista en la España Contemporánea 1868-1974*, published in 1976, and Pilar Folguera's slim but very information collective volume, *Feminismo en España: Dos Siglos de Historia* (1988), is that Spain is also different when it comes to how our feminism compares with the rest of the Western world.

Both volumes make it very clear that there was no feminism movement as such until, properly speaking, the 1970s. We had formidable individual figures (Concepción Arenal, Emilia Pardo Bazán, Clara Campoamor...), many associations of different signs but no all-encompassing movement. When the chance came for that, after Franco's death, the 'Transición' took much of the necessary political energy away from the movement. At any rate, believe it or not, this is the best historical moment ever for women in Spain. Hopefully, the women living in the 22nd century will find ours still an obscure time.

If anyone cares, this is a rough division into main periods of women's history and feminism in Spain:

*1724-1868: Enlightenment ideas enter Spain (with the French Bourbon dynasty). Men who believe in them, and a few women, start a very timid reform of public education for women (primary and professional levels, schools for teachers).

*1868-1939 Individual women feminists fight for the rights of women (access to secondary and higher education, and the professions); also, with much division, the vote. Many feminist associations are formed in the 1920s, none major. Brief period of fast advances under the Republic (vote and divorce 1931) and the Civil War.

*1939-1965 Franco's military regime imposes traditional ideals of womanhood. Women are split into meekly following these ideals, or struggling to end the dictatorship (clandestine resistance organised by left-wing political parties and women's illegal associations)

*1965-1982 Full emergence of the feminist liberation movement, particularly after 1975. Women are split mainly on class lines between the need to consolidate left-wing policies and the need to work specifically for women's gains.

*1983-2014... Institutionalised feminism (after PSOE wins 1982 election). Legislation becomes the main tool for equality, together with education, supported by widespread social acceptance of the main feminist tenets (feminist activism remains fragmented in a myriad organizations).

Um... 2014-2044... Full equality of rights and opportunities is reached for women of all classes, mysogyny is considered a relic as intolerable as cannibalism. Gender divisions become irrelevant as all, men and women, face life from the same position.

Now back to the timeline...

19-IX-2014 CELEBRATING BRITISH DEMOCRACY: TOWARDS A NEW UNITED KINGDOM

It is always thrilling to witness a key historical moment, and today it is one. The results of the Scottish referendum on independence mark, as many political commentators have noted, a decisive turning point in the History of the United Kingdom, which will have to revise urgently the conditions of the union (including, most likely, the establishment of an English local Parliament and Government –how intriguing!).

I am personally fascinated by the political *savoir faire* with which this delicate process has unfolded during the last fifteen years on both sides of the border. A friend who's now a Glasgow resident emailed me a couple of days ago to explain that watching the debates was absolutely exciting. The very existence of these debates and the chance the Scots have had to manifest their opinion attest to the high degree of maturity and stability that democracy has in the UK.

My own reading of the 55/45 result, which I am offering here both as a Cultural Studies specialist very much interested in Scotland and as a Catalan, is that this is neither a vote in favour of the union, nor against independence. It is a vote that expresses uncertainty about the future. Perhaps this is my own interested personal reading but what I am trying to argue here is best summarised by the opinion of a Scottish gentleman I heard yesterday on TV: "I cannot vote 'yes' to a matter politicians disagree so much on". He defined himself as an independentist.

Both sides stand to gain in the end: Cameron will be a hero for keeping the union alive, Salmond another hero for doing his best to grant Scots the right to choose. In my view, though, they have both lost: Cameron had to use a fear campaign to increase the 'no' vote, Salmond could not convincingly explain what the future of an independent Scotland would be like. Neither was persuasive enough about the benefits of staying on or of leaving. The anxiety about the future, rather than patriotism of either kind, has ultimately carried the day.

How do I know? Because even Cameron himself has realised that the union can only survive with less, rather than more, centralism. If the Scottish vote really meant a wish for a stronger union, there would be no need to grant the Scottish Government and Parliament greater powers as Cameron promised to do during his campaign. There might be even good grounds to withdraw some of the powers already devolved in order to strengthen the union. I heard talk today of a future 'federal' United Kingdom. Logically, the Welsh and the Northern Irish, who were holding their breath waiting for the results to materialise, are now also demanding more powers. Soon the English will also wake up from their lethargy and assume once and for all that England is one nation in the union, not the union itself.

The message behind all this is, in my view, very clear: people want matters closest home to be decided locally, and think of unions as fulfilling a role only for large scale issues and institutions (Scotland will not go to war against the Islamic State, but NATO will). Also, this is the second message, even though the small Scandinavian countries seem to be the most desirable model in many senses (Norway is the referent for Scotland), the republican federal model of the United States and Germany seem to work best for economic development. Most likely, a federal British monarchy (if they persist on supporting the Windsors, God knows why) is the solution best suited to that particular corner of west Europe.

In this particular corner of south Europe, the media are focusing today not on the result (which might very well reflect a similar division here, too) but on the fact that the Scots have had the chance to vote. Today the Catalan Parliament is passing a law to secure Catalan citizens' right to be consulted in major decisions, a law that will be immediately annulled by the Spanish Government, for fear that the projected 9 November referendum might result in a pro-independence vote. I wonder why Rajoy has never considered, like Cameron, the possibility that the 'no' might win. His own permanent 'no' is fast undermining unionism and increasing the independentist 'yes'. And, something else he cannot see, leaving Catalan unionists completely desauthorised.

I am personally worried sick about what might happen in an independent Catalonia as I believe we would all be impoverished and, anyway, we don't have enough information to make a reasoned decision (what's the rush, I wonder?). I do, however, firmly support the right of citizens to decide, not only on this crucial matter but on many other equally crucial matters like what kind of education, justice, welfare services, etc. we want. I actually would like the Spanish Parliament to pass that kind of law and, thus, prevent certain Ministers from implementing laws nobody wants.

The matter of Scotland might not be over. If I recall correctly, in Quebec they have voted on independence several times. I'm sure, however, that Salmond will take a reasonable break before he or someone else in the SNP tries again (perhaps one generation?). The funniest thing about the whole process is that an independent Scotland with her own monarch would see our dear Cayetana de Alba, the last of the Stuarts, crowned Queen Cayetana I. Alba, of course, is the Gaelic name for Scotland.

Here we don't even know whether we'd be a Republic, or, this is a nice joke, still part of King Felipe VI dominions—a joke since he's a Borbón as much as the independentists arch-villain Felipe V, his direct ancestor.

Congratulations, once more, United Kingdom, on facing a major crisis with an admirable democratic spirit. I hope citizens in Scotland continue the debate and work for what really matters: a transparent political system, accountable to all voters, and as close to them as possible.

[By the way: I'm celebrating today the fourth anniversary of this blog. Thanks for reading me!!]

23-IX-2014 BACK TO HARRY POTTER ONCE MORE: PUBLISHING UNDERGRAD STUDENTS' WORK

Back on May 12 I published a post commenting on my students collective volume, *Addictive and Wonderful: Reading the Harry Potter Series* (<https://ddd.uab.cat/record/118225>). Today, I'm announcing the publication of our second collective volume, *Charming and Bewitching: Considering the Harry Potter Series* (<https://ddd.uab.cat/record/122987/>).

The elective I taught last Spring, 'Cultural Studies in English: The Case of *Harry Potter*' has given me many satisfactions but also much work, as I decided to turn it as well into an experiment on teaching. I'm writing this post today with the aim of describing this experiment, in case it is useful for any colleague out there. I am repeating many of these innovations in my current elective subject (also fourth year), 'Gender Studies (in English)'.

To begin with, I choose a handbook, on which I based my initial lectures: David Walton's excellent *Introducing Cultural Studies: Learning through Practice*. I soon realised that there was no way I could write one or several exam questions to test my students' reading of this ultra-rich volume. I asked them instead to produce their own exam question: read the book, select a topic, find a text related to it (not *Harry Potter*), e-mail me the question. On the day of the exam, they brought from home a printed page with the question, and if they wished so, a quotation to comment on. Then they wrote in class the 500-word argumentative essay planned at home. It worked beautifully, not just because, obviously, everyone passed, but most importantly because they learned to ask questions rather than simply answer them.

The short essays published in *Addictive and Wonderful* were not part of assessment for two reasons: a) I hadn't planned to publish this before the course started; 2) I want students to learn that assessment is not everything and that it's fine to produce ideas for free (I'm doing this here all the time). When I started reading the essays, the idea of the volume came to me as a sudden inspiration. I have just checked and, as happens, 492 persons have downloaded already this volume from its location at my university's

digital repository. I had no idea we could reach this kind of readership at all. Something else I have learned, then. This semester I'm repeating the experience, with a volume by my students on gender issues (currently at its very early stages).

The second volume *Charming and Bewitching: Considering the Harry Potter Series*, was clearer in my mind when I started teaching the subject but I think I miscalculated the effort it would entail from me. Not that I regret it, quite the opposite –once more, I'm trying the experiment again.

I offered my students a list of 50 topics, a wide-ranging panorama of Rowling's series. I had no clear idea of the coherence the final volume might have but hoped for the best. My reasoning was that since I had to mark the papers anyway, I could turn my marking into preliminary editorial work, then use the corrected texts as the basis for a second round of editorial revisions before publication. I was quite sure from the beginning that I would not teach *Harry Potter* again, a decision I am going to maintain because there is no way I can reproduce the atmosphere generated by the happy convergence of a particular group of students and a particular group of guests. The volume would be a trace left for ever by that happy experience.

The papers were part of assessment and I awarded the corresponding marks. As it is my habitual practice, I asked for revisions in a handful of cases. Only one student among those who followed continuous assessment failed the subject, the rest passed but I decided to discard 5 of the 38 essays because they demanded a too extensive revision before publication. I was on the whole happy with the papers and awarded high marks.

The course was over by the end of June but I could not lay my hands onto the projected volume again until late August. This was good because texts need to cool down, if you know what I mean. When I took a second look, however, I almost gave up.

Even though I had provided my students with a template for their paper, thinking this would diminish my workload as an editor, and they had mostly used it well, I had to make the 33 final essays as homogeneous as possible in terms of editing. Luckily, I learned a few new tricks from Word which saved me plenty of time (like how to accept all revisions in the text). I spent anyway a whole week, Monday to Friday, working on the text. This included all aspects of text layout, including the cover, for which I had a wonderful illustration by the talented Genzoman.

In the preface I wrote that 85% of the text was my students, 15% mine. This is correct, I believe. Call me silly but I had not realised that the impression a student's paper produces for the purposes of awarding it a grade has nothing to do with the impression it produces when you're thinking of publication. I have by no means changed the nature of the papers but I have worked hard on the language, careful not too make it sound artificial for an undergrad. This has been a challenge: let it be as it is, but make it nicer. A little, yes, like applying a discrete layer of make-up.

What puzzled me enormously is that, once I saw the complete volume, it turned out to have much coherence. The essays are organised by students' surname but –this must be yet another example of the magic haunting my *Harry Potter* course– they connect this way much better than in any other way I could have planned. I really think the volume is quite decent, a strange word, I know. I suppose other teachers have published similar volumes but the word that sums up how I feel is 'proud', very proud indeed. Whether this is a pioneering initiative or not, it doesn't really matter.

Finally, without my university's repository I may not have thought of publishing the volumes. I have my own professional website and I have published there plenty, yet I am convinced by now that the repository seems to work better. I wonder that people are downloading the volumes at all but it's nice to see the count grow. I'll be very happy if both *Addictive and Wonderful* and *Charming and Bewitching* reach 500 downloads.

I forget: this is as low-cost as it can be, and it is still a book. I have spent no money at all, just my own personal work and my students'. This, I believe, is how knowledge should flow: we have the instruments to generate content for the internet, and we must use them.

I hope this experience encourages and inspires other colleagues to do the same, in whatever courses they teach. And students as well .

28-IX-2014 SIZE MATTERS, AGAIN: THE LENGTH AND DURATION OF NOVELS

Just by sheer coincidence my first and my last post this month have to do with time and how we employ it in consuming fictions. I wrote on 1st September about whether investing so many hours on watching one of those US TV series so popular today is worth it. I argued that this is not the case (for me), and came to the conclusion that I won't invest more than 20 hours in any given narration.

Then, two colleagues called my attention to a couple of related questions. On the one hand, Laura told me about a piece in ShortList.com about "How Long it Takes to Read the Most Popular Books" (<http://shortlist.com/entertainment/books/how-long-it-takes-to-read-the-worlds-most-popular-books>). On the other, David emailed us to comment on Ian McEwan's recent *boutade*, arguing that most novels are too long. I don't have an exact link for this, but it seems McEwan offered this critique on Radio Four's *Today* programme.

"My fingers are always twitching for a blue pencil," he claimed, when he reads books above the 800-page mark (think Donna Tart's *The Goldfinch*). McEwan added that "The Americans especially love a really huge novel, they still pursue the notion of a great American novel and it has to be a real brick of an object. Very few really long novels earn their length." (<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2740179/900-pages->

[long-novel-says-ian-McEwan-Booker-prize-winning-author-believes-long-books-need-editing.html](#)) McEwan's most recent volume (224 pages) is a novella, he says, *The Children Act*, just 55,000 words long. McEwan's statement has not really impressed readers: a poll run by *The Guardian* showed that 52% disagreed with him. One can always make the obvious claim that this depends on the novel in question, although I would agree that not all novels "earn their length." Also, with McEwan's hint that novelists need more than ever the good offices of competent editors.

If we take a look at the ShortList.com piece, we'll see that McEwan's novella is, rather, a novel, similar in length to Laura Esquivel's *Like Water for Chocolate* (53,234 words, the paperback is 256 pages long). I do not understand the calculations in that page as the logical thing to do would be to note the hours and minutes it takes to read a text, instead of which they use a decimal notation (2.96 hours for Esquivel's book). If my mathematics work correctly, this is 2 hours and 57 minutes at a rate of 300 words per minute. 3 hours and 3 minutes for McEwan's book (which he wants us to read in one sitting). I have checked and this is more or less how fast I (a very experienced reader) read, but it might not be feasible at all for, say, one of our first year students painfully reading in a second language. Or many native speakers of English, depending on their education.

Then, I doubt anyone can manage Sophocles' *Antigone* in 0'61 hours (that's 36 minutes, isn't it?), reading at the same pace one would read a Tom Clancy thriller. Length is not all that matters, as my students, currently reading *Oliver Twist* must now be thinking. Just to comment on a few titles: the whole *Harry Potter* saga amounts to 60 hours (the time I spent watching *The Wire*!). *War and Peace*, the longest volume I have ever read at 1,800 pages requires 32.63 hours (with volumes that long, I tend to count days, not hours –it took me a long August to read Tolstoy's masterpiece, same with Tolkien's trilogy of *The Lord of the Rings*). And I don't think that readers willing to read George Martin's massive *A Song of Ice and Fire* care about the hours, days, months, or even years this will take.

I do not know whether this is a consequence of that Kindle function which enables you to see how long you need to read a volume (the machine establishes your speed once you read a few pages). Yet, something tells me that in this overcrowded fiction panorama of today time is beginning to matter (will writers also count the hours invested in particular novels?).

This came the same week my 13-year-old nephew and I had this crazy conversation about the new game *Destiny*, at 550 million dollars the costliest piece of fiction ever. We got into quite a tangle trying to work out how many hours (minimum) a player would expect from the game and how this related to its high price (55 to 75 euros depending on the retailer, though he had seen a special edition at 150 euros). Perhaps Mr. McEwan is missing the point that readers are happy to read thick volumes because (like gamers) they get value for money, that is, many reading hours. With his slim novellas one is done on any rainy afternoon (like today's); that might be simply too expensive for someone used to paying what his little book costs for a thick paperback.

I puzzle, anyway, every time I take my Kindle to see that duration has replaced length for me as a reader. The first thing we do, Virginia Woolf said, when we pick up a new volume is to see how many pages it has. Not any more, it seems, or not always.

(I'm told games do not have a specific duration, as this depends on how we play them. I read though that the first player to reach level 30 in *Destiny* has consumed 107 hours, which seems to be an absolute record. Also, that other gamers are complaining that the game runs out too fast. So much to learn...)

2-X-2014 HARRY AND OLIVER: AN EXAMPLE OF (UNCANNY) INTERTEXTUALITY

This intense *Harry Potter* period of my life seems never to end... I'm currently teaching *Oliver Twist* to my Victorian Literature class on the usual pretence that they have all read the book and can follow my analysis. Well. Since they need to learn how to write a paper, I explained to them what a conference is and why papers are written, taking the chance to publicise an oncoming event at my own university: a conference on monstrosity (December 2014, *Las mil caras del monstruo*, <http://visionesdelofantastico2.weebly.com/>) to which I have submitted a paper on Voldemort. Now, that caught their attention... and mine to their alertness. Three students actually waylaid me at the end of my lecture to demand that I teach again the *Harry Potter* elective... a tall order!

This is why I decided to use the last 15 minutes of my lecture yesterday to a) present the connections between *Oliver Twist* and the *Harry Potter* series, b) introduce students to the concept of intertextuality (first coined by Julia Kristeva in 1966). In the process I learned that the majority of students in class have read Rowling's saga (and enough Dickens to follow me, good...). Also, that there must be something uncanny in the links between the two authors and the two characters because a girl student got goosebumps several times as I lectured (her physical reaction was certainly intense).

So here we go. Intertextuality, a notoriously wide-ranging term, replaces the old-fashioned idea of 'influence'. It is, despite the looselessness of its meaning, very useful to discuss how texts keep a dialogue with each other, which can be more or less willed, more or less direct. Some intertextuality is explicit (James Joyce's *Ulysses*), some implicit. We can see this for *Oliver Twist* as well: Terry Pratchett wants us to see at first sight that his novel *Dodger* connects with Dickens's work, Rowling is not particularly interested in establishing a connection but this is visible enough and very strong at some points. Uncannily so.

Of course, as a student pointed out yesterday, the list which follows might simply be pure coincidence. Or have just dubious value, I'll add. Precisely, it was my intention to alert students to the fact that intertextuality tends to be extremely subjective, hard to prove persuasively, and always open to criticism.

Now, consider (sorry about the spoilers):

- Harry and Oliver are orphans. They both spend a miserable childhood, which includes a stay with unsympathetic pseudo-parents (the Dursleys, the Sowerberrys) with a particularly nasty foster mother. They're both bullied in this foster home by an older boy (Dudley, Noah).
- The trope of the mother's death is displaced in *Harry Potter* to Tom Riddle's birth, the difference being that Merope Gaunt lets herself die after giving birth. Both Agnes (Oliver's mother) and Merope become pregnant by men who keep with them a relationship beset by problems (Oliver's father actually seduces the poor woman and tricks her into a false wedding, no matter how much he loves her; Merope bewitches Tom Riddle Sr. with a love potion).
- Both Oliver and Harry are protected by their dead mother's blood: Harry literally and also in the person of his unkind aunt Petunia; Oliver by his much kinder aunt Rose Maylie, who saves him from his life of crime and the persecution of the main villains.
- Harry and Oliver are roughly the same age (11) when they leave behind their known environment for a new world of which they know nothing: the world of wizarding and the world of crime, respectively. I might argue that Fagin is a wicked version of Dumbledore but I'll let that be...
- Both James Potter (Harry's father) and Oliver's father, Edward Leeford Sr., are characters with moral flaws: James used to be a bully at school, as his victim, Snape, reveals; Leeford was quite dishonest about his marital situation with Agnes.

Here comes my favourite bit: Mr. John Brownlow. This is a rich bachelor gentleman, with a London establishment of his own, and the closest friend of Oliver's dead father. When after many incidents Rose puts Oliver again in touch with him, Mr. Brownlow ends up offering Oliver a happy home and adopting the boy. The moment I named Sirius Black my students understood that he is Brownlow's equivalent in the *Harry Potter* saga, with a difference: he dies too soon, too cruelly. Essentially, once he is rescued from Fagin and Sykes's hands (thanks to Nancy, another Lily Potter sacrificial figure), Oliver has no role in his own story, except that of offering forgiveness. In contrast, Rowling forces his boy to face his arch-enemy alone, once he's lost his protectors (Sirius but also Dumbledore, Snape). Dickens, always a sentimental man regarding children, would have been horrified at her cruelty. I am.

Finally, both Oliver and Harry make me wonder about their goodness. Dickens defended himself from criticisms against Oliver's idealisation claiming that the boy represented a 'principle of good' beset by evil. There is a wonderful scene in which Nancy throws a tantrum, full of rage against Fagin's physical ill-treatment of the boy; her point is that Oliver will soon become a degraded criminal, there's no need to add abuse to this. Shortly after this explosion, however, Fagin tells Monks, Oliver's arch-enemy, that the boy is impossible to train for a life of crime as he has nothing to scare him with. Harry seems, likewise, impervious to the attraction of the dark side, no matter how often Voldemort insists that they're quite similar. In both cases the reward for this triumphant inner goodness is a happy (middle-class) family life with the

difference, as I have noted, that the child Oliver is rescued by others from evil (imagine a nice aunt Petunia helping a stable Sirius raise Harry), whereas Harry must grow up and rescue himself.

The goosebumps of the girl student and the wand watching my back as I write (Sirius's of course) suggest to me that other operations apart from rational intertextuality are at stake in this kind of connection. Most likely, I need Jung's collective unconscious and not Freud's idea of the uncanny to explain them, though there's something truly uncanny at work. Brownlow, based on a well-known Victorian philanthropist of the same name (secretary to the Foundlings Hospital Dickens knew so well) suggests that something resonates in us when we read about unprotected children. I firmly believe Freud was too focused on the little and big dramas of the patriarchal nuclear family to note other figures we set much store by, and which, somehow, Brownlow (adoptive father) and Sirius (godfather) embody. Dickens understood this, by the way, much better than Rowling, which is why he paid homage with his fictional character to the man employed in real life to protect abandoned babies.

I'll keep on thinking about that. You, too.

7-X-2014 ON BEING AN AU-PAIR (A LONG TIME AGO)

Sorry, this one is very long...

I've given hints here that I could a tale unfold if I wrote about my au-pair days back in 1985-6. I have just signed a reference letter for a girl student to be an au-pair in Britain and this brings back many complicated memories. I had a very hard time being an au-pair but, as I told this girl, this is an experience I would never erase from my life.

In these days of Erasmus grants, I guess that being an au-pair is not as popular as it was among girl students of English in my time. I decided to take a gap year between my second and my third in the five-year 'Llicenciatura' (BA) in 'Filologia Anglesa' because I was not making progress in English as fast as I wanted. Also, to be honest, I needed a change of air, as I could put up no longer with my father's demands that I worked full-time (the money I made by teaching part-time went into books and fees). Once I decided to be an au-pair, I also decided to take the Proficiency examination, as that would provide a clear focus to my stay abroad and would help, as it did, in finding teaching jobs once back.

Just when I returned they started offering the first Erasmus grants. I never applied, fancy asking my father to send me abroad... I've often wondered how many poor students are by-passed as I had to be.

I worked for a grand total of five families in one year: one in Lincolnshire, one in Humberside, three in London. What went wrong? I applied too late and was sent, they told me, to the only family who would have me in October (most au-pairs started in

September). This family was too poor to keep an au-pair so they soon chucked me out. My Spanish agency washed their hands of me, I was found another family by a local agency. I was given a big house to clean, owned by a couple formed by an older man... and a previous au-pair. It took me much tact to navigate her jealousy. I hated, anyway, being alone all day long in the middle of nowhere and decided to head south to London.

There, I was placed with a Greek family from Cyprus in Mill Hill, about one hour by tube from central London. I learned to dislike intensely suburban life, as I felt stranded all the time. Finally, I started attending school in preparation to taking the Proficiency exam. My lady employer, who'd placed entirely in my hands her huge house and also two little children for many hours, told me she did not care for my studies. Also, she had me working Saturday mornings, which left me with no time to go sightseeing with the other au-pairs... I decided to leave and found a family in Hampstead with two teen boys.

I loved Hampstead. Also, the couple who employed me were cultured persons and would point out to me interesting places in London, as they noted my eagerness to learn. I read non-stop as I was given free use of their library. Only later did I join a public library, something I should have done much earlier. This would be my first recommendation to would-be au-pairs: join a library, ideally a reading club –or any other club where you can make friends. Back to my tale: things grew stale between this unpredictable lady employer and myself; I grew awfully nervous around her and had all kinds of little domestic accidents to the point that she threw me out one early morning. Luckily, I had already met an elderly lady who promised to take me in if necessary and she honoured her word.

I was employed by this lady and her husband, both retired and living on their own, for the last five months of my stay. I was happy with them. My tasks were simple and clearly defined. They did talk to me and held actual conversations beyond giving me orders. Not all was perfect but I just wished I had found them at the beginning. The funny thing is how I found them: thanks to an ad on the window display of a local newsagent. Perhaps the most intelligent thing to do is to travel where you want to work as an au-pair and find an employer this way: face-to-face, in their own home.

I had a very romantic notion of what being an au-pair was about of which I was quickly disabused. It took me a while to understand that my diverse employers did not see a university student in me but just cheap foreign domestic help. Many hired me because they could not afford proper live-in help. I was never employed just to babysit, much less so in the house where they had the two little children. At that time Spain had a military service for young men and I used to joke that I had passed mine in Britain...

My best memories are of my free time roaming the streets of London (how I loved Hampstead, really!). I made friends but they were all au-pairs like me, which was not ideal to improve my English. The natives, of course, had no need to meet au-pairs (mere servants) at all. I never felt part of any family, none of my employers bothered

to show me around or asked me questions about who I was and why I was in Britain. Other au-pair girls were much luckier than I, other faced a much worse deal.

I did pass the Proficiency examination, which comforted my poor, suffering mother. In those days my family had so little money I was not even back for Christmas, Dickensian as this may sound today. Cell phones did not exist and I wrote many, many letters. I returned a completely different person, much more confident, having proven that, if necessary, I could support myself by the sweat of my brow. I was a working-class servant for one year, and this I will never forget. Also, I read so much that I taught myself possibly the equivalent of two university years.

Yes, I often think of my employers gossiping about that terrible Spanish au-pair they had back in 1985-6 and her itchy feet...

Beatriz (and all the other au-pairs in the world): my very best wishes, I hope you enjoy the experience.

10-X-2014 THE POP DIVA: AN APPROXIMATION FROM GENDER STUDIES

This post summarises debates in two sessions with my students in which they offered presentations on:

Session 1: Madonna, Beyoncé, Lady Gaga, Rihanna, Adele, Lana del Rey

Session 2: Katie Perry, Miley Cyrus, Taylor Swift, Jennifer Lopez, Selena Gomez

During these sessions, we raised the following issues for debate:

Pop seems to be currently dominated by female performers, with individual male performers occupying a marginal position, except in boy bands (like One Direction). It was hard for us to name male first-rank pop stars beyond Justin Timberlake, Justin Bieber and Bruno Mars.

The pop divas belong to at least two generations, with the oldest being well past fifty (Annie Lennox is 59, Madonna 56) and the youngest in their twenties (Miley Cyrus and Selena Gomez were both born in 1992), having started their careers as teenagers.

The older divas are less well-known by younger audiences, for whom Madonna is not the indisputable referent she is for the generations born before the 1990s.

Madonna crucially contributed to the making of the contemporary pop diva the key idea that female performers should control their careers. Before she became a star in the 1980s that was not the case, with most female stars being manipulated by men close to them: managers, producers, partners (a classic example would be Tina Turner).

What is most controversial in Madonna's case and her legacy is that she chose to empower the pop diva by flaunting her body and her sexuality, turning the object into subject.

This strategy worked fine for her but has resulted in a) an obsession with avoiding the effects of ageing, b) the diva's own bodily objectification. This, while empowering for other women aware of feminist ideals, can be simply read by sexist audiences as an incitement to reading and consuming the diva as pure sexual object. It is very hard, then, to establish whether the diva's self-presentation as a sexy, powerful woman is actually empowering.

The case of Adele, who does not present herself as sexualised, suggests that the sexualisation of many pop divas might actually serve to conceal moderate singing abilities (think Britney Spears). Adele's voice seems an instrument solid enough for her empowerment as a pop diva. Those who have gossiped about her being fat (Karl Lagerfeld) have been harshly criticised, though this seems to be in contradiction with the prejudiced treatment met by fat (or plus-sized) women in ordinary life.

In most cases, the pop diva shows a contrast between her self-assured public presentation and the lyrics in her songs, which display much vulnerability. The diva's successful career often seems at odds with the feelings expressed in the songs, suggesting she might not want to alienate audiences who believe in an essentialist idea of gender and romance.

The pop diva is an object of intense public scrutiny, particularly as regards her private life: marriage (Beyoncé), dating younger men (Madonna, Jennifer Lopez), being with abusive partners (Rihanna), being with partners who are themselves a celebrity (Selena Gomez). A peculiar case is that of Taylor Swift, who, sadly, has earned a reputation as a (promiscuous?) woman unable to commit because of the many relationships she has been involved in.

Regarding the pop diva and feminism, we have seen varied attitudes with a common denominator: either the pop diva rejects feminism but practices it notwithstanding, or the pop diva publicly embraces feminism after rejecting prejudiced definitions of this word. Beyoncé seems to be using a didactic approach which might be beneficial (though Annie Lennox has questioned her feminism as just tokenism).

Of all the divas explored, Beyoncé is no doubt the most successful and powerful one: her career is very solid, and she is in a stable relationship, married to the most powerful male musician right now (Jay-Z) and the mother of a daughter. She is rich, beautiful and well-liked, perhaps because she seems to be more 'respectable' than the other divas (she's been involved in no scandals).

In contrast, the most controversial pop diva seems to be Miley Cyrus as her extremely sexualised self-presentation can be alternatively read as an expression of (feminist) freedom or an unwise choice which degrades her as an artist. A crucial issue in this sense, as she used to be a teen idol playing Hannah Montana, is which effect this may

be having on younger women who used to follow her as a role model. This would also refer to ex-Disney stars like Britney Spears or Selena Gomez.

Ethnic and racial issues are hard to pinpoint: the white divas are not perceived as such, yet for the non-white divas race does not seem to be a major issue, possibly because non-white performers have always been a prominent part of pop. The fact that Madonna is white and Beyoncé African-American seems irrelevant as regards their success, since they reach all kinds of audiences (Beyoncé, though, possibly has a high value as role model for other African-American women performers). Other, like Jennifer Lopez, seem to be exploiting an ethnic identity (Latino) of which they do not really participate.

Most importantly, it's difficult to determine whether anyone has the right to criticise these divas or curtail in any way their self-presentation. This has always been a problem with feminism, as it usually appears to be unfairly censorious and fixed on rigid rules.

My own point of view is that as women we need positive role models that contribute to our empowerment. The pop divas are, arguably, the most visible face of women's empowerment, much above politicians, business women or scientists. The problem is that their intensive sexualisation may actually undermine the possibilities for women to be empowered, particularly for those who choose not to present themselves in this way, or for whom this might be a serious obstacle (who would take a sexualised scientist seriously, whether man or woman?).

Their individual right to choose how to run their careers (and lives) clashes then with our collective need for role models which carefully avoid confusing self-empowerment with self-exploitation. A misogynist or a male chauvinist contemplating Rihanna's half-naked body will not see an empowered woman but a confirmation of his own views that women are nothing but sexual objects.

Finally, the standards of beauty set by these attractive pop divas may even have a negative impact on the world of music itself, in the sense that less attractive women of great talent might feel inhibited from pursuing a career. Adele may be an exception, but if we consider the case of Spanish singer Rosa we see how, instead of adapting audiences to the diva's original physical appearance, she has undergone a drastic process of transformation to suit audience's preferences for slimmer women. In contrast, what is needed for women in careers with a great public projection is the same acceptance for variety that benefits men (think, for instance, how differently the body shapes of opera singers Luciano Pavarotti and Montserrat Caballé have been read).

Just a little comment: as I noted, there are individual academic studies of some of these divas (Madonna and Beyoncé in particular) but no publication addressing the issue of what is a pop diva and how this figure is constituted today.

Fascinating, really...

PS: See my own articles about

*Kylie Minogue,

<http://gent.uab.cat/saramartinalegre/sites/gent.uab.cat.saramartinalegre/files/Forget%20Madonna%20Rodriguez%20Mart%C3%ADn%20AEDEAN%20Cadiz.pdf>

*The Scottish diva (Annie Lennox, Sharleen Spitteri, Shirley Manson),

<http://www.raco.cat/index.php/DossiersFeministes/article/view/102499/153671>

12-X-2014 STEVE MCQUEEN: THE GUYS' GUY (WHAT ABOUT THE GAL?)

You may have heard that millions of I-Phone users were very much annoyed with Apple when they discovered that the new U2 album had been downloaded onto their smartphones without their permission. What you might not know is that the youngest I-Phone-addicts flooded Twitter with complaints beginning 'who the f*** are U2?' I wonder whether the 100\$ million Apple paid U2 were enough to comfort the ultra-vain Bono... What a downer for his ego...

My subject today is not Bono, however, but (partly) how fast cultural memory fades, as the I-Phone blunder has revealed. We teachers often complain that our students live in a limited version of the present with little or no insight into the past. Evidently, we are much older and what for them is history is for us living memory (I recall very clearly the huge queues back in 1987 to buy U2's smash hit album *The Joshua Tree*). I say a 'limited version' of the present, nonetheless, because both U2 and Madonna, whom I mentioned in the last post, are very much alive and adding regularly new work to a very long career already. I wonder, then, what other icons, already deceased, mean to young students.

The particular icon I have in mind is Steve McQueen –no, not the British black film director responsible for *Twelve Years a Slave*, but the legendary American star of the 1960s and 1970s who died of cancer, aged only 50. Last Tuesday 7 Discovery Max showed the new documentary *I am Steve McQueen* (June 2014), directed by Jeff Renfro, written by David Ray and produced by Chad McQueen, a loving son as you can see in the film (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt2649194/>). It's not my intention to review the documentary (you can see a good review at <http://thetfs.ca/2014/09/26/review-steve-mcqueen/>) but to discuss a few points it raises. This connects with my most recent article (available in 2015), on Manuel Huerga's documentary *Son and Moon (Diario de un astronauta)* about Michael Lopez-Alegria. There I argue that documentaries are neglected as key primary sources in the study of masculinities –they show which kind of men we find interesting and from which point of view and this is indeed the case with *I am Steve McQueen*.

I was 14 when McQueen died which means that for me he was what I'll call a 'retrospective icon,' someone you discover through other persons' enthusiastic opinions and mainly an actor I have admired on TV, never on a cinema screen. I recall gossip, unlikely as this may sound as I was just a child, about his rocky marriage to

pretty actress Aly McGraw (*Hola!* and similar magazines were a usual presence in my grandma's home). I've caught up with McQueen's legend later, seeing his films again on DVD, rediscovering above all *The Great Escape*, *The Getaway* and the absolutely thrilling *Bullitt*.

For me, McQueen has a kind of feline attractive: he looked sleek and cool (his nickname was 'the king of cool' for a good reason). He had always something boyish about him, the traces of the bad boy he could have been if luck had not placed him on the path of acting. I've never found him, though, as evidently good-looking as the stunning Paul Newman, a fellow actor McQueen seems to have admired and envied in equal measure (as shown by his jealous bouts during the making of blockbuster *The Towering Inferno*). McQueen simply had the most amazing blue eyes ('piercing' everyone calls them in the documentary) but he had this funny flat-top head, a longish face with that pointy chin, the deep cheek creases that aged badly, the fit but not really muscular body... The actor whom I thought the most likely candidate to be his heir, the late Paul Walker of *Fast and Furious* fame, was far more beautiful than McQueen. Yet, he did not have what McQueen had: charisma.

I am Steve McQueen contributes with its elegiac tone to the legend around the star precisely by focusing on his charisma, both on the screen and on the race track, as he possessed a heady cocktail of major acting and driving skills. At one point a male interviewee (I can't remember who) describes him as a "guys' guy" and you can bet this is a perfect label. The two ex-wives (Broadway star Neile Adams, the mother of her two children, and Aly McGraw) and the widow (ex-model Barbara Minty) share their memories on camera teary-eyed; Minty even presents herself as a kind of female version of McQueen in her pleasure for speed. As happened in the case of Michael Lopez-Alegria in *Son and Moon*, I was bowled over by this all-round praise of wholesome manliness. To put it simply: if thoroughly admirable men like this existed, women would be much, much happier. And so would men.

I was concerned by a comment in the memoirs published by Anoushe Ansari, a rich business woman who bought herself a ticket to travel to the ISS in Lopez-Alegria's very reluctant company: he never smiled, she says, a bit wary. This is a very tiny stain in comparison to what the documentary glosses over in McQueen's life: his constant infidelities, his rough temper, his short fuse. Neile Adams mumbles something about leaving him because she feared him. Also, the documentary attributes McQueen's mortal lung cancer to the asbestos he was in contact with during his stint in the military. Well, fair enough, though I recalled from my childhood plenty of gossip about his being a very heavy smoker (and habitual drug user).

I am Steve McQueen has been produced, as I noted, by a loving son, Chad (the daughter, Terry, died in 1998) and it is very palpably a portrait of a father very much admired privately and, what is more, to be proud of publicly. Something, however, is missing: something which, if you ask me, Brad Pitt possesses right now, that perfect mix: the physical beauty, the personal charisma, the serene manliness and the firm commitment to his big family and to his wife (Paul Newman comes to mind again). Not that Pitt is my favourite male icon (I'm not sure I have one, except Atticus Finch...) but

he comes closest than anyone else to what McQueen embodies in his son's documentary. If Pitt's not a "guys' guy," and I don't think he is, then one thing I can say for sure is that he is a "gals' guy" much more than (too) cool McQueen.

This may sound strange coming from a confirmed feminist as I am but I wish that, one day, the "guys' guy" and the "gals' guy" become the same person. If only we could have the (cool) manliness without the selfishness and the mysoginy lurking beneath all portraits of manly legends things would be so perfect.

Now go and enjoy *Bullitt*...

19-X-2014 THE NEW BA ('GRADO') REFORM: NO WAY TO EDUCATE ANYONE...

This morning I was helping my 9-year-old niece to do her homework: a set of terminally boring exercises on how to use punctuation, designed to make any child hate commas and semi-colons for life. The cynical author had the gall of writing an exercise with the wording "Write an exclamatory sentence expressing how you feel right now." My niece and I burst out laughing, we just could not stop. She came up with all kinds of nasty little sentences, as I wondered what kind of moron thought that generating frustration is educational at all.

Then I thought of my own frustration, produced by a meeting this week in which my university gave us, heads of Department and degree Coordinators, the basic set of instructions to produce yet another reform of our BAs ('grados'). Basically, the idea is that the decision made back in 2007 to implement 240 ECTS, four-year BAs, is plain wrong. We need to go back to the drafting board and produce 180 ECTS, three-year BAs followed by 120 ECTS, two-year MAs. This way, we're told, we'll fit better the European system of higher education and facilitate mobility. Deep sigh. Abysmal sigh.

It seems that seven years ago the smaller universities pushed as mightily as they could to have a 4+1 system, on the grounds that students would leave them to take MAs elsewhere after only three years. My own university, very keen on the idea of the internationally attractive MA, wanted the 3+2 system we need to impose now (and which is apparently based on the British model). From what I hear, though, the universities now taking the lead and forcing the rest to follow are the private universities and, closer home, a public university behaving as a private one. As happened seven years ago, we've been told at the same time that we need not hurry and that we must hurry like Formula 1 racers: take the chance to consider in depth what's been achieved with the new degrees, but prepare the reformed version in less than six months.

The Spanish Government has not issued the decree yet, which circulates just as a draft. This is enough, however, to set anyone's teeth on edge. The whole key to this mess is that nobody seems to have considered how students will react to the very likely

possibility that fees are raised once more. From what I gather, students are to be sold the idea that the three-year BA will not guarantee their professional insertion and will be 'invited' to take an MA, so that a) their education will be prolonged for up to five years (like the old 'Licenciatura'), b) the fourth year will be more expensive –no longer part of the BA but of the MA. Surely, this will push many students out of the more serious part of the university –or is this the plan, that only middle-class students can get MAs and get the best jobs?

I personally have very serious misgivings about the three-year BA in the context of Spanish education, with a notoriously weakened secondary school. In the particular case of the degree I coordinate, 'English Studies', I see no way at all we can send into the market graduates with a competent level of English in just three years, particularly taking into account the plans to make the first year common to several degrees. We've been told not to approach the BAs as something specific to a speciality, as if they were to be just a glorified follow-up to secondary school. The real specialisation should be that of the MA. But, then, how can we train professionals in a second language? Add to this the last straw: the new law actually allows universities to offer degrees between 180 and 240 ECTS so, technically, we might decide at UAB to defend our current 4+1 system. Now, suppose our neighbours UB opt for the 3+2 system –who, then, would take our degree? And how can you put in the market-place graduates with this diverse education? I shudder to think of future doctors...

The person who gave us all this 'good' news, one of us, acknowledged that this is a very bad moment to ask our professional collective to make yet another massive effort: our salaries have been frozen for years, part of them simply stolen by the diverse Governments, we're overwhelmed by the bureaucratization of education, and, most important, most degrees only started six years ago... But we have to go for it, and brave it with a smile. I am personally depressed and desperate, as I was in the front line during the preparation of the new degrees and endured a great deal of psychological anguish only last year, modifying the whole paperwork for purposes I'm not sure I understand. My successor as Coordinator (I'll be done by the end of January) is a much more stoical woman and she has decided to take things as they come. Fair enough. She does not have, though, the experience of wasting precious hours in filling in 400-page documents with newspeak that puts Orwell to shame...

I'm very much aware that many European countries have this 3+2 system we need to introduce now but, if I'm not mistaken, these are the countries that back in 2007 changed nothing, as they already had short BAs followed by MAs. We saw our old 'Licenciaturas' destroyed, then the new degrees imposed with no time to consider their impact on us and now, once more, we need to imitate educational systems very alien to our own to please... the international students we want to attract to our MAs? That was my impression...

In the meantime, few are thinking of the enormous frustration that the students in our classrooms, engaged in four-year BAs with no future, will feel the moment they learn about this. And as I said, generating frustration is no way to educate anyone –nor to encourage those in charge of educating.

And, here the worst nightmare: if each reform is increasingly short-lived, for how long is the new system going to survive? Sisyphus comes to mind (without his original sin).

23-X-2014 ALTERNATIVE MASCULINITIES (IN CLASS)

Yesterday I had the unusual pleasure of basing my lecture on a collective volume just issued, in which I participate: Àngels Carabí & Josep Maria Armengol's (eds.) *Alternative Masculinities for a Changing World* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2014). Serendipity dictated the coincidence of publication and lecture, and I very much enjoyed this happy accident. The topic of the lecture was how to define manliness and how to find alternatives to its patriarchal version. I used Harvey Mansfield's very provocative but cogent volume *Manliness* to stir my students into the mood I need to introduce the idea of the 'alternative.'

'Alternative' is a complicated word, as we know in the research team 'Building New Masculinities' (<http://www.ub.edu/masculinities/indexE>). When we started working on the volume, we decided to use 'alternative' in the sense of 'counter-hegemonic,' which opened up new difficulties as 'hegemonic masculinity' is far from being clearly defined (it seems synonymous with 'core patriarchal masculinity' but many object to this basic description). The idea, however, is that 'alternative' should mean anti-patriarchal, pro-feminist, non-homophobic, non-racist... a version of masculinity with a positive potential for imitation.

The focus of the research team is American Literature. This is what the Ministerio funds us to explore but I have doubts myself that Literature has today much influence in publicising and disseminating gendered role models, positive or otherwise. The main focus seems to me to be elsewhere: in music, video-games, comics, film, TV, popular fictions... My team mates and I have made an effort to locate these alternative masculinities, then, in current US novels and plays, with a result which I find both hopeful and discouraging. Hopeful because we have managed to fill in a 244-page book but discouraging because the texts where these counter-hegemonic masculinities are found seem (to me) a little bit too marginal.

This might not be the case for the novels by Toni Morrison or Paul Auster discussed, but the variety of ethnic productions analyzed and my own inroad into Orson Scott Card's SF (in his saga on Ender Wiggins) suggest that we're not analysing texts with a high impact on masculinity but calling attention to texts that might have a moderate impact in their most immediate surroundings. This is not intended to discredit the work of my colleagues (which I find excellent) nor my own, of course, but to highlight a simple truth: you may find tons of feminist fiction but there is not a single male author out there with the project of working in favour of liberating men from patriarchal strictures. Actually, the volume suggests that women writers are carrying out this task more intensively (as part of their feminist agenda). It's urgent, then, to invite men of all ages to generate the 'missing' texts.

The first part of *Alternative Masculinities for a Changing World* has been written by a selection of distinguished names in disciplines that, according to the editors, should engage in a dialogue with Literary Studies. I think this is a very good idea: yes, by all means, let's learn more from anthropology, psychology, sociology, etc.

My class, however, were much dismayed by Michael Flood's discussion of men's anti-violence activism, as his chapter paints a very bleak portrait of widespread misogynistic violence and only a mildly positive portrait of the men engaged in fighting it. Instead of feeling inspired, a young man told me he felt appalled by the idea that his peers on American campuses, as Flood explains, needed to be educated in not raping their co-eds. Then, Bob Pease, another illustrious name, with a very long experience in raising anti-patriarchal consciousness among Australian men, writes his chapter: "The challenge that confronts men is to find ways to exercise power without oppressing anyone. For men to change for the better, power must be redefined so that men can feel powerful when doing the tasks that are not traditional for men." Students were quick to see that power always entails oppression, as it is power over someone. A new vocabulary is, then urgently needed –we agreed that the right sentence should be "The challenge that confronts men is to find ways to feel *self-confident* without oppressing anyone." The idea of a man feeling powerful as, for instance, he bathes a baby makes simply no sense to me.

Don't get me wrong: I find the volume very, very interesting precisely because it is an index of the limitations under which the search for alternative, counter-hegemonic masculinities operates. The research results are, I feel, good and solid. What is not so good, much less solid, is the anti-patriarchal resistance described by all the authors. Hopefully, this is a first step in our own effort to raise consciousness. It might well be that we need fifteen to twenty years for young male and female writers to write the texts we've been looking for.

I need to add to all this two more comments. One is that teaching Gender Studies within the Humanities is a frustrating affair... as regards the male students. My degree has only 15% male students, which is roughly the proportion in my own class. The problem is that, in addition to being few they are silent. I have simply no idea what they were thinking as I lectured on masculinity, no matter how much I insisted that all big names in Masculinities Studies agree that it is crucial to listen to men. It would be naïve of me to overlook the simple fact that possibly my male students feel insecure and intimidated among so many outspoken young women. Yet I think the girls would be also grateful for their participation in debate.

Second: I asked my students to think of positive, alternative male role models in films and TV as I lectured and to name them at the end of the session. The boys said mostly nothing... The girls were clearly unimpressed by men's efforts to combine manliness with an up-dated attitude towards gender issues and chose young male characters mostly defined as 'nice': caring and sensitive. I have no idea how this matches their real-life practice of choosing boyfriends but, then, I'm no sociologist. My impression, if

you ask me, is that we know nothing and that little fiction accurately reflects the real state of gender issues today.

What a challenge for young writers...

28-X-2014 (GENDERED) WORLD WAR III: HOPING IT NEVER HAPPENS

I was just considering whether to recycle a truncated debate in class last week for this post, when an email message brought me notice of a lecture by the illustrious Prof. Paul Collier, an economist from the Blavatnik School at Oxford University (<http://users.ox.ac.uk/~econpco/>). His title: "Is the world approaching war again?" This chimes in with my subject today: WWII may be already happening and will test the limits of our gender system. Yes, it's bleak.

Last week I lectured on a favourite subject: Frank Miller's graphic novel *300* and its film adaptation. A favourite because it is a very candid *exposé* of the patriarchal military ideals manufactured by the USA and exported to the rest of the world (also, well, it has all those great-looking men). I embarked on a long digression criticising the military code based on the defence of honour, glory and duty, with the help of Leo Braudy's excellent *From Chivalry to Terrorism*. War is not a subject that goes down well with young audiences, much less with girls, and my choice of a remote conflict (Leonidas died 480 BC) was, perhaps, less than thrilling to them.

I insisted that what is really relevant is not what happened in Greece at the battle of Thermopylae all that time ago but how we represent war today since war, after all, is so intimately connected with patriarchal violence (and hegemonic masculinity). To engage their interest I asked them what would happen if the terrifying Islamic State extended its hold onto our own European shores, or if Putin invaded NATO territory? Shouldn't we, as feminist women, also volunteer for combat? How would young men react to the need to enlist? Time ran out without my surprised students answering me back.

If I recall correctly, author Nick Hornby voiced through his protagonist Rob Fleming in *High Fidelity* (1995) a concern that post-WWII generations would not be up to the task of defending the (British) homeland. I recall explaining to an MA class that for men in WWI being branded a coward was fearful enough to enlist; the young male students simply could not understand this: they'd rather be called cowards, they explained, than engage in murder on behalf of their nation. Fair enough.

Conscientious objection is a product of the Great War, which was, let's say, a war among equals and as such not a justified war. WWII was quite different, as the threat posed by the Nazis was downright evil (the same applies to the terrorist Islamic State today), and it *had* to be stopped at all costs. After Hiroshima and Nagasaki, after Vietnam, after the elimination of compulsory military service in most Western countries, we were left with the impression that a) military corps should be exclusively

composed by professionals and volunteers, not by citizens called by conscription, b) if WWII happened, it would be a colossal nuclear affair so short-lived that no actual fighting would happen.

This is not, however, what is happening around the world. Prof. Collier must be either grossly misinformed (which is unlikely) or thinking of WWII (most likely) for, as far as I know, war has never stopped for a single day on planet Earth. That we, the privileged, have been born and live in peace does not mean that patriarchal violence (in its worst aspect, war) is over at all. Actually, the threats posed by both our Russian neighbours and the Middle East inferno are 100% patriarchal in nature.

I know I am beginning to sound like Maggie Thatcher while waging war on Argentina's dictatorship but, well, the life of both my grandfathers was marked by their participation on different sides of the tragic Spanish Civil War. How can I forget this? And I have simply no guarantee that what is happening to the young women kidnapped by Boko Haram in Africa will never happen in Spain.

So, if Prof. Collier concludes that, indeed, WWII war is coming if not already here as a constellation of local conflicts, what are we supposed to do? It's very depressing, I know, as I'm warning that a civilised masculinity and a pacifist feminism can do little in view of the onslaught of the ultra-violent patriarchal Other. If you think I exaggerate about the Islamic State, just think of Putin's military might. And of what NATO keeps in our backyards. No, the Cold War is not over.

What am I saying, then? Am I calling the authorities to re-introduce military service in Spain, this time for both men and women? Should we become Israel? No, not really – I'm just feeling horrified by the possibility that the story I've been told (peace is vanquishing war) is not true but just a pretty utopia, mere wishful thinking.

In case of war, I told my students, lines will be drawn in the West possibly according to age, not gender: everyone below 45 would be fighting at the front, those above 45 would run the home front. The polite smiles suggested they dismiss this scenario as my sick fantasy (too much SF, most likely). And, then, of course, I'm above 45 as they know.

Yet... what do we know about the future? After all, Europe felt more smug and self-confident than ever, thinking that all wars were over until the very eve of WWI. Let's just hope, then, that we're not feeling too smug...

1-XI-2014 TRUE DETECTIVES AND SERIAL KILLERS (BOTH SIDES OF THE ATLANTIC): DEHUMANISED GIRLS AND MALE CLICHÉS

This week I have watched the US series *True Detective* (9 episodes, 2014) and have read book 19 in Ian Rankin's series about Edinburgh cop John Rebus, *Standing in Another Man's Grave* (2012). Blame a nasty cold for my sluggish mind but at points the

missing girls in Nic Pizzolato's screenplay would get mixed with their peers in Rankin's novel, the remote corners of the Louisiana bayou with the lonely tracks in the Scottish Highlands. Both set of girls were blurry, undistinguishable, mere appendages to the madness of the sick male that killed them (off screen) and of the obsessive males who hunted him. The cases were solved by flimsy, far-fetched coincidences. Nobody really cared nor mattered.

The first paper I ever presented in public, back in 1994, was a positive reading of FBI trainee agent Clarice Starling in Thomas Harris's novel *The Silence of the Lambs* (much less conservative in this sense than Jonathan Demme's film, despite the subsequent horrors to which Harris subjected Clarice). I remember a senior female academic asking me whether I did not feel disgusted with this obvious misogynistic trash, in which women were always victimised. Young that I was then, I was puzzled by her remark: not at all, I answered, Harris offers a strong female character who is a good role model to empower other young women in the fight against male violence. I still stand by that. Now, what makes Clarice so unique is that, unlike the men surrounding her, she learns who each individual female victim is and this way she eventually tracks their troubled male killer. I think this is what irked this woman and what irks me now: not so much the femaleness of the victims but their dehumanisation, intensified in current fiction.

I knew I would not like *True Detective* already by minute ten. Where are, I complained, the police women? Has none heard of Clarice and her many descendants? The series turned out to be, indeed, a bare-faced male ego trip. Matthew McConaughey and Woody Harrelson were simply marvellous, giving total credibility to bickering partners Rust and Marty. Yet, somehow the pretentious Pizzolato convinced himself that the more Rust spoke, the deeper the series would be when actually all his pseudo-mystical, depressive chatter only deflected from what should have mattered: the victims. Me, me, me both true detectives proclaim to the world: I'm so unhappy, I'm so lonely, life is dark (but light's winning??). Promising to unmask a confederacy of villains, they unmask in the end ... a cliché, seen one hundred times (for the hillbilly's point of view see the very funny comedy *Tucker and Dale vs. Evil*). Two things have been stuck in my dizzy brain for the last few days: Rust's Texan drawl preaching to me endlessly and the beautiful opening credits (with the song 'Far From Any Road' by Handsome Family). Oh, well: 9,3 according to IMDB audiences. Really?

I read *Standing in Another Man's Grave* a little edgy, as I wrote a while ago an article on the whole Rebus saga. Once Rankin published *Exit Music* (2007), supposedly to be the closing volume, I embarked on an article about the strange bond between his detective and the gangster Cafferty: "Aging in F(r)riendship: 'Big Ger' Cafferty and John Rebus," published in *Clues: A Journal of Detection* in 2011 (see <http://ddd.uab.cat/record/116052>). I wrote with much caution, as I very much suspected Rankin would go on and follow Rebus beyond retirement, as he has done. Luckily for my argumentation, Rebus and Cafferty are still 'best fiends' since they cannot be 'best friends' (a bit like Rust and Marty). Rankin has a great subplot about Cafferty's misleading attempt to become the overlord of a young upstart, who actually

becomes the next big thing in Edinburgh's gangsterhood. Yet, Rankin needs a case... so here we go: serial killer it is.

Rebus has been accompanied in the series since 1993 (*The Black Book*) by Siobhan Clarke, a very solid female character who is crying out for her own series. In *Standing...* she has made it to Detective Inspector; she is now aspiring boss. Keen on the last criminal advances, she suggests that a profiler be brought into the case of the missing girls but her (tepid) attempt to sound properly up-to-date is dismissed. Obviously... for just as happens in *True Detective* not only the victims lack interest for the writer but also the killer. Perhaps aware that the figure, borrowed from American fiction, fits awkwardly the Scottish landscape, Rankin tries even less firmly than Pizzolato to convince us that his male wacko has a solid reason to kill. He is just there in both cases as the excuse for the cranky hero to succeed in the face of unadventurous authority. Siobhan simply looks on, letting Rebus proceed. In Marty and Rust's case there is no female peer about (just a disappointed wife).

Let me recommend at this point Isabel Santaulària's excellent study of the serial killer, *El monstruo humano* (<http://laertes.es/monstruo-humano-p-815.html>). My problem with this figure is not that it exists at all, even though clearly the fictional representations must multiply by now thousandfold the real thing. My problem is that he is used too often in a lazy way. Perhaps *Se7en* (1995) went too far to make any other serial killer interesting. Yet the problem with the ones these three true detectives have faced for me this week on each side of the Atlantic is that, I insist, they're clichés (and blurry ones at best).

My colleague Bill Philips from UB, who leads a research team on the post-colonial detective novel, explained to me recently that readers no longer seek the thrill of the well-made detection story: they value detective fiction as social fiction. Fair enough – after all, I read Rankin for what he says about the dark side of Scotland. Yet, possibly as series as diverse as *Bones* or *Sherlock* show, detective fiction is and has always been about the main character. Both Pizzolato and Rankin (I don't know about the female authors) are suggesting that it would be altogether nice to do away with victim and killers, let the detective be our own nihilistic, existential hero. This as odd as doing away with love in romance...

The matter with genre in fiction is that labels make promises: if its romance, it has love; if it is detective fiction, it has a case. I'm not against mixtures (SF and 'noir' blend beautifully in *Blade Runner*) nor against eccentric detectives. It's just that if you're willing to work on their characterisation you should also be willing to work on their case, for a very basic reason. A poor case spoils the picture, making the oddball detective just that, an oddity, instead of what he was meant to be: someone with a deeper insight into life's dark side.

And no, Pizzolato, the light is not winning, at least not for the victims.

9-XI-2014 THE HIGHS OF ACADEMIC LIFE: A CROWDED COURSE ON POPULAR FICTIONS

I have just spent two joyful days in Valladolid, where I have offered a lecture and have also taken part on a round table. Both were activities within the course 'Héroes, dioses y otras criaturas' organized by the efficient and committed Sara Molpeceres (a member of the 'Literary Theory and Comparative Literature' section of the local university). I have felt throughout these two days a deep envy of the 75 students registered in her course, for in my time it would have been unthinkable to gather together so many lecturers to discuss comics, Tolkien, science-fiction, role games, zombies, witches... with the utmost academic naturalness.

What is happening, despite petty attempts at repressing some aspects of these kind of events (for the events themselves can no longer be stopped) is that the younger academics are making available to current undergrads the subjects we could not study in our time (but are teaching and researching now). I hope these lucky undergrads in Valladolid do appreciate the effort. Naturally, there might be other subjects many students are interested in which are still overlooked or, worse, excluded from the university. If that's the case, do let us know –unlike many of our predecessors, we do listen.

To my surprise, I find myself hailed as a Spanish pioneer in the field of the study of popular fictions. It is true that I already have twenty years of experience under my belt (I presented my first paper in public back in 1994... oh, my!!) but I feel personally that I'm just beginning and far from being consolidated. It is lovely, in any case, to have my ego massaged by invitations like the one issued to me by Sara and our common friend and colleague, Marta Gutiérrez (of the English Department).

Sara and Marta accepted my proposal to lecture on SF and the post-human as part of my current research, and asked me to discuss my experience of teaching *Harry Potter* last semester –on which you have read plenty on this blog– on a round table. I spent a very happy time describing this innovative, fulfilling experience and sharing it with about 120 persons crowding the room (the questions I was asked deserve deeper thinking that I can offer now, next post, then). The lecture on SF went well, I think, and I left Valladolid happier than I have been in a long while.

The lesson learned from the very successful Valladolid course is that there is room for thrilling activities to accompany regular teaching but also that they are under attack. Not because of their content, which may be more or less adventurous, but because the degrees have been pruned of all extras. I used to teach a UAB summer course on film adaptations, which always was a very satisfactory experience, before the concept of the 'free credit' was erased from the new BA degrees. It is true that the 'free credit' was often too easy to earn with trivial activities but this can be easily corrected.

Sara and Marta tell me that their university allows students to take courses like theirs up to 6 ECTS, which are then validated as an elective. I think this makes perfect sense but I need to check whether my university allows this. We complain that the university

is lacking the intellectual effervescence of previous times but then we seem to be doing all we can to prevent that from coming back... I hear that the new degrees will have as few elective courses as the authorities can manage and I fear very much that the precious chance to teach a fourth-year elective connected with our research and the students' specific interests might soon vanish all together. Not to mention any possible extras we can fantasize about.

The other lesson I need to consider is whether specialised courses can contribute to making other subjects attractive –or just the opposite. Let me explain. My worry is that the success of 'Héroes, dioses y otras criaturas' and similar courses based on connecting popular fictions with better-established academic disciplines (here the study of 'myth'), may make 'standard' subjects (even) less attractive. The course included a lecture by the illustrious Carlos García Gual, emeritus professor of Greek at the Universidad Complutense of Madrid. His presence added indeed much academic 'respectability' and interest to the course topic but I wonder whether students would have responded that well to a course on Greek myth. He himself told us over lunch a revealing anecdote: a student in his course complained against the obligation to read the *Ilyad*, which is like telling Prof. Harold Bloom you're not willing to read Shakespeare...

I'm wondering, then, whether after the excitement provoked by a course like the one I'm discussing here the students feel an increased dislike of the classics they must read. One thing is, say, Tolkien and myth, quite another just myth. Couldn't we offer, then, a more exciting view of the classics? The colleagues in charge of presenting a great session on role games within the course claimed that all narratives can be turned into role games and, thus, that role games are very good educational tools. I had this queer vision of my students playing *Oliver Twist* or *Pride and Prejudice*, and I thought 'no, this is not the way to go.' But then it is hard to imagine a class as enthusiastic about Dickens and Austen as the Valladolid students were about role games.

Sara, Marta: thanks, it's been a wonderful experience. Call me anytime, I'll be there. And keep up the good work!!

9-XI-2014 MOTIVATING STUDENTS TO READ (BEYOND POPULAR FICTION): NOT MY JOB

At the end of my intervention narrating the experience of teaching *Harry Potter* on a round table (see my previous post) a woman asked me whether I'm not depressed by the thought that students are willing to read Rowling's seven-volume saga but not (implicitly) better books. Marta Gutiérrez, one of the round table organizers, asked me to what extent the experience of teaching popular fiction is different (or specific). A third person asked me: what should university teachers do to motivate students to read the classics with as much enthusiasm as they pour into reading certain popular fiction?

First my answer to Marta: what made the difference in my *Harry Potter* course was not the content but the fact that all the students registered in it had read the books (in many cases, more than once; in some, many times). I am, like all my Literature colleagues all over the world, tired of forcing LITERATURE students to read... Literature. I don't even demand enthusiasm but simply that students who have FREELY CHOSEN to take a degree in language and Literature come to class having read the books we discuss (ideally having underlined key passages and made notes). The *Harry Potter* elective was *wonderful* to teach because a) I didn't have to 'sell' the books to anyone nor 'force' them to read, b) everyone knew the contents in depth. This way I could take discussion to much deeper levels than usual. How do I know who has read the book or not? Easy: non-readers make notes of basic plot points, particularly those towards the end of the novel. Yes, we teach novels in rigorous narrative order to give students a chance to reach the end before we do. Spoilers are a problem.

The other two answers are intertwined. No, I'm not depressed that students have read *Harry Potter*, as I see it's been a beautiful experience (also for me) and I can never be sorry that people enjoy books. I don't want them to have read something else instead, particularly because I'm very much aware than Rowling did manage to turn many children into very keen readers. I am, to be honest, *dismayed* rather than depressed by the situation in class. I have been wondering in the last weeks when I became the kind of boring old teacher during whose lectures students fall asleep, check their email or wassap, sit slumped as if they have run a marathon... I have started to hear myself speak and I realise I drone on, loudly, to cover up their silences. We teachers have started to refer to 'the cobra movement,' which is that moment in class when you say something connected to what students enjoy and they raise their heads collectively. Also, I have taken to calling myself a dinosaur and to imagine my university as a campus Jurassic Park, as I'm quite sure about my obsolescence as a Literature teacher in a world of non-readers.

I told the three ladies and the 120 students in the room that I do not think my job includes motivating students. These are adults over 18 who have chosen to pursue an academic degree in the Humanities. Their capacity to read well and for long stretches all kinds of academic and literary texts must be taken for granted, as must their interest in a subject of their choice. We, English Literature teachers, have had enough of students who tell us to our faces they don't like reading and that they're here to learn English –well, I was under the impression that reading is the best possible exercise to acquire vocabulary in a native or foreign language. And if you don't like reading Literature fancy reading English phonetics manuals... As I explained, I am responsible for finding *my* motivation to teach and I *will not* be made responsible for the students' motivation to read. I make sensible choices (like asking them to read *Oliver Twist* and not the very long *Bleak House*) and try to connect the Literature of the foreign past with our local present, but this is it. Well, I also try to be as professional as I can. They know this.

Next year I very much want to teach an elective monographic course on science fiction. I have chosen a list of novels and films with some students and I'm beginning work now on downsizing this overlong list to fit the limits of the semester. I find the syllabus

very thrilling but I am as worried as if I were to teach Middle-English poetry for there is no guarantee at all that students will a) read the texts, b) like them, c) be willing to discuss them in class with energy and enthusiasm. I do look forward to teaching this course but, as I anticipated last semester, I know that the degree of student involvement I enjoyed during the *Harry Potter* course will NEVER materialise again. And I won't complain, as I am VERY lucky that I had the chance to enjoy that.

I have conversations all the time with students about the matters I raise here but, as they tell me, the problem is that I usually talk with students who are keen readers (they are the ones who, logically, take coffee with Literature teachers...). For the non-reading students I must be a bore, a pest, an obstacle they want to forget as soon as they can. When I think of the nightmarish years I spent trying to obtain tenure and the constant effort that maintaining an academic career afloat entails... *then* I get depressed. Would things change, I'm often asked, if we taught English-language culture through audiovisual texts exclusively (films, TV)? No, I don't think so. It's something else altogether, a deep fault in the system.

So, students, you should know that we Literature teachers are worried sick there is no way we can do our job well. We need your collaboration, your participation, more effort and more enthusiasm on your side. You're the young ones, not us, and this must show. I hate to think that my *Harry Potter* course will be the exception to remember not now, after 23 years teaching, but when I retire in 22 years... I know it might be hard to swallow but we need to know what's going on and why you don't want to learn from us, willing as we are to teach you. And, no, your motivation is not our responsibility. We have the duty to teach you, you have the duty to read, as simple as that.

16-XI-2014 GRAPPLING WITH BODY GOTHIC: THE LIMITS OF (MY) TOLERANCE

I spent a rich afternoon yesterday reviewing Xavier Aldana Reyes's excellent volume *Body Gothic: Corporal Transgression in Contemporary Literature and Horror Film* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2014). As happens, despite the 2,000 words I wrote, I'm not done yet; there's still a matter to address: the limits of my own tolerance to the shocking primary sources analyzed in the book.

I completely agree with the main theses in the book: a) Gothic Studies scholars unfairly forget that this genre is as psychological as it is somatic and corporeal; b) all gothic *is* body gothic since it aims at eliciting bodily responses; c) current body gothic (he dates it back to 1984) manifests a "sustained questioning of the role of embodiment" (18); d) we consume body gothic as the best strategy to contain our fears about the vulnerability of our bodies. Xavier argues all this by examining 1980s splatterpunk, body horror, new avant-pulp, the slaughterhouse novel and torture porn, using a wide range of authors and texts: from Clive Barker's short fiction (his *Books of Blood*) to Eli

Roth's *Hostel* film franchise, passing through pulp author Richard Laymon and Tom Six' film trilogy on *The Human Centipede*.

When I wrote my own dissertation on the monster, almost 20 years ago, I also used the argument that the task of the academic must not be hindered by a censorious, prejudiced attitude and that extreme horror, in all its varieties, must be included in Gothic Studies. Like Xavier, I made a point of stressing that critical judgement does not apply and that 'trash' is not a relevant concept (fancy an anthropologist refusing to examine cannibalism). I must face, nonetheless, the vexing question of how far contemporary 'shock' cinema (no longer 'horror' cinema) will go in the representation of the total gross-out thanks, of course, to development of film special effects, both digital and prosthetic-based. Blood used to be a silly tomato-red in the old Hammer films, which is why it is laughable today (not so for contemporary audiences). I am squeamish and prone to nightmares but have managed to enjoy dozens of horror films... in the safety of my home. Yet, *Hostel* (2005) marked a limit and I abandoned mid-way the bizarre *Saw* saga (2003-10). Actually, after seeing them I gave up gothic for science fiction. Now let me explain why.

Current body gothic, as Xavier argues, addresses our fears regarding the vulnerability of our bodies by paradoxically subjecting us to the vicarious experience of seeing other fragile bodies destroyed in the cruellest ways. Yes, fine. Actually, I am comforted by his idea that there is a logic behind the appalling sadism of the films. They are rightly called 'torture porn': porn goes straight to sex, these films use plot as a flimsy excuse for torture. Now, torture as seen, for instance, in Katherine Bigelow's *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012), the film on the hunting of Osama Bin Laden, is ugly and inhumane but somehow bearable as part of a larger plot. In 1980s body horror the camera learned not to look away but in 2000s torture porn it has learned to grip the spectator by the scruff of our neck and force us to look. And I cannot do that anymore: the realistic detail has become ultra-realistic and, thus, unbearable (I imagined Xavier taking notes with all due academic care and I wondered how he did it...).

It's ironic that I am now, at 48, invoking the same arguments that I myself had to put up with 20 years ago. Gothic horror is a misogynistic, homophobic genre but I answered back that I found in it strong women characters capable of fighting back. Still, I found myself criticizing Xavier for not passing judgement on these films' dubious gender politics. What is, arguably, making them worse is the general disempowerment of all victims, men and women. Unlike the old-fashioned kind, these stories offer no comfort, preaching that the world is a terrifying place in which random violence just happens. Instead of helping audiences face this inescapable truth today's body gothic is, rather, gloating over it.

It's also harder than ever not to stoop down to consider the sick imagination of some gothic 'artists'. Yes, yes, Mary Shelley, Charles Maturin or Matthew Lewis were also criticized and they are classics today. Yet, Xavier's comments on the trilogy by Dutch director and screenwriter Tom Six, *The Human Centipede* (2009, 2011; the third instalment is in production) gave me the kind of shiver one feels in the presence of the profoundly disturbed (I mean Six...). Xavier sticks to his impeccable academic prose

even in a plot summary that gave me tachycardia: a mad German surgeon kidnaps young tourists whom he mutilates in order to stitch their mouths and rectums to each other, thus creating the centipede of the title. Gasp, and deep sigh.

Thankfully, the sane IMDB spectators rate Dix' film only 4'5 out of 10. Annoyed reviewers abound: one reports the film as '100% medically inaccurate', another simply wonders 'Why?'. The man who titles his review 'After watching it I wanted to kill myself', remarks that (original capitalised text): "People will say it's an original idea, but OF COURSE IT IS. It's never been done before because NO ONE HAS THOUGHT OF SOMETHING AS SICK AS THIS YET." The late Roger Ebert's magnificent review offers, exceptionally, no rating: "Is the movie good? Is it bad? Does it matter? It is what it is and occupies a world where the stars don't shine."

After calling Dix a "dark artist" for taking his films seriously, Ebert grants that the film is "true to its genre" and "delivers what its audiences presumably expect". These audiences are the most demanding midnight movie fans and I am quite familiar with them, having attended the Sitges horror film festival a few times: they're mostly nice, harmless people, out with friends for a night of fun. Often, they receive gross films like *The Human Centipede* with hilarity, both at the expense of the whacky content and at the screenwriter's devious mind. Still the question remains: 'why?', accompanied by my very deep dread of men thinking of ghastly plots like this and enjoying them alone at home.

All in all, then, I can only praise Xavier's *Body Gothic* for his very, very brave approach to texts that for many people, including quite a big number in Gothic Studies, are intolerable. His theses are very useful to illuminate what the extreme texts of contemporary horror, in particular film, mean, for they *do* mean much of interest and relevance in our contemporary view of the body. I hope I find in his forthcoming volume on affect and the corporeal model of viewership answers to the questions I raise here, though I realise that only a titanic, perhaps collective effort, can succeed in finding an answer to the main question –'why?'

23-XI-2014 TALK-STARVED: A MODEST CONTRIBUTION TO ACADEMIC VOCABULARY

A close friend tells me that the recent three-day conference on Modernism that he has co-organised worked very nicely. It was not, he tells me, necessary to divide the participants in simultaneous panels and this greatly contributed to raising the level of discussion. I can very well imagine! The whole event was in the end, he explains, "an orgasm" –not "like an orgasm", please note, but "an orgasm".

This, naturally, sets me laughing hard. Yes, I tell him, everyone is talking about being sex-starved, love-starved or starved for affection but nobody is really paying attention to the needs of the effervescent academic brain. We're really starved for conversation, I tell him, but since this is not that catchy, I'll claim that we're 'talk-starved'.

This very same week, I have had further proof of this: oral sex need not refer to genital activity at all, I'll argue, but to the pleasure we, academics, get from good conversation (well, don't call it 'sex', call it 'joy' if you wish, though I think this sounds a bit corny). Let me explain.

On Monday, I attended a seminar that the research group I belong to, 'Building New Masculinities', organised. Our guest was Prof. Robert Reid-Pharr, from CUNY (see <http://reid-pharr.com/>), who turned out to be a wonderful, brilliant conversationalist. He strung together lunch, a three-hour long seminar and dinner, about 10 hours talking non-stop!! His seminar was particularly enjoyable because he did care very much for keeping the conversation going with each one of the twelve participants, no mean feat that. I myself, who attended the seminar out of duty as I was really having a very hectic week, staid on until midnight... and then had a hard time bringing down before sleep the excess oxytocin.

Yes, the same hormone we segregate during orgasm (and childbirth!!). So, you see, my friend does have a point. On Thursday I took out for dinner the members of the examining board of a doctoral dissertation submitted by one of my students. I booked a table for the absurdly early hour of 8 in the evening for dinner, thinking this way we'd be done by 10. Well, Cinderella got home just by midnight and her sleeplessness was only overcome close to 2 in the morning. Blame the oxytocin again (beautifully understood, incidentally, by the Spanish habit of 'sobremesa' or after-meal talk).

Keeping in touch with one's friends in the academic world is complicated. I think it is generally complicated in any situation, despite Skype and all the social networking. The phone helps but I also have the bitter experience of ending a very long friendship with another academic when I realised that a long call very week could not replace actual direct contact. It's either that situation in which you report down to the last detail activities done with other people, or just claim to be 'fine' (and then no real conversation ensues).

Many of the (academic) friends I have were made many years ago mostly in national conferences. I think that our yearly AEDEAN meeting helps very much to maintain alive this kind of absolutely necessary socialising, though it is not always possible to attend it. The experience of meeting people in conferences is, in the early stages of one's career, exhilarating, but then, in the long run, it becomes something more complicated. After experiencing first hand the difficulties of keeping in touch with friends I love but who live hundreds of kilometres away (so that we do use AEDEAN to meet at least once a year) I am becoming more and more reluctant to invest much energy in making new friends. Don't misunderstand me: the energy of friendship flows with its own logic and is quite capable of diminishing distance. What I mean is that, well, perhaps, in the end, it is better to enjoy conversation while it lasts in random meetings at conferences or seminars, than try to keep it alive once this is over. Yes, I know the same rule applies to casual sex at conferences (not that I have any experience of this at all—just in case!).

Conversation of the oxytocin-releasing kind, as you can see, is more likely to happen only under particular conditions which actually constitute a break from daily academic life. It seldom happens as part of a daily routine. In my Department we talk mainly about problems (or about problem-solving): bureaucracy's demands, a lecture that does not go well, poor exam results, etc. We have, like everyone else, little time to spare, which is why we often practice the genre known as 'corridor conversation', typically when you're rushing elsewhere. We have a tiny room, used for lunch and now furnished with a coffee machine. This is not, however, by any stretch of the imagination, close to the common room or lounge we fantasise that most Anglo-American university departments have. We tend, instead, to drop in whenever we catch a colleague in his/her office and see if they can spare 10 minutes of their hectic schedule for chit-chat.

When I decided 30 years ago that I would try to be a university teacher, the main enticement was my impression that academics spent most of their life engaged in deep conversation. This utterly wrong impression was based on a) reading too many English novels about Oxford and Cambridge, b) reading too many American campus novels, c) the generous use of their time that my own teachers offered me. I understand c) best now because my office conversations with my students tend to be absolutely gratifying. I don't mean the problem-solving visits but the ones in which we do manage to discuss books and raise thrilling issues. If lectures and seminars were not so one-sided, they would be another oxytocin source...

Fine, then, now that I have released a little of the adrenaline that our crazy academic life generates I feel better... How I wish it were oxytocin, though...

30-XI-2014 TALK-STARVED, THE SEQUEL: TELLC, A MODEST CONTRIBUTION TO DEPARTMENT LIFE

Two years ago, on 14 December 2014, the teaching innovation group I belonged to, "Between the Lines: Comprehensive Reading of Literary Texts in a Foreign Language" (coordinated by Andrew Monnickendam, and financed by Catalan agency AGAUR), held a one-day seminar to discuss how to teach Literature students about the function of the narrator. You may read the ensuing publication, also called *Between the Lines*, at <http://betweenthelinespublication.files.wordpress.com/2013/07/reading-between-the-lines.pdf>. I myself presented a paper called "Contrasting Genres: Dickens, Engels and the Workhouse (Narrating and Reporting in Fiction and Non-Fiction)", which is included in the volume.

In the post corresponding to 16 December 2012, "Learning from Teaching about Teaching, with Students' Help", I mentioned that about 80 people, counting students and Literature teachers from diverse universities attended the event. A conclusion I reached was that "we need to establish some kind of annual meeting" to discuss teaching methodologies, hopefully also including students. Well, it's taken longer than

I expected then, but the first meeting of this kind took place last Friday 28, and promises to become a feature of our Departmental calendar.

Opening up spaces for teachers to meet and discuss what they do in the classroom is no easy matter. I saw on that day of 2012 that it brings many benefits, as we are profoundly talk-starved also in this sense and not just concerning our research and intellectual life in general.

Using as quite a weak excuse that the celebration of the one-day seminar was one of the tasks I wanted to accomplish before my time as BA Coordinator is up next January 2015, I invited last September my Department colleagues to join what I called the one-day TELLC (Teaching English Language, Literature and Culture) workshop, and hoped would become a new yearly meeting and publication. I called the conference "Matching Assessment and Competences", thinking of the oncoming degree teaching assessment exercise (I mean to validate the BA for another six years, not for research). Also of each teacher's individual classroom activities assessment by the national and regional agencies.

Before sending the 'cfp' I checked with two other colleagues whether the idea made sense, for one thing I was absolutely certain of was that I wanted to gather together Language and Literature teachers. My idea was to invite all members of the Department to contribute papers on their teaching practice and then organise the seminar by year in the BA, rather than by speciality. Another key idea was that contributions would be jargon-free and very much focused on actual practice, descriptive rather than argumentative if so wished. Bibliography was not compulsory, either.

To be completely honest, part of me expected the 'cfp' to be unsuccessful, so as to be able to claim that at least that I'd tried but gloriously failed. Everyone is awfully over-worked, and so am I... Suddenly, taking on the responsibility of setting up something new just seemed too much but, well, stubborn is one thing I certainly am. I received proposals for 7 papers in total and made a feeble attempt to give in, which was soon stopped by the enthusiasts who had submitted an abstract. The point they made was that TELLC had to start and I had to set the ball rolling. And so I did.

In the end, two prospective contributors dropped out, and I was left with 6 papers, which were more than enough to fill a busy morning from 10:00 to almost 15:00. There were about 15 of us and, from the many congratulations I received (thanks!, thanks!), it became quite apparent that the meeting next year will be bigger. Yes, I'm in again!! Besides, it'll be easy to remember as it'll coincide with Black Friday, now suddenly a date on everyone's mind.

The papers presented were lively and communicative. They not only transmitted information but also opened up debate in all cases and, what is more important, inspired new ideas for cross-collaboration between Language and Literature. The Syllabus may be published online but we simply do not read what our neighbour is

doing, which is why hearing said neighbour describe his or her practice is often quite a nice surprise.

Next year, as I say, I'll try again and will perhaps also invite students, as we did two years ago. Also, if we have resources for at least a cup of coffee, I'll extend the cfp to colleagues in other English Departments in Catalunya. Eight years ago, in 2006, I organised the "I Trobada Internuniversitària d'Estudis Anglesos a Catalunya" (continued by one more meeting in 2007 at Universitat Rovira i Virgili), but the crisis destroyed the resources and the motivation to continue it. Perhaps the pedagogical focus will help put us back on our feet again...

I need to address now the colleagues who did not attend TELLC last Friday to ask them, please, to make room for the meeting next year. And I mean particularly the full-time colleagues, as I understand very well that part-time teachers have too many difficulties to integrate new activities in their ultra-busy schedule (though some did contribute, for which they get my warmest thanks). I think that the time spared to discuss what we do in class proved to be very fruitful, indeed much more than attending the bureaucratic meetings we all must attend now and then. And, well, I also had to put off for another day many tasks, like finishing an overdue article or preparing lectures.

Thanks, thanks, thanks to those of you who insisted that TELLC went ahead. I'm counting on you for next year and to publicise among our colleagues the results. Let's see if this way we can be a little bit less talk-starved.

7-XII-2014 OUTSMARTING CERVANTES: ARTURO PÉREZ REVERTE'S EDITION OF *EL QUIJOTE*

Recently, I went to Laie in search of a copy of Juan Ramón Jiménez's *Platero y yo* (1914) for my nine-year-old niece. I asked for an edition aimed at children, meaning illustrated, and I was offered instead an *adapted* edition. Scandalized that someone had dared touch the original, I bought her a beautiful edition commemorating the 100th anniversary of its original publication... with illustrations. *Platero y yo*, as everyone knows, is not a book for children but the poetical language is perfectly accessible, and, in fact, I bought my niece the book on the basis of her dad's good memories of reading it as a child. It worked, she loved it (well, except the ending, too sad of course).

Next thing I know, the internet is full of comments on the RAE's new edition for secondary school students of Miguel de Cervantes' *El Quijote* –and edition *adapted* by Arturo Pérez Reverte, one of RAE's members and, of course, a well-known author himself. RAE itself announces that in this way they finally fulfil the 'Real Orden' of 12 October 1912, commissioning this institution to produce a 'popular' edition and one for schools, apart from the critical edition (this was issued in 2004, edited by Francisco Rico). Obviously, I'm not the first to note that in 1912 Spain was a mostly illiterate country, which may have made these other editions necessary. But today??

During his presentation of the new edition in Mexico, Arturo Pérez Reverte took the chance to berate, precisely, the “illiterate Ministers” of Culture and Education that have eliminated *El Quijote* from the compulsory school curriculum in at least six Spanish Castilian-speaking countries. He called for a return of Cervantes’ masterpiece to all school systems in this linguistic area, on the habitual grounds that the book guarantees a much needed education in the shared language and in the values needed for today’s life. I marvel how far Matthew Arnold’s shadow extends, even in countries culturally alien to his preaching. Claiming that a book published in 1605 (1615, the sequel) is essential to face life in 2014 is odd, to say the least. And that the person making this claim is the local equivalent of Ken Follett and not of Harold Bloom is even stranger.

What has Pérez Reverte done to *El Quijote*? As RAE informs (I guess this is his own text), he has streamlined the narration, pushing to the margins the digressions and the interpolated tales (whether to footnotes, appendixes, or links I’m not sure). As if this were Frankenstein’s creature, the RAE’s press note refers to the “special attention devoted to the cleanliness of the stitches” used to conceal the cuts in the original. Chapters have been re-numbered and fused together... an operation accompanied by the truly cheeky claim that the integrity of the text has been respected. Now fancy Javier Mariscal adding colour to Picasso’s ‘Guernica’ on the grounds that it’s muted tones bore contemporary audiences and you get what Pérez Reverte has done.

Juan Ángel Juristo, absolutely indignant, claims that RAE has simply and plainly “expurgated” Cervantes (<http://www.cuartopoder.es/detrasdelsol/la-rae-publica-una-edicion-manipulada-del-quijote/5849>). He mentions as an example to follow *Tales from Shakespeare*, the popular versions for children of the plays that Charles (and his sister Mary!) Lamb published in 1807. If you are to adapt a text for children, his point is, do it openly, and don’t pretend that you’re still offering the original, an argument I subscribe even though I think that adaptations are valid only in very particular circumstances. If young scholars are bored by *El Quijote* we need to learn why, he concludes, and not mutilate the book.

I was myself one of the scholars bored to death when aged 15 by *El Quijote*. Reading it put me off Spanish Literature for many years, as I was reading at the same time the much more exciting work by Edgar Allan Poe, Robert Louis Stevenson and similar English classics. When I asked my current students of Victorian Literature how they would solve the problem of making *El Quijote* attractive to teenagers, they suggested inviting young students to read just some chapters and let them decide when to read the whole book. Checking this morning how the teaching of Literature is organised in Catalonia, I have come across a document indicating that this is what local teachers do (I mean in the itineraries for ‘Humanities and Socials Sciences’ and ‘Arts’ of ‘Batxillerat’). The same applies to the Catalan classic *Tirant lo Blanch* (1490).

Logically, the additional problem to be considered is the kind of literacy possessed by current teenagers, who may be absolutely proficient in following complex videogames or TV series but poor readers (a problem I believe made worse by young adult fiction).

El Quijote was not written with teenagers in mind and it is possible best read in a more mature phase of life, when the reader approaches it with a much bigger cultural baggage. The concern, however, is that unless young readers are force-fed *El Quijote* they will never read it; likewise, I myself face the problem of having to force my second-year students to read Victorian Literature in the original language when most are not ready at all. Reading just chapters is not the solution at a university level, and adapted versions are totally out of the question. Pérez Reverte's monstrosity exposes a problem which has no easy solution. In the end, as I know very well, students simply choose to read complete books, a segment or a summary...

As for RAE, instead of contributing to launching a dubious edition which may bring money to its coffers (and to Santillana, the publishing house) but no prestige, it should embark on a much needed project to guide readers beyond their teenage years. To begin with, since Rico's critical edition is freely available online (<http://cvc.cervantes.es/literatura/clasicos/quijote/>), RAE should develop a hipertextual digital resource (which might also appeal to teenage readers).

Actually, I would engage those teenage readers in producing the hypertext... and let Arturo Pérez Reverte continue to write his novels. May they never be compulsory reading...

9-XII-2014 ELSA'S DRESS AND GIRL POWER: WHAT I MISSED ABOUT FROZEN

On 5 January this year I published here a post on a new Swedish system to rate films according to their feminist interest. In this post I mentioned in passing *Frozen*, noting that, although this Disney film exalts sisterly love, after seeing it my two Madrid nieces didn't hug each other but remained "mesmerised," poor things, "by the stupid glamorisation of a pathetic fairy-tale lifestyle." I totally missed the point. Stupid *me*.

An MA student, Camila Rojas, asked me subsequently to supervise her dissertation on how the concept of 'true love' has changed from *Beauty and the Beast* to *Frozen*. Thrilling! (She's almost done). I interviewed then my two Barcelona nieces (same ages as the ones from Madrid: 9 and 5) and this is what I learned: *Frozen* is unrealistic in its depiction of sisterly love because actual sisters quarrel all the time. Still, older girls, though less interested in the princess theme, appreciate the fact that heterosexual romance is not central. They find the film warm and funny, in particular the quirky snowman Olaf. Younger girls simply *love* Elsa. Why? She's pretty and smart and, attention!, she's *powerful*. And a queen who needs no prince, take that! When I stressed that Elsa's power to turn all she touches into ice is dangerous, I was explained that this is irrelevant—what matters is that it's cool: look at her castle, her ice monster and her dress... My Madrid nieces corroborated these views, perplexed that they had to clarify for my benefit what was so obvious to them.

Elsa, as Camila has seen, has clearly become a figure of empowerment for very young girls who don't even know such word exists. For them 'power' means Elsa's special power, presented as a sickly condition by the script but re-written as a super-power by the young female spectators (more Superman than X-Men, if you know what I mean). This is the real reason why the film has become so strong, even a cult film, among little girls, a phenomenon which, in its turn, explains the superlative boom in merchandising-related sales. Particularly of Elsa's dress, without forgetting that the doll based on this character will outsell Barbie herself this oncoming Christmas.

Let me digress about the dress, now that I'm the middle of the nightmarish process of commissioning the Three Wise Men with bringing one home. Think Snowwhite, Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, Belle or Rapunzel, and you see a typical princess dress: a long, flouncy skirt accompanied by a bodice with puffy sleeves, ribbons... right? Now, picture Elsa (or check Google) and see what she's wearing: a tight-fitting sequined gown with a long cut up her skirt. This suggestive dress is aimed at showing off her sexiness, which in the script accompanies her decision to, as she sings, "let it go" and enjoy her unique, toxic power. Her younger sister Anna, in contrast, wears girly dresses of a more conventional cut, actually very pretty. But, then, she has no power, right? Except the power to love Elsa (almost) to death.

I'm sure Disney never anticipated little girls would want Elsa's dress (I'm told that even some little *boys* want it!!). The house designers have actually solved quite poorly the problem of how to adapt a sexy gown made for a curvy twenty-year-old girl into something wearable by girls aged 3 to 10 (without a major scandal). This is why you can currently find at least four official versions of Elsa's dress—well, 'find' is a relative word, as they're sold out in official online stores, whereas in the physical shops they disappear as soon as they arrive. All these 'official' versions are quite ugly, made with low-quality, wrinkled, rough cloth... and totally overpriced (40 to 80 euros, plus shoes, tiara, and other accessories). One wonders about the Asian workers making them probably for next to nothing, unable to afford them for their own little girls. Yet, you should have seen the anxious parents and other relatives asking Disney Store employees to please, please, please, let Santa Claus and the Three Wise Kings keep one for their little girl. Other sweeter and prettier princess dresses elicit much less interest—and, by the way, Merida's unfussy outfit (from *Brave*) is gone for good. I also missed *Maleficent*-related merchandising items, um, perhaps for good reason, though, my!, I loved those wings (not the horns...). And Aurora is simply lovely.

Back to Elsa: the home-made solution, having the Three Wise Men make the dress thus improving on the wretched Disney materials, is not really easier as the required cloth has been sold out from the main stores (at least in Barcelona). Holy cow... A chirpy sales clerk familiar with the *Frozen* situation explained to me that mums came to his cloth shop accompanied by demanding five-year-olds, absolutely adamant that they wanted the 'right' dress. He was scandalised that mums allowed little girls to behave in this tyrannical way, curtailing, besides, all possible creativity. I wonder whether the choice of Elsa as a favourite reflects this trend... get me that dress, or else, I'll use my power to freeze you!

As films with a very similar focus, I very much prefer *Maleficent* to *Frozen*, though I understand that *Maleficent* is too dark for very young girls—I found the fairy’s mutilation almost unbearable to watch. As for the princess dress, though Elsa’s is beautiful, I find it out of place in a fairy tale: it’s closer to Gilda and Jessica Rabbit than to Scarlett O’Hara. Why do little girls have, in any case, this fantasy of being empowered by wearing a princess (or queen’s) dress? And, in our Catholic culture, how does this connect with the first communion dress and the wedding dress, both patriarchal concoctions? Well, I’d answer that very obviously. Disney films for girls suggest that power only comes either by inheriting it from dad or by marrying a prince, and just in fairy tales, not in real-life contexts. In contrast, little boys are offered a much wider choice and may dress up as super-heroes or as more ordinary heroes (firemen, spies, astronauts and such). No prince outfits required for them...

My feminist self would rather see my nieces become real heroines than fake princesses or queens. But, then, what little girl would accept an astronaut dress as a Christmas present with the same glee as an Elsa dress? Even I would go for that blue beauty—though I’d rather warm than freeze hearts...

13-XII-2014 ON BOREDOM: DIFFERENT GENERATIONAL STRATEGIES

Who or what is to blame for the idea that whoever dares speak in public must, above all, entertain? The adjective ‘boring’ has become absolutely pervasive in the classroom and, no doubt, a major enemy of learning. In recent days I have gone through so many situations connected with this that it is hard to choose where to begin... One thing I have noticed is that, although boredom may have a long-lived presence in the history of education, each generation seems to cope differently with it.

Since I don’t recall being bored in primary school I’ll argue that classroom boredom begins in adolescence, when the augmented narcissism of the students results in their belief that teaching should focus on them. Respect for the teacher is eroded if not lost for good then: ‘you bore me; I could do better; who cares about what you teach?’ As I teen secondary school student in the early 1980s, I coped with my own boredom mostly by daydreaming, and only occasionally by skipping class (severely frowned upon, then). My daydreaming strategy has not changed since then: it consists of looking at the speaker with all due attention, signalling with my body language that I care while my mind wanders off. I often complete this with making notes, actually about my daydreaming, though the speaker may be totally fooled into thinking it’s about the talk.

As a university student I found that my threshold of tolerance for bad lecturing decreased sharply, which resulted in my skipping many lectures—often to go to the library or stay home to study. Other classmates famously chose the bar, always crowded. If we did choose to attend a lecture, however, we mostly kept up appearances: we took (pretend) notes and I don’t recall anyone yawning (only discreetly), eating or drinking, slumping on the chair, much less sleeping. We may have

looked at the speaker with glassy eyes but a certain degree of politeness was maintained. Perhaps we just took it for granted that teachers were boring or, rather, that learning was not about being entertained. If a teacher happened to be entertaining that was a bonus, though I distinctly recall that the highest valued university teachers were the ones with the most interesting personality, which does not mean they cared for students at all... Admiring students just hoped their idols noticed them. Really.

In recent days, however, I have seen this in my class: a) an MA student just laying her head on the table and falling asleep (I stopped my lecture to wake her up and invite her to take coffee, or leave), b) an undergrad leaving the classroom five minutes into my lecture. In this case I stopped to manifest my delight at having broken a new record in my career... boring a student in the shortest possible time. He never emailed me to say he was indisposed, so I assumed it was boredom. Students think we don't notice this but from our vantage point we see everyone: the ones staring at the floor or the wall rather than look at us, the ones never making notes, the ones using twitter and Facebook, the ones eating... The body language says it all: I wish I were elsewhere... Perhaps we were just as bored but the etiquette code dictated that we had to, as I say, keep up appearances, beginning with sitting up decorously. This, I find, is gone. If students are bored, they plainly show it, perhaps feeling that honesty is the best policy. For the caring teacher this is unnerving for the only solution is to a) close your eyes to what it going on in class and drone on, b) throw a hysterical tantrum.

In the last three days I have attended a conference and I have had the chance to see these diverse generational strategies at work simultaneously, as the public ranged from post-grads in their early twenties to seasoned academics in their sixties. It's not the first time I write here that conferences have grown into truly boring experiences as few speakers succeed in making the 20-minute paper or the 50-minute plenary lecture... engaging. No, I'm not using the adjective 'entertaining' for in conferences what matters, in my view, is the ability to communicate new ideas based on solid research using an adequate delivery style. Just let me tell you just about one panel session.

I was sitting in the front row, daydreaming and making notes, as I wondered what the speaker was talking about since she had hidden herself behind her paper and was delivering it in an amazingly monotonous voice (a friend told me this is called 'lectura parapetada' or 'walled-in delivery'). If the speaker had, however, raised her head and looked at the audience she would inevitably have seen the young man sitting to my left, madly twitting as she spoke. Not about her talk, as I noticed. Then came an appalling young man who used his 20 minutes to bore us to death about his journey to Japan, where he had interviewed old glories of Japanese cinema for his documentary on Godzilla. I grew so furious at his impudence I could not even daydream. The guy next to me twitted on—this time the factoids in the speaker's self-advertising campaign. To my consternation (and delight) a senior academic in the audience told off the Godzilla guy very rudely for his total cheek. This same academic, however, had slept through the previous speaker's paper... so who was being rude to whom, I wonder?

Is this all, I wonder, the effect of the remote control and channel hopping, the idea that something more exciting is going on elsewhere? Or is it something else, the replacement of an ethics of endurance by the demand for constant excitement for other reasons? The older academics I saw fall asleep in the conference as the younger delegates twitted on confirm my thesis that different generations react differently to boredom.

Yet the older ones' sleep suggests that 1980s sense of etiquette is gone for all... for aren't we all becoming great narcissists? Entertain us or else. Easy to say, hard to do. And why should it be done at all?

31-XII-2014 THE (IM)POSSIBLE HENRIETTA JEKYLL: RECONSIDERING GENDER MATTERS IN STEVENSON'S MASTERPIECE

I have lost count of how often I have taught R.L. Stevenson's masterpiece *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, on which I have published here several posts, as this seems to be an inexhaustible text. I return once more to it after having marked the most recent batch of students' exams to focus on their answer to our question: is this text specifically about men? Can we imagine the same type of moral duplicity in women?

Four years ago I wrote a post in which I mulled about the possibility of a contemporary female version of Jekyll, a Prof. Henrietta Jekyll who, like Jekyll's successor Dr. Hannibal Lecter, had a secret life in which perhaps she had her own students home regularly for dinner. I took the chance then to reject Elaine Showalter's famous reading of Jekyll's male circle as a closeted gay ring, with Hyde being the incarnation of the 'evil' pleasures by which Oscar Wilde was sentenced to hard labour a decade later. Despite Wilde, I find the idea that Stevenson is covertly dealing with homosexuality uncomfortably homophobic, and particularly distasteful when defended by contemporary feminists.

Back to my students answers, then. The matter is very simple: is Stevenson claiming that duplicity is a necessary condition of masculinity in late Victorian times? Or is he taking a man as a representative of all Victorian individuals? Could we, in short, place a woman in the centre of his story and if we did so, how would it change?

This is not, as you can see, a simple question to answer as it is necessary to take into account whether gender or class matters predominate in Stevenson's text. In class, we followed the argument suggesting that Stevenson's target is the hypocrisy of, specifically, Victorian gentlemanliness of the upper middle-class professional (not aristocratic) variety. This led my students to write exams split among three options to explain why Stevenson's text dealt exclusively with masculinity: a) for Victorians it was impossible to imagine ladies leading double lives, and so it was for the author; b) the author was a misogynist and this is why he practically excluded women from the text;

c) since women were excluded from the professions and Jekyll led his double life to protect his professional reputation, no woman could replace him as a protagonist.

Let's see... To begin with, we had read together Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, which made it very clear that ladies like Helen Graham faced daily, like gentlemen of their class, the challenge of having to keep up appearances or see their reputation destroyed. Now, Helen creates a false identity for herself to protect her son and not to indulge in secret pleasures, yet Victorian fiction is full of *femme fatales*, from the vampire Carmilla to the scheming Lady Audley—it is simply not true that Victorians were incapable of imagining perverse women. Rather, as Bram Dijkstra very well explained in his classic *Idols of Perversity* (1988) the problem is that they imagined too many... by which I do not mean that all Victorian ladies were angelic. I'm sure Henrietta Jekyll could have been imagined as a committed adulteress, for instance; fancying her a nymphomaniac would have been harder indeed. What puzzles me is the students' denunciations of Stevenson as an anti-feminist for as I insisted again and again in class, Stevenson offers a very negative image of masculinity in his text, and, well, paradoxically, making a woman the centre of his tale would just have resulted in just one more case of the kind Dijkstra describes, by no means in a feminist story.

Some re-writings of *The Strange Case..*, like Hammer's quirky movie *Dr. Jekyll and Sister Hyde* (1971) or the idiotic American comedy *Dr. Jekyll and Ms. Hyde* (1995), have fantasised about Jekyll's dark side being a woman (in the 1971 film, she commits, in addition, Jack the Ripper's crimes!). Others, have enhanced women's participation in the story, producing totally unnecessary melodrama: just recall Julia Roberts as the maid falling in love with her master Dr. Jekyll (John Malkovich) in *Mary Reilly* (1996), based on Valerie Martin's silly romance (1990). I have been unable to locate, whether in fan fiction or in film, however, a retelling with a female Jekyll, with the only exception of the seemingly pathetic horror comedy *Jacqueline Hyde* (2005), in which shy Jackie discovers she's the granddaughter of the original Dr. Jekyll. The rest, it seems, is porn.

I have awarded the highest mark to a girl student who simply argued that Stevenson could have equally focused on a woman but once he decided to focus on a man he made the suitable decisions to make his tale as solid as possible. Of course. It makes perfect sense for Jekyll to be a gentleman scientist as it would make perfect sense for a Henrietta Jekyll to be, for example, his widow (even a former lab assistant as many scientists' wives were). If you don't want to go the SF way, then stick to fantasy and provide Miss or Mrs. Jekyll with a dark fairy godmother and a magic potion (Wilde, remember?, used magic for Dorian Gray's picture). Henrietta Jekyll surely must be a lady, for ladies rather than low-class girls risked it all by losing their reputation as fallen women. If you still have problems visualizing her unspeakable pleasures, just read *Dracula* (1897) where you'll find a lovely lady, Lucy, attacking every evening poor children to drink their blood.

Here's a challenge for anyone interested, as I don't have the time to do this myself: take Stevenson's text and just alter the gender of the main characters, and see what happens. It will definitely not work if you insist on presenting Henrietta as a newly-

minted pro-feminist Dr. Jekyll (unless you want to produce a misogynistic tale against the few women doctors practising in the 1880s). But think of all those angelic, repressed Victorian ladies and imagine what kind of secret life they would lead if in possession of a magic potion. Perhaps, here's my conclusion, Stevenson knew very well how to do this... but refrained himself from writing what could only have been an outrageously scandalous text. Yet not impossible.

2-I-2015 BEST OF 2014?: LOSING TRACK...

Around New Year's Day seems the best time to take a look at the list of the volumes I have read in the previous 365 days and see what I have been up to. I keep, as I have noted here several times already, a list of all I read, as a very necessary memory aid. My habit of, in addition, rating the volumes throws this time a very unexpected, odd, selection of top readings for 2014. In chronological order, as I read them along this now past year:

1. Lois McMaster Bujold, *Paladin of Souls* (2003), fantasy.
2. Fanny Kemble, *Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation 1838-1839* (1883), memoirs.
3. Frederick Douglass, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1881, 1892), autobiography.
4. Emmeline Pankhurst, *My Own Story* (1914), autobiography.
5. Roberto Saviano, *CeroCeroCero* (2014), journalistic essay.
6. Richard Morgan, *Broken Angels* (2003), SF.
7. Jeffrey Eugenides, *Middlesex* (2000), literary fiction.
8. Isaías Lafuente, *Agrupémonos todas: La lucha de las españolas por la igualdad* (2003), journalistic essay.
9. Geraldine Scanlon, *La polémica feminista en la España contemporánea 1868-1974* (1976), academic essay.
10. Xavier Aldana Reyes, *Body Gothic: Corporeal Transgression in Contemporary Literature and Horror Film* (2004), academic essay.
11. Suzanne Collins, *The Hunger Games Trilogy* (2005-2010), juvenile dystopian fiction.

My first surprise is that even though 50% of my readings this year were novels, as usual, I have been impressed by very few and I'm not sure I would recommend them: Eugenides' *Middlesex*, a re-reading, is excellent but Bujold's *Paladin of Souls* and Morgan's *Broken Angels* are, rather, signs of very personal preferences which are hard to pass on. What is Suzanne Collins' trilogy doing here at this peculiar place 11, you may wonder? Well, her books upset me profoundly to the point of giving me intense nightmares; I know this is not a criteria to call her a 'good writer' and I rather think she's a disturbed and disturbing author—yet, I have found myself caught in Katniss' story with an intensity missing from all the other many novels I have read in 2014. The memoirs, autobiographies and essays I would not hesitate to recommend, as you can see by my having written about most of them here. I do not hesitate, either, to name

Saviano's *CeroCeroCero*, a bold, desperate dissection of the cocaine business, as the best volume that has passed through my hands recently.

It is also the only volume in the list published in 2014, together with Xavi Aldana's study, which leads me to the second point today: I've completely lost track. I have been checking the 'best of 2014' lists published by newspapers like *El País* or *The Guardian*, and also the selections voted by members of *GoodReads*. Since I do not check these regularly for lack of time there was there plenty of authors and titles I didn't know. Fair enough. What threw me off was that quite often they were said to be 'world famous' or a 'smashing hit'. Can I be really this disconnected? And who's the one so well connected with the media so as to keep pace with all that is new?

I shared these worries with a group of friends over coffee and we came to the conclusion that the ignorance I am acknowledging here is habitual. From what I gather, readers follow a thread of their own choice, whether this is young adult or post-colonial fiction, without excessively caring about the ceaseless flow of novelties. If you look at my list, I'm doing that: follow a few threads that interest me and see where they will lead—no need to limit myself to the immediate present. A friend noted not only that so much is published every year that it is impossible to keep up but also that reliable indicators of quality, like, say, the Man Booker Prize, have lost a great deal of their influence and reliability: the books highlighted by awards don't last for as long as they used to last, she said. Indeed, it is harder and harder for me to recall the names of new writers hailed with exorbitant claims about their quality as they, simply, don't seem to be around with the same force as their 1980s predecessors. A matter of numbers perhaps?

The same friend, currently reading African fiction in English, also told me that there is much of quality to be found in that area of the world—this was in answer to my pointing out that, judging by *GoodReads*, the middlebrow has replaced for good the literary in the top volumes selected by readers (or the literary writers, if any are left, are failing to connect with the public, I don't know). I have no reasons to doubt that Africa is producing very fine novels, but how could I know unless she tells me?

I am even lost in my own preferred SF corner, seemingly finding by accident rather than good sense what is worth reading. Here is an example. My friend is co-organizing a conference on the Literature of the Indian Ocean and I proposed to contribute something about African SF. I googled my way into this unknown field yesterday, and here we go: I should have known that it is fast-progressing, spear-headed by white South-African author Lauren Beukes who is, guess what?, very popular and the recipient of I don't know how many awards... Yet, I didn't know she existed at all until yesterday.

As long as readers come across good writers it is really irrelevant whether we keep up with the novelties or not, though obviously it is relevant for the publishing industry. I had no idea when 2014 started that I would be so pleased by books written one hundred or even almost two hundreds years ago, but here they are to last in my memory. We'll see who my top ten are at the end of the following 365 days.

Happy New Year! May it brings you plenty of good books.

2-I-2015 PEETA AND KATNISS (AND GALE): STUCK WITH STEREOTYPES

One of my undergrad students is writing a paper for my Gender Studies course on Peeta Mellark's alternative masculinity and this led me to reading recently the complete *Hunger Games* trilogy. As I wrote two posts ago, the final volume even gave me nightmares as I found the whole concept of having children kill other children on camera, reality-show style, quite sick.

J.K. Rowling's flirting with the dark side in *Harry Potter* is intense enough but at least it has a certain sense of decorum and clear-cut ethic lines. What I found most disturbing about Collins' dystopian fantasy, in contrast, is how often the same line would contain words as opposite as 'death' and 'stylist'. I understand that she intends to represent Panem as the kind of rotten civilization that generates these grotesque matches between the serious and the banal (and the gory spectacle of mutual juvenile killing). Yet I could not help thinking that her own imagination is tinged with the dark colours of America's unacknowledged sense of its own decadence (as much as Rowling's is pure British stiff-upper-lip).

The Hunger Games has already generated an immense list of bibliography. I'm going to refer here specifically to two articles discussing gender issues in the trilogy: Ellyn Lem and Holly Hassel's "'Killer' Katniss and 'Lover' Boy Peeta: Suzanne Collins's Defiance of Gender-Genred Reading" in *Of Bread, Blood and The Hunger Games: Critical Essays on the Suzanne Collins* and "Katniss and Her Boys: Male Readers, the Love Triangle and Identity Formation" by Whitney Elaine Jones, included in *Space and Place in The Hunger Games: New Readings of the Novels*. In case you don't know this young adult trilogy, Collins narrates how Katniss Everdeen alters for ever the appalling dictatorship that, among other methods of brutal coercion, celebrates yearly games in which children tributes from the districts are forced to kill each other until only one is left. Her terrifying experience as a tribute runs parallel to an adolescent love triangle: Katniss must choose between her hunting partner, macho Gale, and her games partner, gentle Peeta. I'll try to avoid spoilers...

The two articles on this triangle make the claim that Collins resists the binary gender system in the name of utopian feminism by having Katniss reconcile masculine and feminine traits in her own person, and by offering her a romantic choice between two very different types of male character, rather than two versions of the same stereotypically masculine hero. However, I find in the articles many worrying arguments.

One is the idea that Katniss' 'masculine' traits respond to the need to entice male readers into reading the trilogy—let me rephrase this: whereas Harry Potter's 'feminine' traits respond to Rowling's wish to make male heroism less aggressive

rather than to attract female readers (this is Hermione's function), Collins had to worry, above all, about making Katniss attractive to her prospective male readers: less girly, more tomboyish. No, I haven't forgotten that Joanne Rowling published her series as J.K. to mask her own gendered identity and thus reduce male readers' resistance to reading women's fiction. Always trying to please the boys... Deep sigh here.

About the 'male' and 'female' traits discussed in the articles, my confusion is superlative. Peeta, we are told "participates in a traditionally feminine occupation: baking", or he represents "the beautiful, gentle part of nature". The idea is that Peeta embodies Katniss's feminine side whereas traditionally male Gale stands for her masculine side, and that she is herself torn between her masculinised identity as a hunter/survivor and the conventional (physical) femininity that her bizarre team of stylists manage so competently to highlight. Jones makes the claim that the three characters can be placed on an imaginary line representing the continuum of masculinity with Katniss veering towards one or the other as her own masculinity requires, for "Though biologically female, Katniss is *essentially* masculine" (my italics). Yet she also claims that Collins is offering a utopian feminist synthesis of gender traits aimed at overcoming the current need for them, particularly useful to teach, here we go again, male readers to overcome masculinist restrictions. In contrast, Lem and Hassel believe that Katniss is "neither overtly masculine, nor feminine" but a mixture (though the feminine side is just skin-deep). Another deep sigh...

I simply get dizzy, and quite annoyed, to be honest. It's almost 25 years since the publication of Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) but little has changed in the fight against gender binarism: essentialist categories remain, both in the readers' perception of their own identity (all this concern about male readers) and in the vocabulary to describe characters who are supposedly alternative gender-benders. The inability to transcend the adjectives 'masculine' and 'feminine' even leads to truly weird statements: baking is a feminine occupation??? How funny: take a look at the mixed team baking cakes in TV show *Ace of Cakes*, and re-think 'feminine' (or baking). As for Katniss' masculinity, well, she's just one more typical strong female character too busy relating to her male companions to connect with other women. She is supposed to be motivated throughout her harrowing experience by the need to protect her younger sister Prim but I noticed that the girls hardly ever speak—so much for sisterhood and feminism...

About the boys in the triangle, um. Gale is such a huge stereotype he's not even worth commenting on: he's the kind who claims to like strong girls but finally marries a pretty non-entity whom he probably ends up abusing. Heathcliff, in short, once more, only marginally less villainous. Peeta is also a huge stereotype, the protective gentleman, perhaps less manly than Darcy and certainly manlier than Edgar Linton, but all the same a figure that dates back 200 years in time. He went through the 1990s 'new man' fantasy and is now seemingly resurfacing here as a man quite comfortable with the idea of the girl being on top. Yet the principle is the same Jane Austen invented with Darcy: Peeta is a gentle man (if not a gentleman) unswervingly in love with a girl whose glaring shortcomings he is willing to overcome unconditionally. He never gets angry, he

never loses patience, though it's funny to see how Collins has him literally brainwashed into hating Katniss for a while, perhaps once more to please those recalcitrant male readers. Read as you wish, by the way, his mutilation (sorry about the spoiler).

Once more, then, young girls are offered with Katniss the complete romantic package and no real positive role model: I was actually very much surprised to see that she is actually a very passive person, except for a crucial scene in the last book. This passivity seems contradicted by her ability to kill animals and, if necessary, human beings. However, it is most spectacularly manifested not so much in her difficulties to choose between Gale and Peeta but in her complete inability to express desire for either of them.

When I expressed to a friend my puzzlement at the frigidity of a text aimed at teenagers which contains at the same time so much horrific bodily violence, he reminded me that American fiction has always preferred violence to sex. Katniss constantly claims that there is no place for sensuality beyond kisses in her dangerous life yet, as any war narrative reader knows, there is no better aphrodisiac than a constant death threat... Poor Gale and Peeta with their love for this new chaste Diana of the bow and arrow!

8-I-2015 MAN OF TODAY?: (UN)COOL MASCULINITIES AND MOVIE STARS

It is not my intention to write today exclusively about the Hugo Boss 'Man of Today' campaign with Gerard Butler, aimed at boosting sales of its star perfume Boss Bottled. However, it is a useful starting point. You may have seen the TV add, first aired in November 2014. Butler looks his habitual handsome self as he sprays his manly chest with the perfume, dons a trim Hugo Boss suit and considers how great San Francisco looks in the distance.

He delivers off screen in his original Scottish accent the Boss Bottle manifesto. Brace yourselves, boys and girls: "I don't believe in less, I go all the way. And you can see it in my stride. If good conduct makes a man, it makes me the man of today. A man will never run. Stay noble I say. I am a man. More than the grip of good handshake and a job well done. Diligence and dedication is what I live from day to day. And you can see it in my deeds, be true to yourself, I say. It makes me a man of success. I am a man of today." Um, you mean 'not of yesterday'? Really? Why's that necessary? Now this sentence about 'diligence and dedication', doesn't this also apply to women?

This modern man, Butler enthuses, is "a pretty cool guy" supposed to be, attention!!, smart, self-confident, masculine but not macho, aware of the demands of feminism but not passive, motivated, passionate, successful but discreet. Please, do read the whole article, part of the campaign, and do wonder about the claims made there about contemporary masculinity: <http://www.msn.com/en-my/lifestyle/runningtheshow/the-man-of-today-who-exactly-is-he/ar-BBa6Jj3>. GC editor Dylan Jones, the brain behind the ad's copy, stresses that "I think the interesting

thing about Gerard as an ambassador is that he's unapologetically a real man". I have no idea to whom he should apologize for being a man nor do I understand what a 'fake' or 'unreal' man is. And consider the effect of someone claiming that (insert here an actress) is 'unapologetically a real woman'. Why and what for? Yes, I'm being obnoxious here.

Jones finds that Butler's advantage as a "brand ambassador" is that he's not "fleetingly cool or too young" perhaps thinking of former 'ambassadors' Jared Leto and Ryan Reynolds. Butler, a mature 44-year-old and not exactly a first-rank star, was honoured and humbled that he was chosen for the job of embodying the man of today; as he notes, "There are many other actors and celebrities they could have asked". I couldn't agree more, particularly considering he is famous thanks to his barbaric Leonidas in *300* (and if that's the subtext he brings to the man of today, well, then let me be scared). Yet, if I ask myself who else could have taken up the job and with better credentials and more popular assent, I confess I find no easy answer.

Just humour me and follow me in this peculiar exercise. Using IMBD's Advanced Search feature and its *STARmeter*, I find that the main male actors by generation are (20 top names excluding some not that popular outside the US):

*born in the 1960s: Johnny Depp, Brad Pitt, Tom Cruise, Ralph Fiennes, Robert Downey jr., Nicholas Cage, Will Smith, Daniel Craig, Hugh Jackman, Jason Statham, Keanu Reeves, Jim Carey, Vin Diesel, Josh Brolin, Russell Crowe, Philip Seymour Hoffman, George Clooney, Colin Firth, Woody Harrelson [also Gerard Butler].

*born in the 1970s: Tom Hardy, Richard Armitage, Benedict Cumberbatch, James Franco, Leonardo di Caprio, Christian Bale, Orlando Bloom, Bradley Cooper, Idris Elba, Mark Wahlberg, Ben Affleck, Michael Fassbender, Jude Law, Jared Leto, Ryan Reynolds, Matt Damon, Joel Edgerton, Joaquin Phoenix, Ethan Hawke, Ewan McGregor.

*born in the 1980s: Chris Pine, Charlie Hunnam, Chris Hemsworth, Channing Tatum, Eddie Redmayne, Jake Gyllenhaal, Chris Evans, Ryan Gosling, Jamie Dornan, Joseph Gordon-Levitt, Shia LaBeouf, Tom Hiddleston, Henry Cavill, Andrew Garfield, Kit Harington, Robert Pattinson, Ben Wishaw, Emil Hirsch, Justin Timberlake, Michael Cera.

Who's your man of today? If Hugo Boss means, as I think they do, that this must be a steadily 'cool' man and supposing that cool means 'self-possessed' and 'self-assured', is Butler the best possible candidate? Who fits the bill best?

As I'm sure you have guessed by now, I find the whole Hugo Boss campaign quite ridiculous for, here's the rub, a truly cool man never proclaims his coolness. Actually, part of being cool is the ability to radiate this coolness in a subdued, subtle way. The spectator, the onlooker, must feel when facing a certain male icon that he *is* the man of today, and not be told who embodies him. If looking at Butler you go 'wow! he's cool' then he's succeeding in being the ideal which Hugo Boss claims he personifies. If

you need to be told what a cool, real man he is then I can only say that cool, real masculinity is in deep... trouble.

In Masculinities Studies the most frequently invoked mantra is that there is not one single way of being masculine but many, hence, there is no 'man of today' but 'men of today'. If you look at my lists, you might perhaps see not only this variety (and remember that actors are just one profession, not all men) but also a manifest disregard for embodying the 'manly man' in the younger generations (which often baffles me... but then, I'm getting old). Whether a man can be cool and not necessarily manly (or vice versa) is quite a vexing question; it might even well be that cool and manly are categories of the past that no longer apply to the 'man of today' (surely younger men find the Butler ad old-fashioned and would name as man of today... fun-loving James Franco?). Also consider whether family man Chris Hemsworth (born 1983), recently proclaimed by *People* magazine the sexiest man in the world, is a likely 'man of today'.

I always have the impression that Butler brings a certain tongue-in-cheek quality to all his roles, Leonidas included. Perhaps this is what I miss in the Hugo Boss campaign, and in the current approach to what being a 'real' man is about...

17-I-2015 ONCE MORE RETHINKING GENDER (AND HOPING FOR POST-GENDER)

I have spent an intense week marking the 33 essays produced by the students enrolled in my BA elective on Gender Studies. Together they amount to a complete volume of about 80000 words, perhaps worth publishing online (though I hesitate to embark again on the arduous task of editing undergrad work). The list of paper titles is, simply, exciting, with plenty of TV series and the first paper on video-games I have ever marked! I feel I have been reading cutting-edge research even though the researchers themselves are not quite ready yet to produce it. Some paradox.

The students' papers cover a wide range of approaches to gender: femininity and feminism, alternative masculinities, queer and gay, lesbianism and the mainstream, transgender and intersexuality and a miscellaneous group of 'gender-speculative' work. This is why it has been such a ... queer experience to combine marking them with reading Helen Merrick's *The Secret Feminist Cabal: A Cultural History of Science Fiction Feminisms* (2009). This is a highly accomplished piece of scholarship on gender studies which has passed quite unnoticed, as usually happens with anything connected with SF. Yet it is also an acknowledgement that feminism and even gender are concepts in urgent need of revision within cultural criticism.

I have read Merrick's volume because I am currently preparing a talk on women and SF, from Mary Shelley onwards, invited by CSIC (11 March, 19:00, Biblioteca Sagrada Familia). This is quite contradictory, for, though I am often connected with SF feminism, I have actually been writing against its unwise gender-based separatism (see

"Cracks in the Feminist Nirvana: Reading David Brin's Anti-Patriarchal SF Novel *Glory Days* as a 'Feminist' Woman," in *Yesterday's Tomorrows: On Utopia and Dystopia*. Pere Gallardo & Elizabeth Russell, eds.). I am a totally convinced feminist in demand of equal rights and opportunities for women and men; yet as a scholar and reader I have always criticised feminism for considering women's work apart from men's, and for ignoring how (and why) men are since the 1980s contributing positive representations of women, particularly in SF.

Merrick's final chapter deals with the James Tiptree jr. award for SF fiction which contributes to offering alternative gender representation. She wonders, though, whether an award should highlight gender, even puzzling over whether an interest in gender is always feminist. Noting that explorations of masculinity are gaining ground in Tiptree submissions, she observes next that there is much pressure from "women of color", post-colonialism, critical race theory, queer theory and even feminist science studies to "de-prioritize gender (...) as the primary tool of feminist theory" (281). Gwyneth Jones, a British SF writer, is quoted bemoaning how feminist SF has become just a 'niche market, a minority interest' while most women prefer thrilling 'fem-SF' and its strong female characters. My reaction?: "well, serves you right for insisting on the separatist line". Then I'm sorry I'm so nasty.

Let me recap my views:

a) gender MUST be used as a crucial analytical tool as long as patriarchy exists; the main mission of Gender Studies is raising everyone's consciousness, men and women, about patriarchy—this elephant in the room of feminism so few women and men call by its name.

b) once more: I prefer calling myself 'anti-patriarchal' if by calling myself 'feminist' I confuse men and women into thinking that I am interested in limiting myself to women (their rights, history, cultural production... as Merrick and her 'cabal' do)

c) SF is a gigantic lab for imagining post-gender, post-race, post-class... utopia, which is why I read it. Most young girls, most men and I myself are not very much interested in feminist stories by women (set in patriarchy) but in post-gender stories by women and by men (set in post-patriarchy).

d) I don't understand why gender should be abandoned, since it is not only perfectly compatible with other identity markers (race, class, age, ability, nationality...) but also intertwined with them. White feminists and black feminists are separated by race, but why should this mean that gender is irrelevant to read their work or life?

Let me mention two more texts. Yesterday I saw *The Expendables 3*, part of the series bringing back to the screen the ageing actors who played the main roles in action films from the 1980s onwards. It is very peculiar to see these men (actually two generations, born between the 1940s and the 1960s) parade with pride faces that look terribly aged (Stallone, Schwarzenegger, Gibson). Harrison Ford (b. 1942!) looks positively ancient...

In the case of Dolph Lundgren (b. 1957) what is most striking is the clash between his devastated face and his still very muscular arms.

The film, from a story by Stallone himself, deals with his character Barney's misguided attempt to recruit a younger band of mercenaries to safeguard his habitual team from danger. His strategy backfires when his new young team makes a silly mistake, which results in their being held captive and in need of rescue by Stallone's fogies. I entertained myself, between noisy shoot-outs and fights, with pondering how impossible the same story would be with ageing women actresses in similar roles (Linda Hamilton, Sigourney Weaver and who else?).

Yet among the post-racial rainbow assembly of testosterone-fuelled men (5 US white, 2 US black, 2 UK white, 1 Latino, 1 Spaniard, 1 Swede, 1 Asian, multiple 'azmanistanies'...), a woman could be found. Luna, very credibly played by a mixed martial arts specialist, the handsome Ronda Rousey, is first presented as a bouncer in high heels, yet, arguably!, not really sexualised. She is just part of the team, full stop, and efficient at doing her job. When at the end she makes eyes at Stallone and tells him 'if you were 30 years younger...' he quips, 'if I were 30 years younger I would be afraid of you'. Is this feminism? Of course not! It is mere tokenism (just one white woman and she's secondary). Yet, I find it refreshing, for Stallone's macho audience is the one needing to be taught respect for women. (I was going to comment on AfricanAmerican Zoe Saldana, kicking ass hard in *Guardians of the Galaxy* but I'm still processing her green skin, after her blue skin in *Avatar*).

The other text: N. Katherine Hayles' ultra-dense *How We Became Posthuman* (1999). This is a fascinating account (if you're up to coping with her unfriendly prose) of the current technoscientific craze by which Hans Moravec and company expect us to become disembodied and reach immortality as pure consciousness on the net or some digital device. Helen Merrick reads Hayles' protest against this wacky discourse, which seemingly forgets that minds belong in bodies, as a feminist challenge against aberrant patriarchal dreams. I see this myself: the persons who have caused computers to shape our world are (privileged white) men who see themselves as primarily minds encased in messy, incidental bodily matter. Hayles' horror of their ignorance of actual bodies is in essence feminist. Yet, funnily, she carefully avoids using a gendered discourse. My guess is that, ironically, speaking as a female person whose body conditions her daily life would diminish her authority against those who, believing themselves entitled to manipulating the whole human species, do not realise that their privileged position comes, precisely, from their possessing white, male, middle-class Western bodies.

Gender, as you can see, is not only not at all obsolete as a tool for understanding life but in dire need of being better understood. Of course, other factors matter but my view is that they're all part of this evil patriarchal system that needs to be destroyed as soon as possible. Ignore it at your own risk.

22-I-2015 ENCYCLOPAEDIC VERSUS ARGUMENTATIVE KNOWLEDGE: CULTURAL TENSIONS IN ACADEMIC WORK

As happens when I'm on holiday, I embarked last Christmas on a project I can hardly complete now: I'm re-editing my PhD dissertation (1996) as a user-friendly volume for my website, as, for reasons I fail to understand, the Catalan repository TDX has it split up into a variety of .pdf documents. Going through its more than 300,000 words (that's about 2'5 current thesis... most likely the reason for its dismemberment), and its primary source list, including 75 novels and 125 films, I cannot help noticing the tension between my clashing encyclopaedic and argumentative methodologies. That is to say, between my native Spanish academic tradition and my adoptive Anglophone tradition.

When I chose to work on how monstrosity was articulated in the Anglophone texts of the 1980s and 1990s (novels and films), it was clear to me that my main task would consist of mapping a vast territory. There was no way I would be satisfied with just a handful of examples. The list of primary sources grew and grew, and I recall trips to libraries, bookshops, and video rental outlets which brought home a half-dozen new sources at a sitting. Things were also complicated, as I recall, by David Punter, one of my two supervisors, who demanded that I included a chapter on children –to a dissertation already 7 chapters long...

It was certainly very, very difficult to integrate so many sources into my discourse, without the thesis sounding as a collection of independent comments on each. I marvel at how hard I worked... really without needing to do so much. Yet, those were the times when a thesis 1,000 pages long was not really very exceptional (mine was about half). At any rate, I learned very, very much and I guess that was the point. I am still mining my dissertation for articles I'm writing today.

Dissertations, however, are currently much shorter and fulfil a different mission, apparently. A couple of years ago a student asked me for help to organize his PhD dissertation on zombies. To my surprise, he brought to my office, not a list but a gigantic spreadsheet (A1-size) on which he had traced a myriad intertextual connections among texts with zombies. I was impressed (my Spanish encyclopaedic tradition responding to this) and dismayed (the Anglophone side), and tried to explain to him that the argumentative demonstration of his thesis statement should dominate the impulse to make lists. Or should it?

There are indeed a number of problems with the encyclopaedic approach, particularly in our internet times. Typically, a Spanish book on, say, 1980s horror cinema, would present as many films as possible, with individual comment and little general argumentation linking them. The worst possible version of this is the volume aimed at a general readership, which usually consists plainly of file cards barely transformed into printable matter. This type of book is now a very obsolete artefact as, properly, its domain should be the internet. A website based on file cards on 1980s horror cinema makes sense, as it needs no argumentation; not a book, as it does.

Then, recently, I saw a woman academic embarrass herself beyond measure when she presented at a conference a so-called paper on vampire films. Her 'paper' consisted of mentioning a list of, well, vampire films. When someone in the audience, surely as aghast as I was, asked her (with a pinch of salt she totally missed) why *Blacula* was not included, she explained that hers was a random selection from a much longer list. Random? A key speaker in the same conference 'delighted' us with a lecture on monster films. Since this was in chronological order, a friend and I entertained ourselves with playing the game of whether we would guess the next item on the list. I must say that perhaps the boring list had a point, judging from the notes made by a student sitting in the next row—she consistently misspelled names I would have thought absolutely familiar to any film audience.

The Anglophone academic approach, in contrast, is based on the argumentative essay and relies very heavily on theorisation. What matters is not so much what you know about a field but which point you are making about it. This is, logically, a better strategy for the kind of fast production that the shorter BA, MA and PhD Anglophone programmes have aimed at. Although theory is also extended across many volumes and articles, mastering the basics is more feasible than, say, reading all the novels of the 18th century dealing with femininity. I am myself applying a very pragmatic version of this approach to my students' own dissertations which, unlike mine, focus on a closed set of primary sources texts from the beginning, additions to be incorporated only if absolutely necessary.

Nevertheless, I'm missing something.

I have found myself very much annoyed during recent readings of volumes on post-humanism, the topic that currently absorbs me, by the, well, random selection of the primary sources. I am not saying the researchers have not done their homework, what I am saying is that the urge to theorise is so compelling that the primary sources are decontextualised, often isolated from intertexts they closely connect with.

Take the figure of the cyborg, which appears in fiction in 1972 with Martin Caidin's novel, simply called *Cyborg*, the basis of the later very popular TV show *The Six-Million Dollar Man*. Now, take the cyborg as presented in Johnny Depp's most recent film, *Transcendence*, or in John Scalzi's *Old Man's War* saga and you can see there's been a noticeable evolution marked by the discoveries in technoscience. However, when you read academic work on post-humanism the arguments revolve again and again around Donna Haraway's 1991 "Cyborg Manifesto" (usually overlooking the primary sources she does mention).

This refusal to make lists, historicize tropes and see how they have evolved is, for me, bad scholarship—as bad as the vampire film woman's argument-free method. How can 'cyborg' mean in 2015 the same this word used to mean back in 1991? You might say that mapping a representational territory in fiction is not as important today because anyone can do it using the internet. Wikipedia does offer lists, if you want them, which I have often used as the starting point for my own maps—but, notice this: someone has made the effort to make the lists and make sense of a vast territory... beyond theory.

I remember being overwhelmed by my monsters twenty years ago: I despaired every day, thinking I could never finish a coherent list. And I never did, I simply stopped at a date. It is quite possible that theory-based academic work is a silent acknowledgement of the impossibility of commanding a minimum knowledge of any fictional field. Name any, and soon you have 200 texts to read and see, whether this is post-colonial detective fiction or recent British theatre.

The Anglophone solution, it seems, is using samples for the whole, regardless of the significance of the sample, and pruning it from complications (if I discuss Batman, I focus on Nolan's films rather than the comic series and graphic novels). It's a solution but it makes for that kind of book that reduces the representation of, say, monstrous children, to five texts. How representative can this really be? On the other hand, the Spanish leaning towards an encyclopaedic name-dropping sounds hollow without a proper theoretical foundation and a solid argument.

Ah... the pleasures of academic bi-culturalism...

25-I-2015 READING TV: THE END OF THE NOVEL?

It is a truth universally acknowledged that Literature students do not read. To be precise, just as, obviously, Austen's man of good fortune is not really in want of a wife, many Literature students do read. Experience tells me, however, that this does not necessarily mean that student readers do read what we ask them to read but what they please to read. The non-readers simply don't read.

This tongue-twister recaps worries occupying some of my time in recent days. Last Monday we had a Literature teachers' meeting to discuss, once more, what we can do to have more students read more. My personal impression is that only a minority (say 20%) read all the set texts, a majority read some (say 50% to be on the generous side) and the rest get by using internet summaries and class notes (30%).

What is worrying, as I have noted here several times already, is the growing number among the non-reading students who have adopted an in-your-face attitude and do not hesitate to tell us as rudely as they can that they don't and they won't read. Recently, we even had a girl who demanded our praise for her honesty (and passing the exam). Now, the consequences of not reading are serious: undergrads can be expelled after registering for a fourth time in a subject—even so, some are beginning to express their, so to speak, 'right' not to read.

As usual, the problem is that the recalcitrant students do not approach any Literature teacher for a chat on why they don't read. So, I have to make do with the ones who do read.

The less dutiful have clearly explained to me that there is a principle of selection at work: you want me to read so and so, fine, I'll choose what interests me and fool you about having read the rest. A few weeks ago, I found at my door one of my most brilliant students: he was finally reading, after taking my Victorian Literature class four years ago, Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*... and loving it! He is famous for having publicly declared that he got an A for my subject without having read any of the (four) books. When I called him to my office to justify this boast, I had him explain his method to me rather than fail him. He had worked quite hard reading summaries and essays and, anyway, the paperwork to fail him retrospectively was so messy I let him be (also, well, he is a compulsive reader). Still, we had other students demand their right to pass the subject as he did, students who based their claim on their not having read the books, either... nor even the summaries.

Anyway, two of the brilliant, dutiful students who do read plenty told me more or less the same story when I asked them this week: the 1990s generation may not be readers but they certainly are consumers of TV series. Both girl students, committed readers since childhood, explained to me that they are quite capable of consuming TV in very long bouts. When I say TV, I should be cautious, for they actually meant series made for TV but watched on the computer independently from broadcast schedules. Everyone, they told me, is watching at least two or three series at the same time, sometimes combining ongoing with already finished products.

As I have noted here, I don't like watching series. I prefer movies and tend to see one every evening, instead of watching TV (my only 'appointment shows' are *Polònia* and *APM Extra* on TV3). Also, as I have noted here, this is because I prefer variety to following long narrations; I learned to control the time I use for a particular story after the fiasco of *Lost*. Yes, I did write that pioneering book about *The X-Files* (<https://ddd.uab.cat/record/118437>) but the experience also taught me that consuming a very long series is, for me, too taxing, too little relaxing.

My students tell me the opposite: for them, reading requires concentration and is, thus, increasingly subjected to a shorter attention span. As one of my colleagues hypothesised, the reason why students don't read too much is because their reading practice was not sufficiently strong before they reached us; lacking practice, they find reading time-consuming and unrewarding. The more complex the texts we ask them to read are, the less they enjoy reading as, naturally, they need greater concentration. These students, of course, still enjoy storytelling, which they get from TV. Now, fancy this: it might well be that both the non-readers and the readers are consuming plenty of TV series because they are easier to follow than a printed text. For different reasons in each case.

Back to my two students, one quite surprised me by declaring that when she completed her MA dissertation she let off steam by watching *The Gilmore Girls* over a few days. This series is 7 seasons long with 22 episodes per season (seemingly 60' each), more than 140 hours?? She clarified to me that her record, watching 10 episodes on one day, has to do with her ability to multitask—she does not sit in front of the TV but takes her laptop all over the place as she does different things. The other

girl, who also uses TV series to relax, gave me a similar account of her habits, stressing that you need not follow all the episodes in detail, ergo, there is no need to concentrate unlike what happens when you read. Sadly, when I observed that, at least, our students' oral and verbal skills must be improving with so much audio-visual input she told me that not all enjoy the original English-language version.

I told a colleague about all this and he wondered how this generational portrait as, mainly, TV consumers fits their other portrait as readers of Rowling's *Harry Potter*. Supposing the overlap is large, of which I am by no means sure, I'll argue that it is perfectly possible. Rowling only turned a fraction of her readers into readers for life and, anyway, a passion for reading is not incompatible, as we can see, with a passion for TV series. Perhaps the real testing ground should be provided by *A Game of Thrones*. Before the TV series started back in 2011, this story was known as *A Song of Ice and Fire*; *A Game of Thrones* (1996) is actually just the first novel in Martin's ongoing series. Ask the 1990s generation and you will see that most refer to it by their TV series' title, as this and not the books is what is mostly consumed. The TV series is surely getting more readers for Martin but I am sure most viewers are satisfied enough and feel no inclination to read the books.

I do wonder, then, whether the 15 years mediating between 1996 and 2011 will be seen retrospectively as the years that killed the novel, and whether we will ever come to the conclusion that the construction of reading fiction as a (cultural) habit has more to do with the availability of technology than with anything else (if Shakespeare or Dickens had had a camera then...). I am well aware that cinema has not killed the novel and that novel sales are still very high, yet this massive TV series consumption might be indicating something else: the final victory of middle-brow, easy-to-follow storytelling over all other forms of fiction.

I'll leave the matter of whether TV series can be avant-garde for another post...

29-I-2015 'QUEDAR BIEN': HOW TO BE POLITE (AND MAKE FRIENDS) IN ACADEMIC LIFE

The Spanish idiom 'quedar bien' (or Catalan 'quedar bé') doesn't translate well into English. *WordReference* offers as basic suggestions "to make somebody happy", "to make/cause a good impression", "to look good to someone". Elsewhere I have come across this: "to stay in good terms", "to get in good with someone", "to please someone", none of these 100% accurate. I mean here, of course, "quedar bien" in the sense of following certain rules of politeness and not the "quedar bien" used for clothing ("that dress looks good on you", "you look great in that dress") or cooking ("me queda muy bien la tortilla de patata" = "my Spanish omelette tastes delicious").

There must be much anxiety about the impossibility of finding a perfect fit in English for this idiom, for a Google search throws up mainly links to translations, not definitions. The *RAE* Dictionary seemingly does not gather idioms, for it offers no

definition of this one, nor do its lexicographers include it in the entry for the verb 'quedar'. Another bout of unfruitful googling leaves me wondering about this strange lexical blank: everyone knows what "quedar bien/quedar bé" means but nobody is offering a reliable definition of this expression; fancy how hard it must be to master by foreign learners of Spanish!

The point of my post today is actually wondering whether everyone does know what "quedar bien" means. I'll offer my own version, to begin with, then offers examples of the opposite behaviour. "Quedar bien" means performing actions addressed to showing one's own good will to please others, for the sake of making the relationship with them work well. I think this is it. This varies in degree: you may 'quedar bien' with your couple by organizing a candlelit dinner to show your love, or simply greet a neighbour every morning to be in nice, neighbourly terms. Funnily, I do not know whether the 'quedar' in the idiom is self-reflexive ("this makes me feel good", that is, "me quedo bien") or transitive ("I make/cause a good impression"). Probably a mixture of both. No doubt, "quedar bien" can be quite hypocritical, as it may even cover an intense dislike: I actually hate my neighbour and I use my daily greeting to avoid real conversation.

In, specifically, academic life "quedar bien" earns you many contacts (and indeed friends). This is a situation in which it is absolutely imperative to behave impeccably, as you never know who might be assessing you for publication, a research project, a tenured position... you name it! The worst possible situation, doubtless, is one in which your academic peers whisper behind your back that you are impolite, nasty or, God help me!, an arrogant bastard/bitch.

We are in need of maintaining our reputations beyond strict academic achievement, and it hurts nobody, as far as I gather, to have the reputation of being a real gentleman or lady. Yes, old-fashioned as this may sound (remember I teach Victorian Literature?). I do my best to apply this rule though, of course, it is for the others to say whether I am successful. I also do my best to incorporate to my academic life what others teach me, like emailing a thank you message to conference organizers once you return home, which I learned to do from a very polite English colleague.

"Quedar bien", in short, entails a big or small personal sacrifice to do something you NEED NOT DO. Generally speaking, though, it only brings benefits—yes, it can be an extremely selfish attitude or even hypocritical, as I said. Now, for the examples of how NOT to "quedar bien" in academic life, this time including students:

*the by now increasing tendency, as I noted in my last post, to tell your Literature teacher that you don't like reading (you don't want to signify yourself this way)

*emails sent with no opening greetings and no closing words (how hard is it to write "Dear Professor, Here's my essay. Thanks. Yours, Mary"?)

*not thanking people who have thanked you for something ("Thank you for being a good student" means, yes, that your teacher is fishing for a compliment)

*pretending you don't see a teacher in the corridor: yesterday an ex-student made a point of NOT seeing me by... whistling as I passed by her side

*pretending you don't see a colleague you don't like that much in a conference you're both attending (just say "hi, nice to see you" and move on)

*disrespecting in any way people in positions enabling them to a) grade your work, b) offer a reference letter or recommendation, c) hire you (this is the equivalent of shooting your own academic foot)

*being arrogant at conferences when asking questions to colleagues, both your own level or superior—coming across as if you know better than anyone else will make you no friends. If you want to be nasty and cannot help it, make sure you will not cross paths with this person ever again.

*express negative opinions about the work of people who have a say in your academic future, for instance by publishing a negative review of their work (oops!)

I could go on and on, I hope you get the idea. If you think I exaggerate, I know of an individual who is guilty simultaneously of the three last offences... my inspiration for this post.

You may be thinking at this point that "quedar bien" is all about being a complete hypocrite/sycophant/brown nose/ars licker... playing a hypocritical game. There is just a little bit of this but, believe me, it is not that difficult to distinguish between the genuine article and the phony one. A person who inclines towards "quedar bien" sets clear limits: "I'm greeting you in the corridor for politeness' sake but this does not mean I admire you". The sycophant knows no limits and will probably tell you in the middle of the corridor, for no good reason, how much s/he admires you. Yes, they overdo it.

Academic life is, I grant this, a delicate game based in many occasions on nuanced personal impressions. I find myself frequently discussing these days how big a hindrance personal differences are for teamwork to progress. Yet, happily for me, I work in a Department in which most colleagues believe in "quedar bien", sometimes with an effort, more commonly making no effort. Teachers may spend decades with the same colleagues and this calls for subtle policies regarding how to make coexistence as nice as possible. Blunders happen, inevitably, but, needless to say, they must be avoided, particularly, let me be crass, to protect your own interests.

To finish: "quedar bien", as I acknowledge, is a fragile mixture of selfishness and generosity which only brings benefits, whether professional or personal. Behaving like a "señor" or a "señora" must always be the rule, in any environment. In academic life there are inevitable power dynamics that, openly or covertly, rule our life and the worst anyone can do is ignore them.

I feel like one of those Victorian ladies who used to publish conduct books, but, well, one doesn't teach Victorian Literature for a couple of decades with no effect whatsoever in one's mentality. I'm even using the impersonal 'one' like Queen Victoria. Better stop now...

4-II-2015 3+2 DOES NOT EQUAL 5: ON THE NEW DEGREE REFORM

The Spanish Government has finally approved the 'Real Decreto' by which universities may choose to offer BAs of 3 or 4 years, accompanied by MAs of 2 or 1 year, respectively. Just yesterday, the CRUE (the organization gathering together the principals or 'rectores' of all Spanish universities), agreed to delay the revision of the degree to the 2017-18 academic year. Students are furious at the Government while they claim this new reform is for the sake of finally bringing Spanish degrees into the European system.

I myself have a 'Licenciatura' corresponding to the 1977 Ministry-approved syllabus. 'Licenciaturas', if you recall, consisted of two cycles: a first cycle, lasting for 3 years, in which students took a list of compulsory subjects; and a second cycle, lasting for 2 years, in which you specialised taking a considerable number of elective courses in your area. You might obtain a title at the end of the first cycle, called 'diplomatura', and there were actually independent 'diplomatura' degrees. Yes, we already had a 3+2 system, with the whole 5 years costing the same fee. Funnily, we were told that the 'Licenciatura' was extravagantly long in relation to other European countries which already had a 3+2 system. Then the fashion started for the very rich to pursue MA degrees abroad...

The 'Licenciatura' was reformulated for the new 1992 Ministry-approved syllabus, and reduced down to 4 years, still with no MA degrees. If you wanted to pursue further studies then the next step was a doctoral programme. The one I started back in 1991-2, consisted of 2 years tuition on the basis of elective subjects, followed by 1 year to write the 'tesina' or small dissertation, followed by 3 years for the 'tesis' or main dissertation. When I started teaching in this programme, we all referred to the first two years plus 'tesina' as the 'master's equivalent', though I'm not sure you could obtain a title. Yes, anyone my age had to spend 8 years in university before writing the first line of a doctoral dissertation, now it's down to 5.

The 4-year 'Licenciatura' was remodelled again in 2000 before the European Union decided to implement the Bologna agreements for convergence into the European space of education. In 2006, then, the 'Licenciatura' was transformed into the current 4-year BA degree, the doctoral programme lost its courses and the new MAs were implemented. I was there in the front line and I very clearly recall the chaos as we were given very lax instructions about what kind of MAs we should devise and how many to offer. At one point, my Department thought of offering 3, this was reduced to 2 and after trying to stay afloat independently, we finally merged 2 years ago our 2

MA into 1. In 9 years, then, the MA I teach in has been reformed 3 times—not a good sign.

I am glad, then, that CRUE has decided to take some time to organize the new reform as, to begin with, we still haven't tested the performance of the 2007-8 degrees. It seemed as if we would be running the tests at the same time that we did the paperwork for the new option. My own personal view is that English Studies should keep its current 4+1 scheme, as students need time to learn the language apart from the contents. We cannot put anyone at C1 level at the end of only 3 years, much more so if the first year, as rumoured, is entirely transversal (= not in English). I also believe that students would choose 4+1 English Studies degrees rather than a 3+2 version for the same reason and also, here's the crux of the problem, because whereas in the old 5-year *Licenciatura* fees were the same for all years, this is NOT the case in the new 3+2 system.

Here are the maths: 60 ECTS (=one year) of the BA in English Studies cost 1657.12 euros, hence, the complete degree costs 9536 euros. The MA's fees are 2907'52. Students can complete a 4+1 education investing a total 9536 euros. With the 3+2 formula, using the current fees, the BA would be down to 4971.36, but the MA would amount to 5815.04, and the total cost would be 10786.4, that is to say, 1250 euros above the current 4+1 system. This might not seem a lot to English students paying up to 9,000 pounds a year for BA degrees (and leaving university heavily indebted) but it is very high considering the post-crisis catastrophic situation of most working-class families (in Scotland, a referent for the, ehem, future Catalan state, local students pay no BA fees).

The Government claims quite cynically that families will save 150 million euros with the new system, as young persons will be able to enter the job market in a shorter time and at a lower cost. Then, they can save money and decide whether to take an MA. What job market, I wonder? The only jobs available are badly-paid subsistence-level jobs that make being a 'mileurista' seem a dream. Anyone but the Government can see that these extra 1250 euros (far more in other specialities) will tip the scales against the economy of most working-class students. They will fail then to compete in the top rank of the tiny job market with middle-class persons in possession of an MA degree (the upper classes really compete with nobody).

In short: while the simple transformation of the old *Licenciatura* into a formal 3+2 system maintaining the same fees would have been quite smooth, the Government has chosen the worst possible moment to implement the new system. 2006, when the chance was missed, would also have been preferable, as the crisis had not started yet and the current resistance to the MA programmes' inflated fees had not materialized.

Supposing the fees problem were solved, we still need to tackle the pedagogical problem. In my 23 years as a teacher I have seen university degrees progressively lose much of their conceptual density (their ability to train people seriously). This is partly due to the lowered standards of secondary education and partly to the increasingly widespread idea that having a degree matters more than accruing real knowledge in a

field. From what I hear, there is more concern about the matter that oh, poor Erasmus students have so many problems because of our 4+1 system than about what exactly we teach students. I heard a top-ranking person at UAB speak of MAs as a key tool to internationalize our university and of BAs as general courses in which the process of accumulating knowledge, which so dramatically varies from the first to the third year, was totally ignored.

So: yes, why not? Let's have 3+2 but let's retrieve the best we lost with the 5-year Licenciatura and, please, prioritize equal-opportunity, non-classist education over the needs of foreign international students. I see the despair of the working-class students seeing the Government callously pushing them out of a serious university education and I can only sympathise, as I was one of them, and I have never ever forgotten what it was like.

9-II-2015 'ATTENDING' AN ONLINE CONFERENCE: A SATISFYING NEW EXPERIENCE

My belief in the need to generate low-cost academic activity and improve networking is not always easy to implement. Possibly already 3 years ago I came up with the idea of organizing a virtual conference (on SF) but I got totally stuck because a) I had never participated in one and b) the two mathematicians I contacted could find no accurate formula to calculate the number of questions/messages a participant should have to write (really, I'm serious about this). So I let that be.

Funnily, everyone with whom I commented my idea for the conference always assumed that a virtual conference requires some kind of actual interaction in real time using video. This may be the case in the more sophisticated version, perhaps, though I have no idea how people all over the world can agree to sit before their computer screen at a certain time to listen to someone speak online—what a strange thought!

I had in mind something much simpler, based on uploading papers, reading them and then opening up online forum discussion. I got to the point of setting up a blog for the conference, having a logo designed... and no further. Then I came across a call for papers sent for a juicy event: "Narrativas en clave de género: Cine y literatura, II Congreso Internacional Online del Instituto Universitario de Estudios Feministas y de Género Purificación Escribano, Universitat Jaume I". This is it, I told myself: I need to join in and learn. To my infinite amusement and pleasure when I first contacted the organizers, one of them turned out to be my dear friend Dora Sales. Lucky me, now I have someone to guide me, too.

The conference, which finished yesterday, has run for 12 days. The principle is very simple: open a Moodle classroom, upload the papers a few days in advance, open a forum for each paper, let people interact (we have been using guest access to this virtual room). The delegates (25) get a certificate for submitting their papers but are also expected, of course, to interact with the public. In its turn, the public is expected

to address questions to 50% of the delegates (=12) in order to obtain their own certificate of attendance.

There were 125 participants, 25 delegates and 100 persons in the (very active) audience. Here are the numbers: the most popular paper generated 75 comments, 41 from the audience, 33 in answer by the author. My own paper, among the least popular ones (um, perhaps Shakespeare is not as popular as *X-Men* or *Hunger Games*, who knows?) got 10 questions. This is much, much more than you get in any presential conference, where you're lucky if you get 2 or 3 comments (plenary speakers may get 10/12 at the most). I am very, very pleased. The questions and comments were in all the forums I participated in better articulated, more sophisticated and complete than the questions I hear in conventional conferences. I assume that writing involves a greater deal of thinking than just speaking out. Also, the absence of time limits helps participants ask any questions they want, in contrast with the few minutes you get in a presential conference (5 usually, 15 if you're very lucky).

Other advantages? You don't miss any paper you may be interested in, unlike what happens when two exciting panels overlap in presential conferences. You can read ALL the papers if you wish, ask everyone questions. Since I was new to this, I opted for having a combined experience as delegate and audience, which means I also read 12 papers and sent questions to the authors. Yes, I gave myself a lot of work, pestered everyone else, but it was very, very enjoyable. Reading a paper takes less time than listening to the same paper, so it's quite feasible to read all those you choose in a few hours and then use the rest of the time for online interaction. I have used time every day to check on the progress of debates for, obviously, an online conference demands discipline from participants. I can only see advantages... Also, in this way, papers are ready for publication before the conference starts.

I know what you're thinking: I'd rather travel, see new places and meet people. Sure. Virtual or online conferences are not supposed to replace presential interaction, only to complement it.

Think, though, of the disadvantages attached to the traditional academic meetings: a) high expenses, as I mentioned, impossible to meet particularly by young, untenured academics, or even by tenured teachers if the conference takes place half the world away from your home; b) the need to interrupt your routine to attend a conference (you may have to make up for missed lectures, over-crowding your schedule; your family situation may prevent you from leaving even if only for a few days...); c) the torture that conferences are for shy people who dread not only speaking in public but also socializing over coffee breaks or dinner time...; d) the enormous stress for the organizers forced to balance impossible budgets with no grants to help them...

So, with my thanks to Dora Sales and Dori Valero for the experience, I'll certainly go ahead and see if I can turn my own online conference into a reality. I'll keep you posted...

16-II-2015 INCREASINGLY RARE BOOKS OF THE RECENT PAST: READING NAOMI MITCHISON'S *MEMOIRS OF A SPACEWOMAN* (1962)

Today I'm going simultaneously in two directions: I am demanding that Open Access policies be extended to the literary works of deceased authors, and I am praising a rare book (which has caused me to consider the matter of literary legacy). Let's see if I can be minimally coherent.

Books have this way of deciding when you are ready for them. Suddenly, you notice that references to them in other books glow as if highlighted by a fluorescent felt pen, and then you know the time has come to read them. This has happened to me recently with Norbert Wiener's essay *The Human Use of Human Beings* (1950, 1954) and with Naomi Mitchison's novel *Memoirs of a Spacewoman* (1962). In the first case, a Google search and two mouse clicks led me to an online free .pdf. In the second, I got trapped by BookDepository, which now has 15 of my hard-earned euros (for a mere 176 pages of a poorly printed book).

Wiener, the father of cybernetics, died in 1964, and, so, his copyright extends to 2034, following US legislation (life + 70 years). Accordingly, Amazon.com offers *The Human Use of Human Beings* in 27 different formats, divided among first-hand print, second-hand print, and .mobi for Kindle. Someone, however, the self-styled 'conspirators' of www.asaunder.org, have released a .pdf which promptly found a way into my own Kindle (via www.calibre-ebook.com). I have already read Wiener's fascinating warning against the subordination of human beings to machines, the very instruments his cybernetics revolutionized in the Second Industrial Revolution. I have learned this way that technophobia is rooted in the least expected minds; also that scientists like Wiener despaired about how the need to win World War II against Hitler had led to the (nuclear) horrors of the Cold War against the U.S.S.R. (not yet gone, think Ukraine).

Have I hurt Wiener's heirs? In legal terms, I may have. Yet I feel that too restrictive legislation is hurting me and anyone else who wants to learn by withholding knowledge from public access. I respect the rights of the living authors, being one myself; yet, I totally support the implementation of Open Access policies, which are making research available in the shortest possible time lapse, particularly research paid with public funds. You may be thinking that I should draw a line, in any case, between the un-paid articles we produce, with costs covered by grants and our salaries, and books which, by definition, depend on a separate contract. Perhaps. The point I am making here, though, is that copyright should cease with the author's death, whether the author is a researcher like Wiener or a literary author like Naomi Mitchison.

Mitchison died much more recently, in 1999, at the very ripe age of 101. I had stumbled upon her name often when reading about Scottish Literature and was more or less aware that she was an important figure. I am, however, just beginning to grasp her importance. Mitchison published more than 90 books, had 7 children, was a social and political activist in several fronts... read the Wikipedia entry and judge for yourself whether this was a woman or several, living a kind of multiple quantum life.

At least 2 of her novels, *Solution Three* (1975) and *Memoirs of a Spacewoman* (1962), which I have just finished reading, were science-fiction. Now, the edition of *Memoirs* here by my side is part of the Naomi Mitchison Library by publishers Kennedy & Boyd of Glasgow, who aim at “offering twenty-first century readers the opportunity to discover her”. I should think that 21st-century readers would rather the Scottish Government or some Scottish university uploaded all her works for the whole world to read, but, of course, (British) copyright legislation is preventing this from happening. It’s complicated, isn’t it? You have a prolific, first-rate author whose books are mostly out of print, and you do have the means to make them universally available (think Project Gutenberg) yet the choice made (by whom?) is the traditional one: reprint the books. Make readers pay.

SF readers are used to finding gems like *Memoirs of a Spacewoman* no matter how invisible they may be and, indeed, the Internet Speculative Database (isfdb) carries notice of the diverse utopian and SF novels in the Mitchison Library re-published by Kennedy and Boyd. The additional problem is that, unfortunately, the preface for *Memoirs of a Spacewoman* by Isobel Murray, the emeritus professor in charge of editing Mitchison’s volumes, is totally unsympathetic towards SF. Mitchison’s novel, she tells us, “begins not with space ships or amazing rays, but with a list of people.” She is at pains to deny that, look at the title, *Memoirs of a Spacewoman* is SF because, as the back cover blurb reads, the protagonist Mary “is also a very credible human.” I am used to finding very credible humans in SF novels and I wonder what kind of literary snobbishness is blinding Murray into thinking that SF is all about “amazing rays”. Her preface then, does *nothing* to help place this amazing novel where it deserves, actually distancing it from its true potential audience.

I was bowled over by Mitchison’s tale of Mary, the spacewoman who acknowledges with total candour that she loves being an inter-planetary explorer as much as she loves making babies. In Mary’s post-gender society, men and women are equally engaged in space exploration (at one point she becomes part of an all-woman expedition); the relativistic passage of time allows Mary, besides, to enter a variety of romantic relationships with complete freedom on both sides. Her babies become then the centre of her life for a year (until they are ‘stabilised’) and she moves on. Her job consists of establishing communication with alien species within a strict protocol of non-interference (I’m sure Iain Banks knew the *Memoirs* well...). In Mary’s civilization respect for the environment is fundamental, and communication with Terran animal species habitual. There are only a couple of academic pieces on this novel and one deals indeed, with this aspect. Oh, yes, and there is an Indian female scientist, and other non-white space explorers.

Mitchison penned this in 1962, only three years after Heinlein’s classic militaristic SF novel *Starship Troopers* and, what is far more relevant possibly, before Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) started second-wave feminism. Indeed, years before Ursula K. Le Guin opened up the way for feminism to enter SF in the late 1960s. I always say that what I love about SF is the possibility of imagining a post-gender civilization in which women can choose to live as they please but until now I thought

we were moving towards that kind of novel. Now I know we already had it in *Memoirs of a Spacewoman*, 53 years ago!!, but somehow missed it.

As we'll miss it again, for who, in the age of the internet, will notice a book by a dead Scotswoman, published by a small Glasgow printing press? I don't think either the printers nor he heirs will make all that money, after all... How many readers lost for this and for many other rare books!

19-II-2015 (STILL) TEACHING GENDER STUDIES IN THE 21ST CENTURY: A PREFACE TO *GENDER AND FEMINISM: THE STUDENTS' VIEW* (2015)

[I'm recycling here the Preface to the volume I have just edited, *Gender and Feminism: The Students' View*, available from <https://ddd.uab.cat/record/129180>. Please, publicise it in your Twitter and Facebook, thanks]

An awareness of gender differences begins very early in life as does little girls' demand for equal treatment, even when the concept of 'equal rights' is only imperfectly known, if at all. The essays gathered here, written by undergrad students born in the early 1990s, further show that there is much to be learned and taught about gender issues today as seen by people under 30.

As I finished the edition of this volume, I came across a worrying piece of news in *El País* which further justifies the publication of these pages. In June 2014 the Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (CIS) published the results of a survey, according to which one third of Spaniards tolerates couple-related psychological abuse: 92% reject physical violence, but not verbal ill-treatment, which they have serious difficulties to see as abuse. A second survey published this week declares that one third of the young persons, aged 15 to 29, regards as "inevitable or acceptable in some circumstances" ¹ controlling their partners' schedules, preventing them from seeing family or friends, not allowing them to work or study, and telling them what they can or cannot do. Among this age group, the tolerance of male chauvinist attitudes is on the increase, and not only among boys: 32% of the girls "tolerate" masculinist behaviours as opposed to 29% of all Spanish women, 34% of the boys in comparison to 28% among all Spanish men. It is, then, more urgent that ever to give voice to the members of these young generations who are completely opposed to any form of abuse, and who demand loudly that gender equality is finally reached.

The 32 essays in the hands of the reader were written in answer to two questions: "Why do we need Feminism today?" and "What worries me most about gender is...". I gave my students (enrolled in my new elective subject 'Gender Students (in English)' 2014-15), no guidance whatsoever so as not to curtail their personal approach to my questions. I did ask them, though, to speak to the older persons in their family, and to other similarly aged acquaintances. As you can see, many followed my advice, composing thus not only a candid generational portrait but, quite often, a

simultaneous view of three generations. I am sure they learned as much from talking to their elders as I have learned from reading their sincere, moving essays.

I believe that the main collective contribution we are making here is a vindication of the words 'feminist' and 'Feminism'. In my own youth I was very much reluctant to identifying myself as a feminist for, as I understand now in hindsight, a young woman starting her career will naturally reject women's disempowerment. Now, when I am only two years away from hitting 50, I see things very differently, not so much because I feel personally disempowered but because so many young girls not only reject feminism but are actively supporting patriarchy. It takes much commitment to sustain a sense of your own autonomy and to build your biography on the basis of your own total independence, which is, no doubt, why so many are slipping back into male dependence (romantic and/or economic). You'll see here that young girls and myself face together the same problem: the meaning of Feminism is poorly understood—the aim is not replacing misogynistic patriarchy with an androphobic matriarchy, but fighting for equal rights for all. I have been calling this struggle 'anti-patriarchal' for years and this is what it should be: a common front where men and women join forces to face patriarchy and build a new genderless world.

I am not particularly happy to be teaching Gender Studies, as I am very sorry that they are still needed. I want to go the way of the abolitionists who needed not raise their voices after the end of formal slavery (racist abuse and exploitation, unfortunately, are still here). Teaching Gender Studies involves many problems: it is hard to get the recognition you may earn in less confrontational fields,² it often feels like painting yourself into a debased feminine corner and, finally, it too often appears to be an exercise in preaching to the converted (though you'll see one essay here by someone who is by no means convinced by my discourse). Teaching Gender Studies is, however, also immensely rewarding since it has a very direct impact on young persons' lives, as you will see, and on my own, as I need to rationalize an anti-patriarchal discourse which is often too emotional for words, too grounded on rage and fear. I am just sorry that I am not reaching more men. The proportion you will find here (7 men, 25 women) may seem low at about 25% for the men but it is actually higher than the 15% they occupy in the BA degree I teach, 'English Studies'. Ideally, the proportion should have been closer to 50%, but, well, the Humanities are by no means a favourite choice for male undergrads.

I believe there is a similar proportion of non-heterosexuals writing in these pages, about 25%, including here both boys and girls. There is also a transgender man, whose discreet presence in my class has, nonetheless, provoked me into rethinking my whole approach to gender. The syllabus of my course, which can be seen here: <http://ddd.uab.cat/record/121835>, intended to cover gender in all its manifestations. One day, when I complained that the class was very quiet, a girl told me privately that the silence often manifested shock at the radically new ideas from Gender Studies researchers I exposed my students to. Yet, for me, the presence of my new student was a constant reminder that I am not (yet) radical enough. I may have chosen for my students to see femininity, masculinity, gay, queer, lesbian, bisexual, intersexual and transgender texts but this was not enough. The real challenge, in which I think I partly

failed, was altering the order of this list and making my teaching far more queer than it is—even though I think it is very queer indeed, heteroqueer but firmly queer all the same.

I'll finish by thanking my wonderful students from the bottom of my heart for the personal confidences they pour here. And for their boldness, as I am not sure I could have written what some of them offer here. I am very, very proud to have elicited all this valuable insight into gender and Feminism from them.

1. Vidales, Raquel. "Una de cada tres jóvenes considera aceptable que su pareja la controle." *El País*, 27 January 2015,

http://politica.elpais.com/politica/2015/01/27/actualidad/1422363044_535263.html

2. See: "Teaching gender studies as feminist activism : still struggling for recognition" (paper presented at the international Gender Spring Conference, Setting a New Agenda for Equality Policies, Centre Francesca Bonnemaison, Barcelona, Spain; 25-27 June 2014.)

<https://ddd.uab.cat/record/126586>

23-II-2015 ON NOT TEACHING AS A REWARD: SOME SCATTERED THOUGHTS

I came across a UAB colleague a few days ago, who had a good piece of news to announce: he's been awarded a prestigious Catalan grant (ICREA Acadèmia), which will allow him to focus more intensely on his research for the next 5 years. I'm really impressed, for I am sure he must have faced huge competition...

I knew vaguely about this grant because another illustrious colleague from UB received it a few years ago and a dear friend filled in her position during the long absence. My UAB colleague has also been allocated financial resources to free him from teaching, if he wishes so. And he does. When I asked him whether he's concerned that after 5 years he might not enjoy returning to the classroom at all, he replied that he is indeed worried. Also that, perhaps, depending on the results, there might be other grants to apply for and thus delay his final return to teaching.

I sympathise with my colleague as the teaching he's been assigned is not particularly attractive, consisting mainly of one of those first-year transversal subjects that nobody enjoys (whether teachers or students) but that has the unconditional support of our Dean's team. I am wondering, rather, at this odd idea of rewarding excellence in research with no teaching at all.

This is paradoxical as this semester I'm not teaching, either, with the exception of a one-month seminar and my undergrad and post-grad tutorees. My university has finally applied the so-called 'Wert decree' which rewards senior lecturers who have passed three assessment exercises (= 18 years) with a 8 ECTS discount over the usual workload (24 – 8 = 16). I have already taught most of these credits and so I need not step into a classroom, just supervise my tutorees to complete the rest. After the hassle of combining teaching, research and my task as the BA degree Coordinator, I can only

say that I'm very happy with what I feel to be a long-deserved break. Still, I wonder about (missing) teaching.

I have so far enjoyed two long breaks in 23 years as a teacher. One 20 years ago, when a grant took me to Scotland to work on my PhD dissertation and I found on my return that I had to teach all my 24 credits in the second semester. I had this way 15 months to myself which, ironically, resulted in my producing a far too long dissertation. Then, in 2008-9, I had an admin sabbatical, a year off granted to recover from the exertion of being Head of Department for 3 years. I used that time to read for a book still lying unwritten in my PC's hard drive. I have high hopes that I will be able to write some chapters this time around before September looms in the horizon. I also have high hopes that in the next few years this pattern will repeat itself and I have less teaching and more time for research. And writing.

When I took the 2008-9 sabbatical, I also spent 15 months away from a classroom (31 May 2008 to 15 September 2009) and I recall my return as something quite dreadful. I have not managed yet to sleep soundly the night before a new course begins; I always feel jittery before facing a new class even if it is a class I'm teaching just for one day. Believe it or not, I'm shy. Students do not seem to grasp well that teaching takes plenty of courage, as you need to leave aside all your insecurities, and mine are many. I remember starting my first lecture after that long break by frankly telling my students that I was awfully nervous and please bear with me, as I felt like an absolute novice, butterflies in the stomach and all. They all smiled, and were lovely to me. Now fancy five years...

I am not, as you can see, too keen on long absences from teaching. Instead, I'm looking forward to not doing any admin work for at least 3 years. In these first 3 weeks of freedom, without the weight of the BA Coordination on my shoulders, I have felt relieved, even bodily... The flow of urgent emails has dropped dramatically, and I can use the spare time to concentrate on my teaching (an MA seminar) and on my research. If such a grant existed, I would pay to have someone do the boring, frustrating admin work which reduces us teachers to glorified clerks. If I went back to teaching 24 ECTS, then I would be happy to shed some courses but I know I would not be happy with no teaching at all.

This might be because I am fortunate since I enjoy what I teach (don't mind my ranting here, I really love teaching, I just wish it worked better!). I'm not going to give you, however, the rap that I value above all the contribution to society that my teaching generates. I mean, I do, and very much so, as I believe that my job consists above all of teaching young persons to think for themselves. I like teaching, to be frank and honest, also for very selfish, even vampirical or parasitical, reasons...

The truth of academic life, as I have been narrating here for almost four years and a half, is that as regards the exchange of ideas it is quite a barren landscape. We need to invest much time in sorting out bureaucratic matters and in navigating the time-consuming tasks associated with getting teaching organized. The result is that we do not really have spare time to socialize, shoot the breeze, as the American idiom goes,

over coffee or tea (or a beer) and let talk flow. We are, as I explained a while ago, ‘talk-starved.’ This is why I personally need to teach: my students are my bouncing wall (do I mean ‘sounding board’? I’m not sure). I throw ideas at them, and when they bounce back they come in a better shape. Alone, at home, there is no bouncing wall. Yes, I have my blog, but it’s an odd bouncing wall, as the ideas (mostly) go through it.

I cannot really separate my teaching from my research, not quite because I teach courses based on what I do research on (I wish!) but because whatever I teach demands that I focus and explain myself—and this essential practice for my writing. With no students for 5 years I think I would wither like an unwatered plant...

So, to conclude, if I were the colleague with the grant I would use the money to get rid of the less rewarding courses and to pick and choose my way into what I really wanted to teach, even if it was down to one course in one semester. For, you know, without students to keep us on our toes, we just lose touch with reality and end up being pent up in our bizarre ivory towers. Also, I wonder, why the authorities think that an outstanding researcher should have no impact on five cohorts (em, the technical terms for classes) and vice versa, that five consecutive cohorts should be deprived of the best researchers in their Department. Odd, isn’t it?

Perhaps things would be better if, as they do in more civilized countries, the academic year lasted until 1 May and then we could all enjoy a few months every year for research. Keep on dreaming...

1-III-2015 AND NOW FOR THE ASEXUALS...: CEASELESS LABELLING IN GENDER STUDIES

In the process of reviewing an ongoing PhD dissertation, I learn about the recent scholarly interest on asexuality. Apparently, some of the key volumes are Anthony Bogaert’s *Understanding Asexuality* (2012), Karli June Cerankowski and Megan Milks’ edited collection *Asexualities: Feminist and Queer Perspectives* (2014) and *The Invisible Orientation: An Introduction to Asexuality* (2014) by Julie Sondra Decker (which has a five-star rating on Amazon.com!).

Asexuality, it seems, is being vindicated as a legitimate sexual identity and/or orientation in yet another attempt at de-stigmatizing what others treat as a disease, whether physical or psychological. Also, to question and challenge the widespread sexualisation of human life in the 21st century. The dissertation also teaches me that there are many asexual communities, the largest being the Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN), founded in 2001 by David Jay. The main novel dealing with asexuality seems to be Keri Hulme’s 1984 Booker-Prize winner *The Bone People*.

If I understand matters correctly, asexuality is by no means the same as celibacy, which is the lack of sexual activity some persons vow to comply with for religious (or other) reasons. Asexuals are not frigid, either. Now called ‘hypoactive sexual desire disorder’

or HSDD, colloquially-named frigidity is regarded officially by psychiatrists as a sexual dysfunction causing distress, hence in need of a cure (HSDD was labelled a disorder as recently as 1977). There is plenty of criticism against this intervention of medical science into sexual normativity and against the pathologizing of desire, which, obviously self-defined asexuals resist. As we all should.

I learn all this one day after discussing with an MA tutoree working on a dissertation about the slow visibilization of bisexuality whether we, in Gender Studies, are making any sense at all (I should extend this to activism and the lives of individual persons). Now, the problem with bisexuality is that it appears to be disruptive of LGTB labelling as, famously, it is not clear whether bisexuality is an inborn identity/orientation like the others, heterosexuality included, or the complete denial that sexuality can be determined. I engaged in a peculiar conversation with my student as a) I have no idea whether bisexual people feel an inclination towards males and females from a very early age, b) I often wonder how many people would turn out to be bisexual if only the accidents of their biography led them this way. I recall very distinctly the words of a male student I once had, who claimed he was not gay: he just had fallen in love with a man.

Committing the sin of ageism, I tended to believe that asexuality is a phase of life, or even, phases which may alternate with bouts of sexual activity. It seems I'm awfully wrong. Asexuals simply do not feel an interest in sex, which puts them, understandably, in a very awkward position regarding both hetero-normativists and LGTB activists, all of them defining human beings according to their sexual activity. I am personally sick and tired of the supposition that sex is so central to our lives which is why I welcome the emergence of the asexual position, as it is a true challenge to the way we have understood personal identity in the last 100 years. I can imagine what coming out as an asexual entails and it cannot be easy: you're just frigid/abnormal/a freak, you haven't found the right person(s), I'll teach you what sexual arousal is about., etc., etc. As long as anyone who feels normal to themselves suffer the prejudice others heap on them, we, in Gender Studies, must struggle to defend them and make room for the free expression of their identities.

Having said that, I must confess I am puzzled indeed. Not by the existence of men and women unconcerned about sex, as everyday experience indicates they are around indeed, but by their need to form communities, develop new labels, stand out. I have never been particularly fond of the LGTB label as I find it anti-heterosexual in quite a prejudiced, even gross way (it seems to respond to the need of having a common enemy and denies us, heterosexuals, the chance of opposing patriarchal hetero-normativity). I'd much rather we all used 'queer' in the sense of 'anti-normative' and let people be, avoiding the essentialisms that plague the gender-related labels.

Bisexual and asexual are not really free, either, from this essentialism as they seem to override other possibilities, namely, that the individual's biography passes through sexual phases in a much more fluctuating way. I don't find it very hard to imagine someone who engages in heterosexual sex during a certain period of his/her life, then combines this with homosexual sex or goes through a strict homosexual period, and

then lives off sex for a while, perhaps to start all over again. Why, then, this need to attach labels to what we do in bed and with whom? Not to raise the obvious politically incorrect matter of where we put the limits to what is acceptable in human sexuality.

I do not know how and when this ceaseless process of labelling will end, if ever. Asexuality, in any case, opens up onto an unmapped territory. Let me explain. What is usually condemned by the bigoted is engaging in a particular activity which appears to be abnormal but which is not really so. The, if you allow me, originality of the asexual position is that it is not even about refraining from doing something, as asexuals are not, like celibate individuals, actively rejecting or avoiding sex. Asexuality questions the very idea that having sex is central to human life and, thus, their lack of sexual activity becomes not a lack at all. It is even quite in-your-face: why would it bother anyone that someone does *not do* something? (=have sex).

What is found to be annoying about asexuality and the reason why the label is criticised so harshly, I believe, is that it highlights the absurd importance that sex has gained in our lives. I'll try to draw an analogy with sports (in a way, sex is a kind of sport today): people who practice sports believe that life without exercising is empty, but people who are not keen on sports do not feel this is the case. Now, imagine a situation in which you would have to silence the fact that you don't like sports for fear of being labelled a freak...

What a strange world we live in, really.

8-III-2015 INTERNATIONAL WOMAN'S DAY: A REMINDER OF OUR SUBORDINATION

Today, 8 of March, International Woman's Day, I only feel irritation. I'm irritated because we still need a special day to complain that more than half of humankind is subordinated to men, who are actually the minority. I'm irritated because I wish we did not need days like today in 2015 and because even if I live to be 100 (2066...) there is still going to be an urgent need for an 8 of March like today. Google has decorated its opening page with a logo reminding us of women's achievements in a variety of fields but the Spanish media are full, rather, of the miseries we women endure and I feel really downbeat.

El País explains that since the Spanish Government started counting the victims of couple-related violence, back in 2001, the list extends to more than 800 already... The son of one of them writes about the tragic void left by his mother's absence and this is as it should be: the men must shoulder half the burden of the fight against patriarchal misogynistic terrorism, which must become a collective fight. Miguel Lorente, the man who, together with Luis Bonino, has spoken with the greatest clarity against male violence in Spain, makes the same claim and I could not agree more with him: my main hope for violence against women to end are the loving sons, brothers, fathers, partners, friends... and, above all, the fathers of daughters who will not want to see

their little girls grow into abused women, whether this is in the hands of men claiming to love them or men in positions to employ them.

Many of the news items this week have to do, precisely with the gender pay gap, which in Spain is officially 17.5% in contrast to 19% for the whole European Union. This means that if a man and a woman are hired to do a job he will get higher wages by that percentage just for having a penis (it seems that a common strategy to justify this kind of illegal discrimination is giving the man's job a title within a higher category). Catalan TV3 interviews today a few female students indignant that they have to face a worse future than their male peers although the statistics indicate not only that women are a majority in college but also that they do better. Then, the newscast moves onto a report of a political act in which President Artur Mas has promised women will have full equality in a future independent Catalan nation. His own Government has withdrawn all aids to kindergarten for children from 0 to 3 years-old, the very pre-school establishments on which young mothers depend in order to be able to work full time. So why delay to a hypothetical future Catalonia what can be done today? And not only to help young mothers but also young fathers...

As regards violence, I'm left with two potent images: one from the new film *Refugiado* directed by Diego Lerman, who was inspired to write it when he saw a woman attacked in the street by her husband before his very eyes. The little boy Matías, age 8, and on the run with his pregnant mother from his murderous dad, has a conversation on the phone with him: "If you love her so much", he asks really distressed, "why do you hurt her?" The other image comes from an Italian campaign, in which some boys, ages 6 to 12, are introduced to Martina, a girl about 10. They're asked to caress and kiss her face, which they all do very sweetly—and then to hit her. Taken aback, all the boys refuse to use violence against the girl: as one sentences, this is not what a man does. I only wish all the men who do use violence could be shamed by other men into understanding that they do not deserve the honour of being called a man, much less a human being.

I have not joined the local demonstration in Barcelona today, though I have crossed paths with it as I walked to La Virreina to see an exhibition by the renowned French woman photographer Sophie Calle, 'Modus Vivendi'. What better way to celebrate women's work, right? I have been distressed by some of Calle's autobiographical works, presenting her as vulnerable because of her body (she has even worked as a stripper) or her relationships with men. The main segment of the exhibition had to do with one of her peculiar projects: she passed to a variety of women an email which her lover had sent her announcing that he was ending their relationship. Each of these women analyzed the lover's pathetic, whiny letter from her own vantage point, determined by age and occupation. The result is a frankly hilarious deconstruction of romance, right now one of the worst vampires sucking energy off women, together with fashion and the cult of youth.

Then, to complete my peculiar homage to women I have read *La guerra secreta de los sexos*, a fascinating volume that María Lafitte, the Countess of Campo Alange, had the temerity to publish in 1948, under Franco's regime and one year before de Beauvoir

published *The Second Sex*. I marvel not only at her bravery but at how profoundly feminist her book is, and how valid her view of women's subordination is still today. If you've never heard of Lafitte, she founded in 1960 the Seminario de Estudios sobre la Mujer, the first one in Spain. Like the editors of her text, re-published in 2008, I had serious misgivings that she would offer a right-wing version of women's mission in support of the fatherland, closest to Pilar Primo de Rivera, the regime's main female spokesperson. This is not at all the case; Lafitte is no left-wing, radical feminist like the ones that would appear in the 1960s but she is quite outspoken in her own mission to highlight the strategies used by patriarchy to diminish women physically and mentally. Her view is that patriarchy of the traditional kind ended in the 19th century when legislation took much power away from patriarchal family men; we are, then, immersed in the long process of building a new system which she thinks will take very long to accomplish, perhaps centuries. I see myself like her in 1948, just one of the few free enough to hurry the process along, surrounded by many more freer women than Lafitte but also by millions of other women stuck in the mud of what I can only call enslavement.

Over lunch I hear on TV the news about that young Moroccan woman, resident in Rubí, just a few kilometres from my university, who has been arrested for inducing women to join the Islamic State. She herself abandoned her husband, kidnapping their three-year-old boy, and moved to Syria. A Spanish woman lawyer specializing in cases like this one explains that women are lured into joining this barbaric kind of patriarchy (as seen by this week's destruction of the Assyrian city of Nimrud) by the promising of finding the man of their dreams: a handsome warrior that will protect them. My appalled husband complains loudly that the authorities should launch a campaign against that kind of gendered brainwashing but I find myself telling him that, then, another campaign needs to be launched against other forms of enslavement. Like *Fifty Shades of Gray*, the film so many Western women are freely choosing to see (with their girl friends) and which is giving men the excuse to say that all we want is a master to enslave us –whether he is Christian (Grey) or Muslim...

Only 364 International Patriarchal Men's Day left for the next International Woman's Day, then...

14-III-2015 GOODBYE AND THANKS, TERRY PRATCHETT

Terry Pratchett was diagnosed with posterior cortical atrophy, a rare form of early-onset Alzheimer's, in 2007. We, author and readers, have been saying goodbye for almost 8 years, then, yet for all our readiness this is a death that catches us unawares. Couldn't we have had more time? This is it? Sir Terry, just 66, is no longer with us and although we were lucky that he kept on writing to the very end (dictating in the last stages), it is still too little time.

His death comes, besides, not even two years after losing Iain M. Banks also too early and too unfairly. It is hard to lose them both, it feels as if very dear personal friends are

gone. I think also of my doctoral student, Rosa María Moreno, currently writing her dissertation on the narrator's voice in the Discworld series and how sad she must be feeling now. As I told her, the best possible homage is finishing the work and making sure Pratchett's novels are preserved for posterity.

I have already written here that I started reading Pratchett 20 years ago, when my PhD supervisor in Scotland, Prof. David Punter, gently mocked my snobbish prejudice against the colourful covers of Pratchett's novels. I have read since then 39 novels by Pratchett and 3 other volumes he has co-authored, missing just 1 Discworld novel. Since then, I have taught novels by Pratchett twice: my favourite, *The Truth* (number 25 within the Discworld series) and his collaboration with Neil Gaiman, *Good Omens*.

When I finished teaching last year my course on *Harry Potter*, I asked my students to please, please, please thank me, if they wished to do so, by reading one Pratchett, any novel, and see how it worked for them. I don't know if I have made any new fans this way but I hardly see the way to teach a monographic course on his work, if only one based on a selection of 5 or 6 novels. My personal homage, by the way, is an article I was already preparing for a volume dealing with neo-Victorian fictions, on his novel *Dodger*, which I'll praise for his clever recycling of *Oliver Twist*.

For me, Pratchett and Dickens are very close: as I have insisted here again and again they are writers one reads for the pleasure of their company, no matter what they narrate. Both have potent narrative voices, suggesting that the man behind the telling, the author, is, yes, a wise and witty man. As my student Rosa María is arguing, Pratchett had a unique way of satirizing the real world by transforming it into the blend of comedy and fantasy on which his Discworld lies. Also, as she claims, the satire works not by direct allusion but by winking an eye to the reader and making us feel part of the circle of initiates who is in on the joke.

The cast of Pratchett's characters is very extensive, also very Dickensian in their way of appearing on the page very much alive from the first sentence introducing them. They're all quirky in a way that would even disconcert Miss Havisham, yet they are all recognisable human beings, even the ones who/which are not human at all. I have, for instance, a silly soft spot for Otto von Chriek, a vampire iconographer (= photographer) who, being destroyed every time he uses flashlight for his photos, has the precaution of carrying a tiny flask of blood tied to his wrist. He collapses in cinders, the flask breaks, the blood remakes him. My other soft spot is for Corporal/Captain Carrot, a most decent man who would be simply overwhelmed if he only knew who he really is.

Pratchett has legions of fans and in the same many other popular classics have survived without the aid of academia, I am sure they will keep his memory fresh for generations to come. I would say, besides, that an ability to read Sir Terry in English should be a great enticement to learn the language; I have never read any translation into Spanish or Catalan but one thing I can say is that it is impossible that the humour translates well. Perhaps the same applies to the cultural references, I don't know, though my guess is that Pratchett's books are multi-layered, so that the older and more sophisticated the readers is the more meaning s/he grasp in his satirical voice.

This does not mean, quite the opposite, that the novels are inaccessible to young or foreign readers, just that they possibly grasp only the more basic layers.

The MLA database only names 48 items dealing with Terry Pratchett works, of which only 1 is a book: *Discworld and the Disciplines: Critical Approaches to the Terry Pratchett Works*, a collective volume edited by Anne Hiebert and William C. Spruiell (McFarland, 2014). There is actually a second volume, the monograph *Accused of Literature* by Andrew M. Butler, which MLA ignores, perhaps for being that kind of work which straddles fandom and academia. Interestingly, the first item named by MLA appeared in 1992, a very brief essay by Liz Holliday for the *Science Fiction Chronicle*. This is 8 years after Pratchett started publishing his Discworld series, 21 since his first book. The new collective volume is, hopefully, a good sign that the academic world has finally caught on and realised that Pratchett is someone worth studying and not only worth reading. My own first attempt to explain Pratchett to local Spanish audiences, by the way, dates back to 2002: “Ídolos del fantástico popular: el gótico cotidiano de Stephen King y la sátira pseudo-histórica de Terry Pratchett” (see: <http://gent.uab.cat/saramartinalegre/content/other-publications>).

If you're reading this and are wondering where you should start reading Pratchett and why you should read him at all, my answer is that you can either start at the beginning, with *The Colour of Magic*, or just anywhere you like. I started with *Guards, Guards!* (1989), the 8th Discworld novel, I don't even know why, read a few more published later and then decided to start again, back at the beginning. Why read Pratchett, then? Because he was a wordsmith, as the definition goes “a skilled user of words.” Was he, then, a literary writer? Yes, he was that rare breed: the popular literary writer, the ones who used to abound in the 19th century until Modernism decided that either you told a story or you wrote Literature. Fortunately, Sir Terry could do both.

A typical experience of reading one of her novels consists for me of reading non-stop and then braking hard in the last 50 pages, realizing that the pleasure of a new Pratchett will not be repeated for one year at least (now never again...). I admire the way Pratchett comments obliquely on the absurdity and stupidity of our world by using an even crazier parallel in the Discworld; I love how the narrator's voice is full of barbs and yet so kind, so humane; I enjoy the variety of eccentric characters and how one gets to know little by little the varied geography and societies of the Discworld; I value Sir Terry's defence of integration despite difference and how his humans, trolls, dwarves, zombies, vampires... find a place in the accommodating city of Ank-Morpork. I marvel at the inventiveness. He has always made it smile, and has often made me laugh, sometimes really loud. No easy feat for a writer.

Queen Elizabeth II knighted Terry Pratchett for services to literature in 2009 (he had been appointed 'Officer of the Order of the British Empire' or OBE in 1998). He declared himself “flabbergasted,” and I declare myself won over by a state capable of honouring this way not only him but also Arthur C. Clarke or Arthur Conan Doyle, even Barbara Cartland. That Pratchett ended his days 'Sir Terry' is one of those very nice British quirks we wonder about from abroad... very civilized.

Sir Terry, knight of the Discworld, servant of Literature: I'll miss you very, very much. Thank you from the bottom of my heart for 20 years of the most wonderful company. I'm really sorry you're gone; your books will be here, by my side, for as long as I live. And I'll do my best, this is a promise, to find you as many new readers as I can. Long live Sir Terry!

18-III-2015 SCHOLARSHIP, CRITICISM, REVIEWING: FINE DISTINCTIONS, DIFFERENT JOBS

Today I'm quoting from an essay by Gary K. Wolfe, "Pilgrims of the Fall: Critics and Criticism" from his highly stimulating volume *Evaporating Genres* (2001, p. 205) He discusses the differences between 'reviewer,' 'critic,' 'scholar' and 'academic,' explaining that for " a great many practicing writers" reviewer and critic mean the same, that is to say, the persons assessing their work in periodical publications for a general readership. Yet, in academia, he adds, "the distinction can be crucial" for we call ourselves 'critics' but we are not reviewers "working under 'journalistic' constraints." We may do review work for academic publications but it usually involves academic texts and not literature.

Criticism, Wolfe adds, remains, however, within academia a "much vaguer term" than 'scholarship,' meaning "the uncovering of new or newly combined knowledge by means of formally described and peer-reviewed processes" with a view to obtaining a "degree, a job, or promotion and tenure" (p. 206). Wolfe then proceeds to praise the work within SF and fantasy of John Clute, known for his indefatigable task as a reviewer and encyclopaedia writer outside the circuit of academia, though actually straddling this and fandom (he's, em, an independent scholar). Wolfe also proceeds to chastise scholars and academics for using too little time to read literature and too much energy to read theory; we are also guilty of patronising the reviewers who, like Clute, may lack a theoretical framework, as once Rob Latham famously complained, but who do much to map a particular genre on a regular basis and thus, I would add, pave the way for scholarship.

The key problem worrying Wolfe is how to tie "literary criticism directly to the actual world of readers" (p. 213) which chimes in directly with the complaint by the only Amazon.es reviewer of *Historia y antología de la ciencia ficción española*, edited by Julián Díez and Fernando Ángel Moreno (Cátedra, 2014). This lonely voice complains that although the anthology is "impeccable" the study is a bit marred for being "too elitist, neglecting the task of fandom within the genre." Indeed. Certainly, SF and fantasy, secondarily horror, detective fiction and romance, are very different fields from literary and mainstream narrative (middlebrow?), and other genres like poetry, since the emergence of scholarship is posterior to the emergence of fandom. As Wolfe explains this created a strange situation for academics within SF and fantasy who had to adapt to a pre-existent vocabulary or risk excluding themselves completely from communication with the readers in this genre.

Yet, this is not where I was going (if I'm going anywhere today!). The internet, forums like Amazon and Good Reads, give us the chance, as I have already noted here, to contrast the opinions of academic critics and scholars with the opinions of common readers, to which, of course, we need to add those of professional reviewers. Although academic work must include a certain measure of reviewing in the case of works relatively unknown, few academics ever work on a text untouched by reviewers, whether professional or amateur.

I might even say that a complete lack of professional reviews for certain contemporary texts bothers me far less than a lack of reviews by common readers, a void which seems to me a clearer indication of the indifferent quality of a particular text. Whenever I start a paper on a contemporary novel, I read the reviews first, with appreciation, and try to quote them. Although it might seem that expressing an opinion is easy enough, I find reviewing a very difficult art, as a reviewer must be knowledgeable without being pedantic, and communicative without being arrogant and, above all, s/he must be fair.

Proving his point that an academic critic/scholar must also be a well-informed reader, Wolfe uses in his volume an encyclopaedic approach—the one I also miss in theory-oriented scholarly work. He inserts mini-reviews of a few lines as he theorizes, using an almost jargon-free, elegant prose which keeps you reading as if his academic book were a novel. This, let me stress, is bold and surprising for, as he complains (and I complain), if you want to publish within the habitual academic circuits you need to accept restrictive style rules. When I let myself go a little bit in my own academic work, I kick myself hard: girl, this is academic work, not a blog post! Yet I know that I'm possibly doing my most significant scholarly work here, writing informally in my blog, if by scholarly we understand as Wolfe does, the dissemination of knowledge.

Wolfe recalls interviewing a candidate for a college teaching position who declared that she had no time to read fiction as she had to read so much theory; he adds that this is what this woman thought she needed to say, though it might not be true at all. In my own case, I seem to have developed a strange sort of guilt about reading fiction. It seems that academics do not work unless they're using a computer so, somehow, I started pushing my reading to the evenings and weekends. Monday to Friday, 8:30 to 16:30, except for the time I spend in class, I sit at my table trying to produce something publishable, preparing classes, answering emails, etc, etc. I haven't spent a weekday reading for a long, long time and now that I have the chance, as I need not teach this semester, I feel, well, guilty of enjoying a very strange kind of privilege. The sense of guilt increases if I do my reading in glorious sunshine, on my terrace... but decreases a little if I read theory, pen and paper at hand. Spending my day reading a novel is not really working, is it?? I know it is, but this guilt must be a remnant of the time when reading was what I did for a hobby after school was over...

So, funnily, reading theory feels like more real work than reading fiction even though the criticism of fiction is, in the end, my main aim. Or is it? Wolfe says it's the other way round: theorizing is the real aim of contemporary scholarly work, and the fiction is there just to pepper the theory. Could it be, I'm wondering, a kind of puritanical

attitude against the idea of reading fiction? Is this also why we, academics, do not review fiction (unless it is properly literary and in the proper newspapers)? Waste of time, read serious work...

Although I am a doctor in English Philology, I don't call myself a philologist. To be honest, I don't call myself much of anything, as I find that, generally speaking, we refer to our task by speciality ('I do Masculinities Studies', for instance) rather than by name ('I'm a scholar'). When I try to define what I do to myself, I prefer the label 'cultural critic', though perhaps 'academic cultural critic' comes closest. I use 'cultural' because I work with a variety of texts, literary and audio-visual. When I think of 'scholars' I tend to envision colleagues working in archives or libraries, unearthing the secrets of the past. As I work on contemporary texts, and tend to produce knowledge by making connections rather than discoveries, I'm not sure whether I am a scholar, though it seems I am indeed an academic.

Wolf, as I have noted, claims that scholarship is produced to obtain a "degree, a job, or promotion and tenure" (p. 206). I see it the other way round: one aims at obtaining tenure in order to be able to produce scholarship (or academic criticism, whatever you want to call it). Wolfe seems a bit jaundiced here for I believe that genuine scholars are as vocational as, say, literary writers. I see many people around me producing fine academic work with little hope of achieving tenure because they feel, shall we say?, naturally inclined to do so. A strange vocation calls us to try to disseminate knowledge though in the end we may produce very obscure knowledge that only a handful ever read. No wonder there is a little of bad blood between academic and journalistic critics for, in the end, they have a higher impact, not to mention the millions of amateur reviewers crowding Amazon, GoodReads...

So, thank you, Gary Wolfe for the salutary reminder that as academic critics/scholars we need to read fiction and not only theory. Sunshine on my terrace is calling, as is this alluring novel on my table... yet it only 10:45 and there are papers to write...

23-III-2015 ALTMETRICS AND THE MAJOR OF JUN: QUESTIONING (MY) EXISTENCE...

There are days when I think that I live in a kind of time warp, causing me to catch up with crucial matters for research with unavoidable delay. Thus, I have only learned about 'altmetrics' last week, via an email I received from their organization, when this seems to have materialized five years ago. What is 'altmetrics'? Citing from their own web, <http://altmetrics.org/about/>, 'altmetrics' is "the creation and study of new metrics based on the Social Web for analyzing, and informing scholarship." Oh dear...

If you read the "Altmetrics Manifesto" (<http://altmetrics.org/manifesto/>) of 2010, you'll learn that the 'alt' in 'altmetrics' stands for 'alternative.' The manifesto explains that, as we all know in academia, peer reviewing, citation counting measures and instruments like JCR (Journal Citations Report), are failing to fulfil their purpose of

helping to transmit sound knowledge and measuring its impact accurately. Peer reviewing is excruciatingly slow (it seems that also in science) and citations impact is open to manipulation.

Dr. Roger A. Brumback narrates in his article "Impact Factor Wars: Episode V—The Empire Strikes Back" (*Journal of Child Neurology*, 2009, <http://jcn.sagepub.com/content/24/3/260.long>) an interesting case. Two "clever scientists," Harm K. Schutte and Jan G. Svec, members of the International Association of Logopedics and Phoniatrics (IALP) published an editorial in *Folia Phoniatica et Logopaedica* (2007) citing "all 66 articles published in that journal" in the two previous years. Self-citation, Brumback explains, more than doubled the journal's impact factor and helped the journal climb "9 places in the subject category of 'Rehabilitation' (which only contains 27 journals)." I love it, by the way, that Brumback validates the impact of popular fictions (and its research) by basing his argumentation on *Star Wars*. Thomson Reuters plays the part of Darth Vader, we are all rebels against the Empire. I always knew Princess Leia is my girl!

The matters of altmetrics also includes what they call peer-review crowd sourcing: "Instead of waiting months for two opinions, an article's impact might be assessed by thousands of conversations and bookmarks in a week." There was indeed something called CrowdoMeter for a while (<http://blogs.plos.org/mfenner/2011/12/20/crowdometer-or-trying-to-understand-tweets-about-journal-papers/>) based on the idea that measuring tweets about journal papers gives a reliable indication of their impact. I have serious doubts that Twitter is the place to react to academic papers and there is, besides, always the risk that, as the manifesto acknowledges, altmetrics might reflect "just empty buzz."

I understand, then, that so far this is a closed avenue and that the strategies to measure impact are still going in the current official direction. As an example, see the announcement I have just received today for the "Quartres Jornades sobre Gestió de la Informació Científica (JGIC-2015)" (<http://blogs.iec.cat/observatori/jgic/jgic-2015/>). The programme includes plenty on bibliometrics and institutional information systems but nothing directly on social networks, which is, well, odd, CrowdoMeter or not.

As a researcher, as I have been complaining here, I feel overwhelmed by the need to prove not so much my impact but my very existence. Although I have published plenty, not all databases acknowledge that I am alive and working as nobody, except myself, is providing information about what I do. And the task is never-ending. Recently, my university informed me, to my horror and consternation, that I don't belong to any research group—I had not entered the corresponding information in our user-unfriendly computer application. Deep sigh because, as happens, I do spend much time keeping that updated. Also, as I have been narrating here, I'm using Academia.edu, my web, this blog and a Twitter account to publicise my work. I think it is working, more or less, but I feel daunted by the task of being my own community manager, as I don't have the training. There are days, then, when I seriously doubt I can carry on the task of proving that I exist. The task of proving that I matter, if I do at all, is just too much...

This weekend I have met someone who has indeed no doubts that he exists and that what he does matters: José Antonio Rodríguez Salas, the Mayor of Jun. This is a town of about 3,500 souls next to the city of Granada, which is now famous for its Mayor's indefatigable work in pursuit of visibility in the social networks. The Mayor's project is to turn Jun into not just a smart town but one of the smartest on Earth, by making it as forward-thinking as possible in terms of current trends in communications and networking. His very popular Twitter account (@JoseantonioJun) has indeed placed Jun on the world map and you can even see a little blue bird on the façade of the Town Hall. When he announced that Jun would welcome any gay and lesbian couples wishing to marry, this caused an Australian minister to stage his wedding there... Just yesterday, he broadcast live on Twitter the counting of the votes for the Andalusian elections in Jun, a pioneering initiative for the sake of transparent democracy. So here is someone who fully understands social media (and a politician who knows what he's doing). I just don't have his energy...

The impact of computers in our lives is so immense that even though I spent my first years as a university teacher with no internet I cannot remember how on Earth I managed to work then. Internet must have been introduced in my university in 1995-6, for while in Scotland in 1994-5 I didn't have an email account. I had been using pre-internet BBS (Bulletin Board Systems) for forums and chats pre-online since 1993, but the internet came later. The funny thing is that although I acknowledge the need to adapt to the new times and I try to catch up as best as I can, at heart altmetrics irritates me as much as bibliometrics and the attached citation systems. One thing is counting the downloads of my papers on Academia.edu or the digital repository of my university for my own reference; quite another matter reducing me to these figures, to the number of my followers on Twitter and to that of my blog readers. I never check that myself, as I don't want to know. I don't want to be, as I say, reducible to a set of figures and much less for what I do precisely to open up academic work to general readers beyond the official ways of measuring me up. Just let me be...

So my conclusion is a very existential one: I exist a little, and I matter (hopefully) a little. And I don't want anyone to give the exact quantities of that 'little' something. I know full well, thank you very much, that other individuals matter much more. Yet, I think of the many millions whose lives will pass unnoticed by the social networks and whose lives will leave no trace and I conclude that, in the end, Twitter or not, altmetrics or bibliometrics, this is our most common destiny.

29-III-2015 BODIES: BROKEN, MISSING...

It is hard to come up this week with an idea which does not connect one way or another with the crash of GermanWings flight 4U9525, apparently caused by co-pilot Andreas Lubitz. It all points to a textbook situation: a frustrated individual who cannot achieve a goal in life (becoming a Lufthansa captain, it seems) commits suicide claiming

in the process the lives of other persons, who simply had the bad luck of standing in the way of an unstoppable death wish.

I do not intend to analyze this person and his motivations: I'll simply note that, for me, the most baffling aspect is how and why his suicidal cravings overcame the necessary empathy which a person responsible for the lives of 149 human beings, many of them children, is supposed to feel in similar circumstances. I am familiar with the processes of dehumanization to which the victims of monstrous abusers are subjected, from pimps exploiting prostitutes to the Nazi personnel running the death camps. What is particularly bewildering in the case is the lack of utter motivation or benefit. In comparison, the 9/11 murderers seem much easier to explain as deeply damaged human beings.

The bodies. For quite a number of years I have been a member of the research group 'Body and Textuality,' and I'll try to process my think here using the Cultural Studies tools I learned with them. I wrote for one of our collective volumes a very grim article, explaining how the techno-warfare unleashed on the frail human body during WWI, when so many disappeared, was a sort of general dress rehearsal for the Nazi final solution. This applied to the systematic extermination of the Jewish all kinds of technology designed to make bodies disappear, so successfully that many denied the Holocaust ever happened. Then the Americans dropped nuclear bombs on the Japanese that reduced many of the citizens of Hiroshima and Nagasaki to mere shadows on the wall. Between 1914 and 1945, in short, we learned the sad craft of viciously breaking bodies and disappearing persons as it had never happened before in human History.

I had to think about these matters recently as a) I have written an article criticizing J.K. Rowling for cruelly disappearing Sirius Black, most readers' favourite character and, b) because I visited last Saturday Federico García Lorca's museum in Fuente Vaqueros (Granada). I have actually come to the conclusion that the many dead of the Spanish Civil War whose bodies are still missing have probably taken a subconscious hold on all of us in Spain, which is, most likely, why I could not stomach Sirius' death (he is also, let's recall, a political prisoner wrongfully condemned to a life sentence at Azkaban for crimes he did not commit). The friends who took me to see Lorca's house explained to me that his family's tepid attitude towards the efforts made to find his body (he was executed for no reason at all, except that he was gay and a progressive man, by Franco supporters) can only be explained by his having been buried elsewhere, in a secret location only his closest relatives know. This would make sense, but, still, the appalling fact that he and many others are missing after so many years makes my heart flinch. In Alfredo Sanzol's marvellous play, *En la Luna* (2011), a couple searching for another missing victim despair of ever giving him a proper burial. It's the early 1990s and the optimistic man tells the depressed woman that there is no way the Olympic Games will be celebrated in Barcelona with all the dead still buried anonymously in dirty ditches by village roads. My hair stood on end... for this is where so many still are.

Reading about WWI, the Nazi death camps, Sirius Black, García Lorca... you learn that you can only properly overcome the terrible process of mourning if you celebrate

funeral rites. 9/11 is fresh in our memories as a tragic event whose grief can never be truly conquered since many of the bodies simply vanished swallowed by the extreme violence of the events. Jonathan Safran Foer wrote a poignant novel, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005), narrating how nine-year-old Oskar tries to make sense of his father's disappearance on that day. The 9/11 missing crop up again and again in fiction, ghostly presences signalling our perplexity before the onslaught of ferocious death.

Sinister planes connect those 3,000 deaths with the 150 this week (and with the other plane, lost in the Indian Ocean one year ago, possibly in the same circumstances). We learned with 9/11 that the images of the broken bodies should not be shown, as a sign of respect for the dead. Tabloids used to show them; I still shudder at what I saw on the pages of *Interview* after Los Rodeos' crash, as a too curious 10-year-old. We also learned with 9/11 that DNA positive identification is crucial to allow relatives and friends to close their process of mourning if only on the basis of minimal human remains. This very intense week, we have seen again and again on TV the families travelling to the Alps village close to the site of the tragedy, mourning around a memorial stone their dead ones—as we all hope in Spain that DNA processing will not result in the disaster that it was in the case of the military personnel lost in the accident of the fated Yak 42 flight in 2003. All this coming in the week after the local Madrid authorities gleefully announced that the mortal remains of writer Miguel de Cervantes had been disturbed from their place of eternal rest and will soon be the object of morbid curiosity for any fee-paying tourist.

Ironically, trying not to think of the broken bodies and the broken families, and of the bad luck that trapped the poor people destroyed by a frustrated person's moment of fury, I decided to watch the most trivial of movies: Arnold Schwarzenegger's last action flick, *Sabotage*. Now, this is a man whose whole acting career (yes, I know this is an oxymoron) has been based on the display of his muscular body, still in possession of spectacular biceps at 67. Action films thrive, precisely, on celebration of what Yvonne Tasker once called 'musculinity' and I just wanted some pop-corn movie in that style. No such luck... *Sabotage* was, rather, a celebration of the broken body; each of Arnie's badass team died in terrifying ways, closer to the kind of body horror I have learned to avoid than to your typical action film. The first man to be dispatched is mowed down in his Winnebago by a freight train. When Arnie gets to the site, a local police officer asks him to stick little flags to the dead man's scattered remains... shown in all gruesome detail.

I think we, human beings, are a mad civilization. We take pains to avoid certain images from reaching us on the screen, on any screen. And, then, as you can see, we generate fake images of what we do not want to see, for enjoyment. All the many series about forensic specialists, the pleasure in zombies, all the graphic, gory detail of the fictional representation of the broken body is telling something quite ugly about who we are. This spectre first reared its head, as I say, during WWI, when the impossibility of bringing home whole bodies led to the gigantic cemeteries in France and all the war memorials. Since then, we have been growing something rotten in our souls, a psychopathic yearning to break human bodies in the worst possible ways—precisely the

sick craving that filled the lost soul who destroyed so many human lives a few days ago. May they all rest in peace. May we all learn to prevent horrors like this one.

4-IV-2015 BETWEEN LIFE AND FICTION: MALE SUICIDE

British cinemas are warning sensitive spectators about the first 'conte cruel' in Damián Szifrón's highly acclaimed film *Relatos Salvajes* (2014). The story certainly has eerie coincidences with Andreas Lubitz's tragic murder-suicide of last week. Yet, Szifrón's very Argentinean take on the matter of a pilot's terminal depression is humorous rather than tragic. The tale is dominated by improbability (the pilot's method to select his passage) and by Szifrón's mockery of the psychiatrist's efforts to stop the pilot. As he bangs on a door also firmly blocked against intruders, he manages to increase rather than decrease the pilot's destructive determination. The final oedipal image is an indictment both against family life and against the failure of psychology and psychiatry to contain a man's pain. As it happened in Lubitz's case, with nothing at all to laugh about.

I am writing these days an article about a novel dealing with the real-life suicide of a man, British director James Whale. The novel is *Father of Frankenstein* (1995) by Christopher Bram, adapted for the screen by Richard Condon as *Gods and Monsters* (1998). I argued in the abstract submitted that this ageing man's decision to kill himself is an act of masculine empowerment: Whale, 68, suffered a series on minor strokes which were diagnosed as the onset of an immediate psychological and physical decay. Rather than face this, Whale decided to drown himself in the pool of his wealthy California home (he could not swim, the pool was built for a young lover). The whole novel is addressed to proving that gay men like Whale are also manly; this is why Bram fancies that Whale befriends in the last two weeks of his life a prejudiced, homophobic young man, Clayton, who little by little realises the 'old fruit' is a man in full. I was asked on what grounds I claimed that Whale's suicide was a specifically masculine act of empowerment and not an act any human being could commit; also, how his being gay connected with my claims. The Alps tragedy happened in the middle of my considering all this for the article.

Statistics indicate that, roughly speaking, in most countries more men than women commit suicide: of all suicides 70% to 80% correspond to men (the only exception? Afghanistan, where women lead this sad rating). Some specialists claim that the same number of men as of women consider committing suicide; among those who do try killing themselves, however, women are far less effective than men. There are no clear reasons for this, though I'll speculate that women are worse at using violence, even against themselves. Also, that men connect suicide with courage and possibly feel ashamed at the possibility of appearing to have acted in a cowardly way if they fail to do themselves in.

In support of my argument, I'll cite Iain Bank's last novel, *The Quarry* (2013). Banks was writing the story of cantankerous Guy, a man terminally ill with cancer, when he was

himself diagnosed with the same disease. One early morning Guy suddenly disappears; his son Kit and friend Hol find him on a bridge above the motorway: “(...)’I still couldn’t jump, in the end (...) More of a coward than I thought. (...) Thought I could at least control something, take fucking charge of something, impose my own fucking schedule on what was happening to me, rather than just being... prey to it” (368). Banks himself did not commit suicide, nor did Terry Pratchett, who passed recently. Pratchett’s family had to tweet that he had died of natural causes, given the very vocal attitude he had kept in favour of assisted voluntary suicide; Pratchett had even collaborated in the documentary *Choosing to Die* (2012), which shows the suicide of Peter Smedley, a 71-year-old man suffering from motor neurone disease (aided by Swiss pro-choice Dignitas).

Men, most research suggests, tend to commit suicide because they bottle up their feelings are unable to ask for help when depressed. The case of the German pilot, who did ask for help and was technically on medical leave, possibly even under medication prescribed by his psychiatrist, shows that this claim needs to be disputed. I agree that men tend to keep their feelings to themselves more than women do, and that acknowledging that they feel depressed may in many cases be incompatible with their own sense of self-confident masculinity. In Bram’s novel, and in real life, James Whale did not tell anyone about why he wanted to die; *Father of Frankenstein* actually shows the very narrow limits of the friendship he establishes with this other man, Clayton, whom he sees just as a tool. Whale fancies that this man is his Frankenstein’s monster returned; his violence will kill him and there will be no need for Whale to commit suicide. This is not, though, what happens. Yet, just suppose that Whale had asked for help: he would have been told that degenerative illness must be endured and told to bear it with anti-depressants.

Carmen Tejedor, a Spanish psychiatrist who implemented a very successful anti-suicide programme at Barcelona’s Hospital Clinic, claims that there is not such thing as a ‘rational suicide,’ as Whale’s appears to have been, since “95% of all suicidal individuals present clear symptoms of being mentally disturbed.” The other 5%, those diagnosed with a terminal bodily illness as Whale was, are “balance suicides;” these appear to be rational but the individuals involved actually suffer from “more or less covert depression” (<http://lescontres.blogspot.com/2009/06/carmen-tejedor-psiquiatra-dirige-el.html>). This, of course, is totally at odds with the philosophy behind SOARS, the British Society for Old Age Rational Suicide established, by Michael Irwin in 2009, with the intention that rational suicide might become one day a human right.

I realise that I chose to write about *Father of Frankenstein* because I am totally in favour of assisted voluntary suicide, that is to say, of the individual’s right to choose how to die. I also think we need to carefully distinguish depression induced by a biochemical imbalance, which is an illness, from sadness and unhappiness caused by events in one’s life, which is a condition. Take Lubitz again: if he suffered from the first kind of depression, he should not have been allowed to fly a plane ever; if, however, he was suffering from a physical complaint that would make him lose his flying licence, and thus his dream job as a pilot, then he needed help to understand that he could still lead a fulfilling life rather than anti-depressants. As for Whale and anyone else like

him, male or female, the only dignified solution is helping them to commit suicide in better circumstances than doing yourself violent bodily harm.

And men, listen: feeling sad and unhappy is part of being human. Do ask for help, do help each other, share feelings, share problems, share stories... If male suicide, as the British say, is the 'silent plague' killing too many of you, then speak out about what is troubling you. There is dignity in doing this, even in dying if that's your choice. There is no dignity at all in victimizing yourself pointlessly and, indeed, in victimizing others even more pointlessly.

12-IV-2015 A PECULIAR CHALLENGE: MAKING SENSE OF LOCAL MASCULINITY...

I was approached a while ago by a Danish colleague who explained to me that she would bring to Barcelona a group of undergrad American students, as part of their Study Abroad programme. She asked me for help regarding gender issues in Spain, as her students will be dealing with these during their stay in Barcelona (she contacted me as a member of the research group in Masculinities Studies I belong to).

To my horror and consternation, though, the Danish website describing my city and the tour intended for these students was full of appalling clichés, running from Hemingway (in Barcelona??) to bull fighting (forbidden by Catalan law...), the whole stereotypical rigmarole. Quite indignant, I volunteered to lecture the students on condition that the offensive text be replaced. I'm meeting them next week—and I'm using the post today to start drafting my presentation... (the clichés are still online... I wonder whether their rephrasing depends on what I'll say).

I need to teach these young American students in which precise way Spanish masculinity differs from old-style 'machismo,' whether Catalan masculinity is different in any way from that of other areas of Spain, the role that men play in current debates on gender equality all over Spain and, finally, whether our reputation for being a women-friendly state (remember Zapatero's Government?) is still extant. A tall order indeed... It is very difficult, believe me, to know where to begin. I have asked the American students to come to my lecture having previously made a list of features defining American masculinity. A challenge, I know!, for both of us.

I'll start with possibly the easiest part: clearly, Zapatero's Government was more favourable to women than the current Rajoy Government. It's not just a matter of how many women Ministers Zapatero appointed (50%, which prompted male chauvinist Berlusconi to joke this was a 'pink' Government), but of a general attitude towards women's rights. Just this week, several prominent members of Partido Popular, some in the Government, including the current Health Minister, have insisted that abortion is not a right and have announced that they intend to remove any references to that word in the new legislation on this issue, so crucial to women.

Soraya Sáez de Santamaría and María Teresa Fernández de la Vega may have both occupied the position of Vice-Prime Minister, but I cannot imagine two more different women. This does not mean that we need to get suddenly nostalgic of Zapatero's Government as not that much was done for women, and much more could have been done for gender equality in general. Some of the steps taken, for instance the legislation to diminish the burden of caring for dependants in the home by women, were not solid enough and have been swept under the carpet with the excuse of the 2008 crisis. We all certainly have much to do in that sense.

I do not know how to translate Miguel Lorente's wonderful slogan to encourage men to fight patriarchal violence: "No basta con arrimar el hombro, hay que arrimar a los hombres." Lorente, a forensics specialist familiar with the bodily harm endured by women in the hands of patriarchal abusers, is the author of *Mi marido me pega lo normal* (2001). He has also been the Government's Delegate (2008-11) in charge of running the anti-violence programmes devised by the Socialist Ministry for Equality. The title of his volume defines, I believe, the enormous change in the matter of couple-related violence seen in recent decades in Spain. This kind of violence, as the shocking title expresses, was assumed to be a normal part of marriage, both by men and women. The fact that it is no longer so is what, paradoxically, gives us the impression that there is more violence, when, actually, this is decreasing. Its relatively new visibility is, I believe, a sign of the diminishing tolerance. Again, this does not mean that all men are doing their bit explicitly against anti-patriarchal violence. And, yes, yes, we need to deal with the matter of men's victimization by their female and male partners, even if this is only 10% of the total couple-related abuse.

I think that in order to understand how deeply Spanish masculinity has changed one only needs to see the grandfathers pushing baby prams in the parks or picking up young children from school (they're not as many as the grandmothers, I know, but they are many, nonetheless). My own father, who is not quite that kind of grandfather, tried to justify men's avoidance of children both in private and public when he was himself a young father (mid-1960s to late 1970s) on the grounds that "we were not allowed" to behave as fathers do today. I was puzzled by how his words suggest the existence of a repressive external authority, when actually it was, rather, a matter of personal choice (he could have for instance picked up my younger brother, born in the mid-1970s, from school without facing patronising looks but he chose never to bother). Spanish men, who took a gigantic step towards their own patriarchal liberation when they fought together to end compulsory military service (1996), have often discovered in their personal lives that it is in their own hands to change things. For their own benefit but also for women's.

I am thinking of accompanying my talk with iconic Spanish male figures, both in fiction and the media, yet it is complicated who to choose. Is there a man who represents Spanish masculinity best today? What does Pablo Iglesias' famous ponytail say about men in Spain today? Is our most successful actor, Antonio Banderas, the ideal Spanish man? I wonder... As for Catalunya, I need to explain that the process for independence is now stalled by the squabbling for prominence between alpha males Oriol Junqueras (a man who does not care what he looks like) and Artur Mas (a man of carefully styled

looks). Their confrontation says much about our local masculinity, torn between the need to play victim of the patriarchal Spanish other and, thus, unable to build a serious Catalan leadership. In *Polònia*, the political satirical show that always gets it right, Catalan men are represented by a new hero, Super Seny (Super Sensible), characterized by his inability to make any decision as he is always torn between the possible consequences... And I keep thinking of Joel Joan, who in his delicious TV series *El crac* (2015) chose to poke fun at his own iconic value as the poster boy for Catalan independentism by presenting the character also named 'Joel Joan' as the worst bundle of lies and cowardice you can imagine... I think the word I am looking for is self-deprecating.

Of course, if I tell my American visitors and Danish colleague that, as a recent survey suggests, bull-fighter Francisco Rivera is the most desired man in Spain (it's hard to imagine a similar category in Catalonia right now), then I'm lost... as this will only reinforce the clichés I'm trying to fight. Happy were the 1980s when Miguel Bosé, then young and handsome, was the most desired man in Spain—and because of his ambiguity and not despite it. The fact that his own coming out of the closet and his, relatively recent, paternity of four children have not diminished his acceptance as an artist is perhaps a clear sign of how far Spain has progressed. I wonder, though, on what common grounds a man like him and, say, former President José María Aznar, could meet... and what this says about men in Spain today.

I'll keep on thinking...

18-IV-2015 RESPONDING TO 'THE ACADEMIC MANIFESTO' (BY HALFFMAN AND RADDER): SHOCK AND AWE

My colleague David Owen has circulated among us, Literature teachers, a juicy article by Dutch professors Willem Halffman and Hans Radder, "The Academic Manifesto: From an Occupied to a Public University" (*Minerva: A Review of Science, Learning and Policy*, 3 April 2015, <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11024-015-9270-9/fulltext.html>). This is a very bitter indictment of the intrusion of what they call 'management' and I call 'bureaucracy' into the university, clearly far more advanced in the Netherlands as regards the occupation of our professional world by private corporate interests than in Spain. They call for the counter-occupation of the university and its transformation into a real 'public university,' by which they don't simply mean 'state-sponsored' but working to benefit the citizens. I'll refer here extensively, then, to the article and try to answer back in some way, from a different yet similar (Spanish) university context.

Halffman and Radder offer a very thorough dissection of the negative effects that the "regime obsessed with 'accountability' through measurement, increased competition, efficiency, 'excellence', and misconceived economic salvation" has forced into what should be an institution geared at the production and dissemination of knowledge for the common good. The saddest part of this catastrophe is that, as they show, we all

contributed to letting the Wolf in about 25 years ago when the younger generation decided to do away with the sluggish ivory-tower university and show to society what we are capable of. Since, basically, society still thinks we live in that old-fashioned ivory-tower, we have allowed their delegates, the bureaucrats (who hate us for the supposed 'privileged' nature of our jobs) to control our production and, frankly, to limit our capacity for thinking. How? Well, by turning us, as Halfman and Radder explain, into sheep who meekly obey all the absurd regulations imposed on us for the sake of hanging by the skin of our teeth onto the possibility, more and more remote, of producing knowledge, as it is our vocation.

From their comments, I understand that the Dutch university is far more privatised than the Spanish university, as we still run, basically, ourselves our own institutions, despite the growing control by external forces, like the 'Social Councils' (not to mention the companies funding research). Anyway, here are six "excesses" they identify, quite familiar too (mostly) here in Spain, followed by my comments paraphrasing their words:

1. "Measurability for accountability": we need to produce, produce, produce to keep up with changing indicators that only result in an "*illusion* of excellence"; so much over-production leaves with no time to actually read and think.
2. "Permanent competition (for 'quality')": this is a mechanism devised to keep everyone on their toes, for it is easy to see that knowledge is generated by collaboration and networking.
3. "The promise of greater 'efficiency'": Competition increases (rather than decrease) the cost of running the universities as we waste time and resources vying with each other for students and funding.
4. "The adoration of excellence: Everybody at the top!": rather than help many to do research, top researchers get more and more resources, leaving nothing for the rest (nor for discredited, cheaply-funded science)
5. "Contentless process management": the bureaucratization of the university means much more work for teachers/researchers, who become admin servants
6. "The promise of economic salvation": the universities lose their autonomy in research by following the orders of the private companies that fund projects; non-profit-oriented fields, from philosophy to mathematics, are dismissed as a financial burden.

We, Halfman and Radder write, have internalised the Wolf and feed it by, I'll add, living to fill in our C.V.s rather than to transmit knowledge. Yet, since we lost long ago the support of society, to a great extent because of the many indolent ivory tower inhabitants, there's very little we can do to explain our plea and gain sympathy. Nobody cares. How, then, do we change matters? The authors of the "Academic Manifesto" suggest up to 20 measures, actually 21 as they also support Pels' (2003) call to replace "the publication rat-race with more meaningful, slower-paced and more considerate research." Publish, in short, only when you have something to say and after carefully thought out research. Anyway, the 20 measures are (quotation marks for verbatim citation, otherwise my paraphrasis):

1. An administration style open to academic staff, students and supporting staff (we do have that at UAB, yet the impression is that most decisions are made by higher instances...)
2. The administration supports the staff, and not the other way round (we justify the work done by the bureaucrats); also, point 9. the university administration must be accountable to the academic community and not vice versa
3. "Limiting wasteful control systems" (self-explanatory—consider all the resources wasted on checking what we do, and how they punish those who work harder)
4. "A ban on mergers": currently happening in Spain at Department and 'Facultat' levels, though not yet at a university level; we have the opposite problem—too many universities.
5. A less intensive focus on our own institution, a more open vision encompassing all local universities; this is complemented with 6. "No wasteful competition between universities"
7. "A ban on university marketing" to attract students, followed by 8. using the university media to transfer knowledge to society, not for our own marketing
10. "No real estate speculation", think of the universities in Barcelona occupying areas in central locations and gentrifying them...
11. No top researchers allowed not to teach (fine by me, but also limit teaching so that whoever wants to do research can do it); accompanied by 15. Rejecting 'productivity' as the main "research assessment criterion" and, this is a good one, 16. "Introducing the Sabbatical Year" so that once every 7 years we can stop, read and think.
12. "Free education" but also 13. a limitation of student population so as not strain public resources and 14. promoting "vocational training" as a professionally attractive alternative to the university.
17. Freeing research from its bondage to content-oriented interests, both in production and assessment (18), which also translates as giving researchers time to follow long-term lines and not only projects with immediately applicable results.
19. Make society both a partner and the target of our activities, by 20. establishing an open access system to distribute knowledge.

Now, here's the problem—what do you do if the managers/bureaucrats and society do not care for any of the above? Halffman and Radder call for "resistance" and "shaking off our fear", yet what they offer sounds often like desperate measures: 1. leaving the university, 2. legal action, 3. "Muddling through" and even "work-to-rule," 4. sabotage, 5. collective refusal, 6. trade unions, 7. mass demonstration, 8. establish contra-indicators as counter-measures (and disseminate knowledge about our real working conditions), 9. striking, 10. occupying the university, 11. parliamentary and political action. Working, as I do, in a 'Facultat' (or school) were 9 and 10 are recurrent but totally useless events, I can only proclaim my scepticism. Also, in view of the fact that more than 50% of our staff are temporary workers and those of us who are tenured are gripped by our... throats by a system that has frozen our salaries and only offers tiny inducements by passing assessment exercises (or the very unlikely chance of promotion to full professor). Actually, it occurs to me that the full professors, the 'catedráticos', are the only ones in a position to lead the resistance that the "Academic Manifesto" calls for. So, if any of them is reading me...

In the meantime, here's reality: one of my most brilliant students announced to me today his intention of moving to Denmark, where the Government funds post-grad students, including the foreign ones with a nice student's record. When I showed my sadness that his leaving would only contribute to enhancing the current Spanish brain drain, he could only answer to me that he sees no future in Spain. So—why don't we ask the Danes?

Resistance may not be totally futile but when have the sheep ever banded to eat the Wolf? I think of Naomi Wolf's (oops!) description of the 'shock and awe' doctrine to keep whole populations subjected to the current appalling political and economic regime, and I think this is it—we're too shocked by and in awe of the Wolf.

Anyway, thanks Willem Halffman and Hans Radder for the effort and, above all, the call to amass and use courage.

26-IV-2015 AFTER SAINT JORDI: ROSES OUTNUMBER BOOKS

For those reading me outside Catalonia, I need to explain that 23rd April, Saint Jordi's festivity, is a gigantic civic holiday all over the nation. According to the segment devoted to this celebration on the website of Barcelona's Town Council, Saint Jordi fuses together the old legend of the dragon-slaying hero (possibly descended from Perseus and his sea monster) and the martyrdom of a knight (doubtful...) under Emperor Diocletian (284 to 305 AD). Both legend and saint are commemorated around the time when roses bloom, and it seems that already in the 15th century Barcelona boasted of a rose fair celebrated at the Catalan Government's palace. It seems that the tradition by which men (must) give their sweethearts a rose dates back from that time...

The idea of celebrating books on the same date is much more recent. In 1927 Valencian writer Vicent Clavel i Andrés, also a publisher, proposed to the 'Cambra Oficial del Llibre' of Barcelona and to the 'Gremi d'Editors i Llibreteres' that a holiday was established for the promotion of books in Catalonia. The original date chosen, 29 October, was changed in 1929, when the booksellers mounted the first street book market on 23rd April. This also happens to be the date when both Cervantes and Shakespeare died, in 1616, which came in handy for UNESCO to declare in 1995 23rd April 'World Book Day'. Not that you hear much about this internationally.

This year's Saint Jordi has been hailed as one of the most successful ones in recent memory, meaning during the current economic crisis. At least 250 writers (possibly 50 more) signed books; major figures like Ken Follett kept fans queuing for more than 2 hours, many of them failing even so to get his autograph... La Rambla was so packed, that Major Trias suggested moving the main bookstall area, once and for all, elsewhere for fear of accidents... The best-selling writers were María Dueñas (in Spanish) and Xavier Bosch (in Catalan). A group of medicine students and a group of Roma street sellers almost came to blows towards the end of the day when the students' decision

to lower the prices of the roses they were selling to make some extra money threatened to destroy business...

Now, of all the hullabaloo what caught my attention this time is that 7,000,000 roses were sold (yes, that's right, as many as Catalonia's inhabitants) but only 1,500,000 books. Roses, (over-)priced 2 to 7 euros, are obviously cheaper than books, 15-20 euros on average (minus the customary 5% discount). Also, they're bought on Saint Jordi's day itself, which is not the case with books (I, for instance, purchased the 6 books I gave as presents 2 weeks before, which means that the total number of books sold around Saint Jordi must be bigger, as not everyone loves the massive street crowds of the holiday). Even so, the picture that emerges is that although Catalan men are romantic enough, Catalans altogether are not that keen on reading... Let's say that only around 20% got books.

The main local newspaper, *La Vanguardia*, published on Saint Jordi's a summary of the general survey by CIS (Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas), published in December 2014. CIS data refer to all Spaniards, but this will do for my purposes. 35% of Spanish people never read: 37,9% of all men, 32,1% of all women. They just don't like reading (42%), lack time (23%) or prefer other type of entertainment (15%). As I always say, if you like something, you always find time... I prefer the two other, far more honest answers. Among those who do read, 65% of the Spanish population then, many claim to read every day (men 24'40%; women 34'90%), which I very much doubt. It seems Spaniards do not only lie about how often we practice sex... It seems more realistic to claim, as around 16% do, that they read twice a week (does this also apply to sex??). By the way, the average books-per-year figure for Spanish readers is 8'69... less than one a month... They must be very slow readers...

A common complaint on Saint Jordi's day is that books may be celebrated but not really culture as many best-selling authors on that day are media celebrities or, at best, middle-brow authors. You can check for yourself at <http://www.lavanguardia.com/libros/sant-jordi/20150422/54430780161/firmas-autores-sant-jordi-2015.html>. Mariló Montero was there, but also Carme Riera... Anyway, back to CIS: which genres do Spaniards enjoy reading? I'm not sure whether it is surprising that they prefer historical fiction (23'6%), followed by general fiction (17,9%), adventure (7'6%), detective fiction (7'4%). There is a joke somewhere in the fact that 6'1% read romance fiction and 4'4% science fiction, as both figures are very low (3'7% fantasy??? Who did CIS ask, I wonder...). Below 4% you find other genres like biography, essays, short fiction, self-help, poetry, cooking books, travel, drama, comics. I find it very, very hard to believe, all the same, that self-help (1,9%) and poetry (1,7%) have a very similar share of the market... or that only 0'6% read comics and graphic novels. Really, CIS? Have you ever visited FNAC? I got curiouser and curiouser and checked CIS's website to find out that Spaniards read mainly for entertainment (61'6%) and not really to improve our culture (10'4%) or be better informed (12'8%). We choose books by subject matter or genre (64'5%), and not by author (16'6%)—poor things! Blurbs matter more than covers, by the way.

The other matter that got me curious is what Spaniards do instead of reading. CIS asked how much free time they have on a working day and the answer baffles me, for only 5'8% claim to have no time at all... whereas 44'1% grant they have between 2 to 4 hours of leisure every day. 27'7% of all Spaniards say they have from 8 to 5 spare hours a day. I don't get it... This, however, makes sense if we consider that daily viewing time of TV in Spain (for 2014) amounts to 238 minutes per person, that is, 4 hours. The historical record was 246 minutes, reached in 2012. Figures are possibly much higher for Spaniards aged 65-75 who do not use the internet (25% claim they do) than for young people aged 16-24 who do surf the net (98,4%). These claim that they have mainly quit watching TV (62%) rather than reading books (27%). Yet, as everyone knows, internet consumption among the young is closely tied to watching TV series online or using downloads. I won't say a word about the 25% of unemployed general population in Spain or the 50% of unemployed young people under 25. Well, just one question: how do they fill in the hours spent in despair, hoping a job finally materializes?

Five roses for every book sold, this is who we are, the lucky ones with money to spare and limited time in our hands.

29-IV-2015 MAKING SENSE OF CATALAN MASCULINITY: A CHALLENGE...

Last Friday 24 I taught a group of visiting American undergrads a seminar which I called 'Making Sense of Catalan Masculinity.' I published a post on 12 April regarding my worries about how to organize the contents; here I offer a summary. I must say that the students were great, I enjoyed very much the ensuing debate and their intelligent questions. As it often happens, when I asked the 3 young men (and 15 young women) about their view of masculinity, they were a bit taken aback. One young man told me very candidly he had not really thought about the matter. The girls had... And, yes, they agreed that Hollywood movies reflect well American men's fears about appearing to be 'losers,' 'homos' and 'sissies.' Quite different here, I think.

It seems that Catalan men have not given much thought to Catalan masculinity so far. If you Google "homes catalans" and similar variations, you'll see that nothing comes up. I did come across a list of the 50 most influential Catalan women, and the 50 most influential Catalan media personalities, but nothing specific about Catalan men or masculinities. Well, I did learn from a Canary Islands female journalist that our men are complete morons since they have more sex on the days when local football team Barça wins matches... My academic search did not go much further, either. The two main volumes published in Barcelona and in Catalan are: *Calçasses, gallines i maricons: Homes contra la masculinitat hegemònica*, edited by Josep-Anton Fernández (Angle, 2003) and *Masculinitats per al segle XXI: Contribucions als congressos de masculinitat a Barcelona, 2003-2007* edited by Josep Maria Armengol (Centre d'Estudis dels Drets Individuals i Col·lectius, 2007). In Armengol's volume there is no specific essay on Catalan masculinity; I still need to read the other book...

Catalan men... I spoke to colleagues, friends and family and, of course, I was told that it is impossible to generalize and that once I start categorizing a particular local masculinity then I should need to map them all. This is funny, as the day before the seminar I had an interesting conversation about Basque matriarchy, whether it does exist or it is a myth (and in which way, here is the paradox, it is patriarchal). Anyway, I made a gigantic list of Catalan male icons and decided finally to choose a few, or collapse under the weight of so many popular names.

I think I am on safe ground if I claim that Barça's football team is essential to understand Catalan men, and not only in the sense highlighted by the Canary Islands journalist. Since star Leo Messi is an Argentinean (and Neymar from Brazil), I focused, rather, on Xavi Fernández, Andrés Iniesta, and Gerard Piqué, who seem to be the most obvious poster boys—and, of course, Pep Guardiola, now coaching Bayern at Munich. This is the man who, together with Jorge Valdano in Real Madrid, taught men that football is not incompatible with personal elegance and with an education. The other Catalan male icons I showed the visitors are: Ramon Pellicer and Josep Cuní (media), Artur Mas and Oriol Junqueras (politics), Joel Joan and Andrés Velencoso (acting and fashion), Albert Rivera and Jordi Évole (Catalan men with a Spanish projection). The students deduced that Catalan men are not much concerned as regards physical attractiveness, but they saw in the photos an inclination towards idealized middle-class professionalism. Um, yes, I think so. Or was it my choice of names and photos?

In the course of preparing the seminar I came across a hilarious piece on a website, "10 Tipus d'Homes Catalans" (<http://benegre.cat/2014/12/03/10-tipus-dhomes-catalans/>). This is not intended to offer an exhaustive catalogue of all men you can find in the streets of Catalonia but it is true that you recognize the types, to which I have added two. Here they are, with my approximate translation: 1. el perroflauta (the recycled hippie, with his local *okupa* undertones), 2. el *fucker* (the sexy but tasteless guy), 3. el *runner* (more obsessed by sports equipment than by sports), 4. el modernillu (the hipster), 5. el cholo català (the son of Latino migrants), 6. l'extraradi (the son of Spanish migrants), 7. el pijet (the brand-obsessed son of the 1980s 'pijo' or trendy guy), 8. El pijipi (the posh hippie, yes...), 9. El marca blanca (the non-descript guy), 10. l'emprenedor (money matters rule...). I added l'indepe (for Independence!) and the pagesot (the country boy). I had great fun choosing the illustrations for the PowerPoint... I used Manel, everyone's favourite Catalan pop band, to explain the 'non-descript', possibly the most common type right now...

Here are the main traits I came up with, in my pseudo-sociological approach:

*Catalan men are not blatantly patriarchal. My personal impression is that sexism is moderate in Catalonia but, as a friend reminded me, perhaps the truth is that patriarchy is less vocal while still keeping a firm, covert hold.

*Catalan men, I believe, are family-oriented but strictly as regards their own nuclear family, and not a more extended kind of family. I put as an example of the local fusion of patriarchy and matriarchy the Pujols: the many corruption scandals they have been involved in recently do stress that Jordi Pujol, the President of the Catalan Government

for more than 20 years, is actually a tool in the hands of his power-hungry wife, Marta Ferrusola.

*Catalan masculinity is defined by a contradictory discourse which mixes professional success and political victimization. This a nation of small businessmen, perhaps still best represented by shop-owners, both the classic 'botiguer' and the more modern versions. Yet, this commercial success clashes with the idea that national leadership is limited because of the enmity of the Spanish Government. Catalan men appeal to this supposed victimization indeed too often, failing in the process to make more effective civil and civic contributions.

*Catalan men are not particularly emotional in social and personal contact. The whole culture tends towards limited displays of positive and negative emotion (perhaps with the exception of Barça... and the demonstrations for independence) both in public and private.

A few years ago I started a paper on Joel Joan's TV series *Porca Misèria* (2004-7) as I thought that his own character, Pere Brunet, and that of his brother and antagonist, Roger Brunet (played by Roger Coma), are interesting representations of Catalan masculinity. I abandoned the paper half-way through as I am, after all, a specialist in Anglophone culture and I decided that working on Catalan texts was becoming a distraction. I feel now that, after so many years studying Anglophone masculinities, it might be time to have a good look at our local guys. Perhaps I should study the current TV3 soap *La Riera*, or Joel Joan's recent *El crac*, or the political humour of *Polònia* but then I think that all this is for my Catalan Studies peers to research. The additional problem is that local Catalan Cultural Studies hardly exist as such, and sociology can provide us only with limited cultural insight.

I'll be happy, and I really mean it, to receive proof of the opposite, so if you happen to know about any study of Catalan masculinity (or masculinities), I would very much like to read it. For next year's seminar.

3-V-2015 CERCAS, HERNÁNDEZ DE MIGUEL AND MAUTHAUSEN: THE LIMITED USE OF THE NOVEL (FICTION OR NON-FICTION...)

Knowing about my recurrent interest in the Holocaust, my family gave me as Sant Jordi presents two closely related books: Javier Cercas' non-fiction novel *El impostor* (2014) and Carlos Hernández de Miguel non-fiction essay *Los últimos españoles de Mauthausen* (2015). I have read them back-to-back, half by chance and half on purpose and the result is that I have serious doubts right now about the function of the novel in contemporary culture.

Cercas became an instant celebrity back in 2001 with the publication of *Soldados de Salamina* (*Soldiers of Salamis*) and remains today one of the few Spanish novelists with a truly high literary reputation. I enjoyed his *Soldados* though still today I find it an

over-hyped novel, a phenomenon rather than a literary masterpiece capable of withstanding the test of time. The subject of *El impostor*, however, intrigued me, which is why I was glad to receive the book. In case you have not heard about it, Cercas deals with the extraordinary case of Enric Marco Batlle, a compulsive liar who ended up presiding the association 'Amical Mauthausen' falsely claiming he was one of the 9,000 Spanish Republican prisoners locked up in a Nazi concentration camp (in Flössenburg). This affable, talkative man became the main spokesperson for the Spanish victims of the Nazis and when historian Benito Bermejo exposed him, in 2005, public opinion was sharply divided between the urge to shame him and the impulse to defend him as one of the main Spanish disseminators of knowledge about the Holocaust, quite unknown in Spain (until *Schindler's List*...).

Cercas seems fascinated by Truman Capote's dubious position when writing his masterpiece *In Cold Blood* (1966), the book which the American writer devoted to the two murderers of a family of farmers in Kansas. This is the volume that originated the genre we know today as 'non-fiction', which uses a mixture of techniques borrowed from the journalistic report and from the novel, with the difference that, unlike the latter, non-fiction is supposed to narrate the 'truth' (or something that approximates it).

Cercas, very cleverly, calls *El impostor* a 'non-fiction novel' so that his reader never knows whether there is any truth in it or, the opposite, whether this is fiction disguised as something else. I was first taken over by Cercas' post-postmodern approach to his elusive subject, his constant hesitation about whether Marco's life had any truth in it, and his insightful suggestion that Marco's pathological lying responds to a deeper pathology in the Spanish psyche, as so many Spaniards chose to re-invent themselves as victims after the Transition. My initial admiration, though, started paling when I realised that as the volume progressed the repetitions increased without Cercas' scratching more than Enric Marco's surface. Above all, I was quite annoyed by the constant authorial presence in the text, that of his friends, family and even his student son, whose banal problems seemed to worry Cercas on their trip to Flössenburg more than the truths (and lies) of History. In the end, Cercas delivers a trite message about the novel as a genre: just like Marco, novelists are unreliable manipulators who will do anything it takes to pass themselves off in public for what they are not... in Cercas' world, real writers.

Next I read Carlos Hernández de Miguel's non-fiction essay *Los últimos españoles de Mauthausen*, a thick book which presents itself as a work of clear didactic intent, aimed at teaching common readers the truth about the sad fate of the Spanish Republicans after 1939, when 500,000 Spaniards faced exile in France little imagining the horrors awaiting them. Hernández de Miguel, who started his own trip into Nazism chasing leads that would explain his own uncle's experience, chose to let the few Spanish survivors speak. He disappears from the text, fusing in his portrait of these men and women his own interviews with them, testimonials kept by their families and frequent quotations from other sources, whether these are military and Government documents or well-known volumes like, for instance, Montserrat Roig's *Els catalans als camps nazis* (1977). The result is extremely vivid, compelling and at the same time

absolutely devastating. I have read quite a few volumes about the camps and knew about many of the atrocities I would find in *Los últimos españoles de Mauthausen*. Even so the immediacy of the Spanish voices—and Hernández de Miguel's adamant denunciation of the complicity among Franco, Hitler, Pétain and even the allies to let the Republican exiles die—made reading this volume a very intense experience. A true History lesson.

As I read *Los últimos españoles...* I could not stop thinking, logically, of Cercas' novel, for what Hernández de Miguel's narrates is the truth that Enric Marco usurped for his own false biography. Being familiar with Marco's very public downfall through the media before reading *El impostor*, I already knew that his lie was grotesque. Yet, when reading the disheartening memories of the real survivors, and understanding the depth of their still unacknowledged grief and suffering, Marco's lie appears to be hideous and unpardonable. I am now convinced that Cercas made a very serious mistake in choosing for his novel this monster and not one of the 9,000 lives that passed through Mauthausen and similar places.

Los últimos españoles de Mauthausen produces the same intense disgust with the human species that many other books on Nazism produce, for the facts narrated touch the very marrow of evil. No wonder many survivors decided to keep silent, seeing that family and friends would not believe them. If you are familiar with Primo Levi's *If This is a Man* (1947), a volume absolutely fundamental to understand Nazism and the Holocaust, but also human nature, you'll find that Hernández de Miguel's survivors tread the same dark territory.

Cercas, who has quite a cavalier attitude towards the recent process in favour of recovering historical memory in Spain, may be regarded as a good literary writer but I find in the end his work quite trivial in comparison to what Hernández de Miguel provides the reader with in his volume. At one point in *El impostor*, Cercas (I'm not sure whether the man himself or a meta-fictional version) claims that Marco could fabricate his ersatz victim personality because of the rampant historical kitsch. He doesn't explain himself clearly but he seems to mean that kind of superficial, sentimental (or morbid) fashion for Holocaust stories that has led to perversions such as best-selling novel *The Book Thief*. I hope he's not thinking of *Schindler's List* for we owe Thomas Keneally and Steven Spielberg much more than they're credited for. I have no idea what Cercas thinks of Hernández de Miguel's book but what worries me is that it can be mistaken for historical kitsch. It is not.

I express in my title doubts about the function of the novel today and perhaps I mean the novelist. Hernández de Miguel takes a back seat but even so he makes his indignation palpable all through his book. In contrast, Cercas' literary vanity is all he thinks about. Novelists used to be good at writing well and spreading indignation (Charles Dickens...) but it seems that now these two aims are incompatible. If you ask me, in the end I even find much better Literature in *Los últimos españoles de Mauthausen* than in *El impostor*, in the essay than in the novel, non-fiction both. I have no doubt whatsoever about which is the truly *good* book.

Now, visit www.deportados.es and let's continue thinking—for here's the irony: as I read *Los últimos españoles de Mauthausen*, I wished Hernández de Miguel had made a documentary mini-series which millions would watch instead of a book which only a few thousand will read. So much for the power of the written word...

7-V-2015 TRAVELLERS AND PLANNERS: TWO STYLES IN FABULATION

I am going to sound sillier than usual in this post but I keep wondering these days why there is no research on how writers fabulate. Yes, I am aware that I am most likely misusing the word. See below.

I'm working on *Black Man*, an SF novel by British writer Richard K. Morgan and wondering why this thriller is so long (630 pages) and why the action is so often interrupted with long (juicy) conversations, I emailed the author. I have never ever bothered an author, except to request a formal interview in a couple of cases, as my PhD supervisor used to tell me that authors lie all the time... Well, to my surprise and delight Morgan generously answered this and many other questions (I'll soon publish the improvised interview online at my university's repository). One thing he clarified is that unlike what I supposed, that thrillers are written 'backwards' after careful planning, he had started the journey of writing the book with a clear ending in mind but with only a vague idea of the actual path he would take. Paraphrasing his words, writing *Black Man* was like travelling towards a hilltop glimpsed at the end of a thick jungle with little idea of how to cross it. Since, he says, he is not good at planning, he will never make the airport best-selling lists. I answered back telling him about my surprise that he is a 'traveller' and not a 'planner'.

These two labels, 'traveller' and 'planner', are my own private way to distinguish between types of authors but I have never used them formally in any academic writing. There was a time, years ago, when I attended many of the presentations offered by British novelists at the British Council's building in Barcelona (no longer offered, sadly). From their talks, I deduced that fiction writers are very keen on discussing technical matters but that nobody really asks them the right questions. The ones that do get asked refer to the habitual matters: 'where did you get your inspiration for this or that?', 'were you influenced by this or that?' Naturally. We, common readers, are always making connections and expressing curiosity about how exactly fiction is written. Yet we don't write novels.

The problem is that, academically speaking, this curiosity is complicated to manage. I did ask Morgan whether he got the inspiration for his main character (Carl Marsalis) from an actor (Idris Elba) who seemed to connect very well with his novel; he confirmed that I had got this right and his confirmation will help me with the article I am writing, as I will be able to claim that audiovisual products do have a very direct impact on fiction writing, particularly as regards the possibility that white writers deal with black characters. Yet, this connection still explains very little about the process of what I call 'fabulation': what happens when, as Martin Amis recalled in a British

Council presentation, the writer sits down to think about a story, spending hours looking at the computer screen and outside the window, being bored, picking his nose now and then...

Back to my topic: the many writers I heard discuss their trade alluded, mysteriously to me, to either a long process of pre-planning or to taking a journey, a favourite metaphor it seems. Michael Crichton, the best-selling author who penned *Jurassic Park* among many other very popular novels, used to explain that he would do research for six months, plan his forthcoming book down to the last comma and then sit down to write it. A 'planner', then. Stephen King is, in contrast, a 'traveller' of the thick-jungle-crossing kind, which also explains why all his books are overlong. My dear Charles Dickens seems to be a hybrid 'journey planner': I once wrote a paper on his longest novel, *Bleak House*, and was completely overwhelmed by the enormous effort at planning the book he had made; yet, he was at the same time quite capable of improvising new plot lines to increase the sales of his serialised works. And, as I keep on explaining, what put me off watching TV series is the fact that the writers in charge of *Lost* claimed to be the best of planners when they were actually travellers, and very poor ones to boot, with no real hilltop in view.

If I consider what Morgan suggests, that planners make the best-selling lists better than travellers (um, I don't know, look at King), then this means that there is a so far little explored tension between the needs of the writer to fabulate and the needs of the text to be constrained by feasible limits. My guess is that the masterpiece is the work in which those contrary needs are best balanced. Now, for the word 'fabulate'...

I use 'fabulate' in the basic sense of 'telling invented stories' but within Theory of Literature, or literary criticism, the word has a more specific meaning. Robert Scholes is responsible for first using 'fabulation' to describe the plotting of liminal novels, placed somewhere between realism and fantasy, though not quite 100% the same as magical realism (perhaps because they were Anglophone?). He did so in *The Fabulators* (1967), although this particular meaning of 'fabulation' was spread among literary scholars thanks to *Fabulation and Metafiction* (1979). It seems that writers were labelled 'fabulist' until the word 'post-modernist' put Scholes' term out of fashion in the 1980s. Or not quite. Within SF, 'fabulation' is associated with the work of American scholar Marleen Barr, who with her volume *Feminist Fabulation: Space/postmodern Fiction* (1992) urged critics to correct the exclusion of women fantasists from the post-modern canon. I do not use 'fabulate' in this way.

I mean, rather, the psychological process which is the foundation of storytelling. For all I know, someone in Cognitive Science may be literally picking the brains of novelists to see what happens when they sit down to stare at the blank page or screen and daydream about their stories. Think of J.K. Rowling's famous claim that Harry Potter materialized in her head during a train journey and consider the impressive effort at planning his confrontation with Voldemort into 3,500 exciting pages. A detailed reading of Rowling's series shows, as we all know, errors and gaps, and, certainly, improvised authorial decisions but, on the whole, she knew where she was going and had a pretty good idea of the jungle paths. What she did do as she walked them down,

however, is just a matter for speculation and for, mainly, fan interviews, for it seems as if we have developed in academia a manifest distrust of writers. Remember my PhD supervisor?

I was thinking, excuse my silliness, that it would be nice to have 'making of' documentaries about novels. We have them for movies and they offer wonderful insights into filmmaking. I have no idea whether novelists keep writing journals where they jot down observations about how, returning to *Black Man*, Idris Elba shaped the physical appearance of Carl Marsalis, or showing their surprise that, say, Professor Dumbledore turned out to be gay. It would be nice to read something like 'and then I realized that Heathcliff would never get Cathy', in the same way we get sentences like 'and when I saw Vivien Leigh, I knew we had our Scarlett O'Hara'. Supposing the journals existed, they would only scratch the surface, of course. Yet, it would be nice to have them.

What I am discussing here also affects, naturally, other kinds of writing, including academic writing. As a teacher, I insist to my students that they MUST plan their essays in advance, yet I know from my own practice that the greatest pleasures in writing come from surprising yourself: 'Now, where did that come from?' Now, imagine a silly academic asking you that all the time ☺

10-V-2015 STAGE TO SCREEN: A POORLY UNDERSTOOD TRANSITION

I will not refer in this post to the film adaptation of stage plays, though if you're curious, you may start by checking the IMDB list I opened last February with my students in the MA 'Theatre Studies' (UAB). Here it is: <http://www.imdb.com/list/ls076798996/>. I mean, rather, the poorly understood transition from the 19th century technologies of spectacle to the beginnings of cinema, both in France and in the United States. This is a story I learned years ago in the course of studying for a tenured position I failed to secure. I ended up transforming the report I wrote then into an online document, *Teatro y Teatro Inglés: Una Breve Introducción* (2000), <https://ddd.uab.cat/record/122989>, if you care to take a look.

I had always distrusted the many introductions to English Literature which claim that there is nothing of interest in Romantic and Victorian theatre, except for the plays of Oscar Wilde. And I was right to do so, for there may have been few 19th century plays worth printing for posterity, but the history of theatre in those years is a very exciting tale about how the many technological advances and the new urban mass audiences, both created by the Industrial Revolution in England, resulted in an relentless, thrilling stage revolution.

I had told no students the complete story because, although I teach Victorian Literature, this is focused on the novel (yes, we used to teach Wilde's *Importance of Being Earnest* but it felt odd, out of place). This is why I was very happy to finally get a chance within my seminar on 'Shakespeare and the Cinema' for the MA subject 'Stage

Arts and Other Arts' (the MA itself is called 'Theatre Arts', <http://masters.filescat.uab.cat/muet/>). Using Shakespeare as my excuse, I tried to make sense for the benefit of my students of how cinema was born as a parasitical theatrical art to become eventually a separate, fully autonomous art. Just recall that in the USA cinemas are still called 'theatres'. At the time of preparing my seminar I did not know about the existence of Pablo Iglesias Simón's monograph *De las tablas al celuloide: Trasvases discursivos del teatro al cine primitivo y al cine clásico de Hollywood* (2007, Fundamentos), based on his doctoral dissertation, a book that I have read with great enjoyment. It is an excellent account of this little known but crucial process.

I'll begin here by recycling my own PowerPoint presentation to mention a number of facts that may be surprising for the Shakespeare *aficionado*:

*Up to the 1720s, there was no serious attempt to preserve Shakespeare's 'original' plays ('original' because he never bothered to edit them and what has survived is by no means reliable).

*David Garrick, who wanted to turn his Drury Lane theatre into the literary competitor of the spectacle-oriented Covent Garden, organized the first Shakespeare Jubilee (1769). Despite this, he himself used Restoration re-writings of Shakespeare by John Dryden and Colley Cibber, as was then the common practice.

*Throughout the 19th century Shakespeare became the object of increasingly spectacular productions aimed at a general audience.

*At the beginning of the 20th century William Poel changed this trend by foregrounding the text and using a simple pseudo-Elizabethan production design (by Edward Gordon Craig, son of stage star Ellen Terry). This was the beginning of the end for the view of Shakespeare as a popular author.

*Today, yes, Shakespeare has been adapted for the screen (cinema or TV) more than 1,000 times (see his IMDB entry <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000636/>), yet although he is fundamental to understand how stage and screen connect, the real roots of this connection are to be found in 19th century popular theatre.

Now for theatre itself:

* From the early 19th century onwards Drury Lane (remember Garrick?) and Covent Garden, the only two 'legitimate' theatres licensed by the authorities, started competing with each other, enlarging their buildings and offering increasingly more expensive productions that required bigger audiences (even above 3,000...). These were secured by turning melodrama, imported from France in 1802 with Thomas Holcroft's version of a play by the originator Guilbert de Pixérécourt, into the main attraction.

*As the actors' star system grows (there no director really until the early 20th century...), the upper and middle-classes abandon the theatre for the novel (excepting opera and ballet).

*This lasts until mid-century when the Haymarket Theatre, re-decorated as an exclusive middle-class playhouse, starts offering text-based plays in a naturalist style avoiding the excesses of melodrama but still derived from it (these are the plays which Wilde later parodies and that Ibsen crumbles down).

*Melodrama thrives for as long as gaslight dominates (1803-1881), yet stage illusion and special effects need to be reconsidered with the advent of the much harsher electric light: London's Savoy Theatre is the first in the world to be illuminated by electricity in 1881 (Boston's Bijou follows in 1882). By 1890s most theatres have abandoned gaslight (Savoy recently pioneered the introduction of integral LED lighting).

*Cinema, which appears in the 1890s, soon starts borrowing plots and actors from melodrama, also from vaudeville (and/or music hall). Most importantly, early cinema tries to reproduce the experience of being in a theatre, using the spectator's point of view, showing actors in their natural size and using static filming.

*Mèlies in France and Edison in the USA, however, soon see that this is not the way to go, and they start generating new film effects in the first cinema studios in the world, Montreuil (1896) and Black Maria (1896), respectively.

*Cinema's real independence from theatre comes with the work of David Griffith, who invents what we know today as edition, wisely mixing with the series of diverse shots he and others developed (famously the close-up).

I think that what best explains the transition from spectacular stage melodrama to the cinema of spectacle is *Ben-Hur*. This was originally a novel by General Lew Wallace (1880), very successfully adapted for the stage in 1899. This adaptation inspired in its turn the short film *Ben-Hur* (1907, black and white), the long feature film *Ben-Hur* (1925, black and white, the third highest-grossing silent film), and finally the Technicolor blockbuster we all know, *Ben-Hur* (1959) with Charlton Heston. My students would not believe me when I explained that the stage adaptation included the famous chariot race, until I showed them the original poster.

To sum up, then, Victorian theatre on both sides of the Atlantic ended up offering amazing pre-electricity spectacle of a kind we can hardly imagine today. Cinema appeared precisely when electricity started complicating the continuity of the old gaslight-style of stage spectacle; initially borrowing basic techniques from theatre, cinema ended up eventually developing its own spectacular technology. Sadly, we tend to believe that this is exclusive to cinema because our current theatre (with the exception of musicals) tends to be visually quite limited. David Griffith already foretold it would be so.

About vaudeville... I was immensely pleased when I found a photo of the very popular vaudeville stars The Gumm Sisters in their first film (the short *The Big Review*, 1929). The youngest, Judy Garland..., was just 7. Early cinema certainly knew where to find big talent...

18-V-2015 'VAMOS A LA PLAYA, OH, OH, OH...': ACADEMIC LIFE (IN SOUTHERN EUROPE, ON A TRULY GLORIOUS DAY)

It's an absolutely glorious day outside, with temperatures around an ideal 25º, not a cloud in sight. The beach is 5 kms. away, reachable in under 40 minutes by metro and here I am, hearing in my head the chorus of that catchy 1983 summer hit by Italo-disco Righeira, singing in Spanish: 'Vamos a la playa, oh, oh, oh...' (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sTsVJ1PsnMs>). Never mind that the song deals actually with the risks of going back to the beach after a nuclear explosion... (<http://www.musica.com/letras.asp?letra=1490365>). And that I hate going to the beach because I'm pale and I sunburn in five minutes, not to mention how the gritty sand finds a way all over your body... Ugh. It's just this strange feeling that nothing and nobody prevents me from walking away, yet I'm staying on, tied to my desk and my computer. How much easier it is to do this with grey northern skies outside the window.

I do not intend to draw a sharp line between productive northern academics and unproductive southern academics justifying the division on the grounds of how distracting the weather is. Surely, one can always find other distractions. When I was on La Caixa's scholarship, I recall one of my peers asking genuinely surprised how come nobody was going to check on our performance as scholars, considering we would be abroad, we were young and, well, you know?, fill in the rest. The person in charge of us replied, very politely, 'we trust you; you know how hard it's been to get here and you won't start misbehaving now.' 'My!', I thought, 'aren't we strange people?' Twenty years later, I have the same feeling: we, academics, are very strange. Here I am, tied to my desk, writing this post as I hope for the energy to continue the complicated article I'm working on to descend on me... instead of picking up my bag and heading to the sea... beaconing out there... It seems I'm still to be trusted.

The problem is that as I age I find my trustworthiness increasingly stupid (of me). Less vocational colleagues are surely if not down on the actual beach, possibly taking it easy in ways that my vocation spoiled for me from day one. Meanwhile, here I am, all stressed out because time runs fast and I won't be able to do, in this strange semester with no teaching, all the writing I vowed I would do. Why all that stress, I wonder? As I brace myself to reach the ripe age of fifty next year, I am starting to wonder whether it is worth it, the whole thing of trying to accomplish something—and this nagging doubt returns with the intensity of a punch to the face on every sunny day.

I think of a colleague, truly upset that she had not passed her accreditation as full professor, telling me 'if it's going to be 'no', then at least they could let us go to the

beach and relax.' She, nonetheless, did not relax and got her accreditation at the second try—she's still waiting for her merits to be acknowledged with real tenure not just a certificate but I'm 100% sure she's not sunbathing. Good for her? I wonder... I'm thinking also of this other colleague who worked wonderfully hard to get the same accreditation, but then lost tenure to someone else in her own Department. Already past sixty, this admired colleague decided to retire—telling none of us, her colleagues for decades in Cultural Studies. I do wonder what went through her head and whether she finally decided that the beach made more sense. I hope she is happy now.

Of course, I'm way too young for that kind of decision. Still, just as forty certainly is a time of personal crisis, fifty seems to be the natural time for an academic crisis (in the Humanities, I'm aware that scientific research is quite different, bringing in earlier crises). Fifty is when you start measuring your colleagues in terms of how many books they've written and when you start thinking that the time to write your own is fast shrinking. Mind you, I am not depressed, feeling that I cannot do anything worthwhile yet. What I am considering here is that, unlike most workers whose daily schedule is marked by someone else, I determine my own and there are days when it feels like a strange masochistic exercise—why try so hard to produce something that, as a younger colleague noted with a smile, nobody will want to read, anyway? Why not relax and go to the beach instead? Is it a sense of duty? Is it pure ego?

I keep on telling myself that as long as football players and top models matter, academic work matters—but, who am I kidding? All the articles and books published this year by Spanish scholars matter far, far less than Leo Messi's goal yesterday, the one that won Barça the League's championship. Nobody goes on the streets to cheer for intellectual achievement, whereas thousands flooded La Rambla yesterday to celebrate Barça's triumph. Thousands more had cheered Barça's star player Gerard Piqué in the morning for publishing a cute photo showing his usually well-coiffured blond head all tousled. In this trivial world of ours, this matters. (Is it envy? Is it sour grapes?)

I could end up by claiming that I'm not picking up my bathing suit and towel this Monday morning out of respect for those workers who do not have the option to do so, even for the unemployed who sadly have all the time in the world to enjoy sunshine but little reason to enjoy themselves. But no, this is hypocrisy—it's pure ego, the hope that this is finally the article that makes my reputation (if ever an article written by a Southern European academic can achieve that). The hope that next comes a book, and another, and another. It is also, a little bit or all of it, cultural clash between the northern Puritan work ethos born of melancholy grey skies and the southern temptation to take life as it comes born of cheerful blue skies.

The weather forecast for tomorrow announces rain...

25-V-2015 FAILING TO EXIST: THE UNITED STATES OF EUROPE AND THE EUROVISION SONG CONTEST

Just one year ago I wrote a post about Conchita Wurst's unexpected triumph at the Eurovision Song Contest. This year's edition was broadcast last Saturday from Austria, her homeland. The winner was the handsome Måns Zelmerlöw, representing Sweden, in tight competition with the pretty Polina Gagarina, representing Russia. I know that my remark is far from original, but their singing in English highlights the main reason why the United States of Europe are failing to materialize: we are too reluctant to accepting our diverse cultural and linguistic identities.

If I recall this correctly, the singers using their national language were representing Italy (third in the grand final), Montenegro (thirteenth), Romania (fifteenth), Spain (twenty-first) and France (twenty-fifth). The rest of the twenty-seven sang in English, or, rather, the bad English full of clichés that surfaces when you translate from your own language lyrics already quite cheesy. Of course, singing in English guarantees no good results: look at the United Kingdom's position—twenty four out of twenty-seven... (Australia, the guest country, did much better, making it to a fifth position which should have been a second). And, as usual, the Spanish media and social networks have deplored that Edurne only got 15 points... because she sang in Spanish—well, send a Basque singer, or Catalan, or Galician, and see if that improves matters. And once again, our local jury delegate, Lara Ciscar, spoke only mediocre English, saving us at least from the embarrassment of last year's 'oit points.' Just barely.

My personal favourite was Latvian Aminata's "Love Injected", which was also accompanied, in my view, by the best, most elegant, atmospheric *mise-en-scène*. Aminata, the festival's commentators explained, is the daughter of a Russian mother and a Burkina-Fasso father, but regards herself as profoundly Latvian... whatever that means, for I simply don't know. She sang in English which, I guess, must be for Latvians as shocking as it would be for me to hear Manel (local most popular Catalan band) sing in Shakespeare's language. So, on surface, beautiful black Aminata does represent Europe's plurality, as did the winner of 2012, the Swede Loreen (born Lorine Zineb Nora Talhaoui in Stockholm to Moroccan Amazigh parents). Yet, this is only on surface for as long as the ruling language is English the plurality remains unseen (and, above all, unheard).

Knez, the gentleman from Montenegro who offered us the beautiful 'Adio', sang, I assume (excuse my stupidity) in Serbian. Nobody bothered to explain which of the four languages spoken in his country he sang in. Anyway, the Eurovision Song Contest website does offer translations of the lyrics into English (...and French, since Francophone speakers seemingly still believe that theirs is a pan-European language...) This translation, then, could have been easily used in subtitles, helping us viewers understand what Knez sang about (not that this was strictly necessary as the title 'Adio' helped very much). In Spain's case it would certainly have helped as it was hard to guess why Edurne was crying very pretty tears as she danced with a great-looking male dancer (mourning a dead lover, it transpires). The Rumanians, offering a moving

song on the sorrows of abandoning your children to migrate elsewhere—now that’s a European subject—opted to self-translate, offering a bilingual song.

The contest is always criticised for being a shabby, old-fashioned spectacle for which nobody in their rights mind should care. To begin with, it’s not that shabby anymore and, as TV shows go, it is quite good. If, excuse me, this is an event supported mainly by gay people, then let’s give gay people the run of all European TV, it would be much more fun, believe me... I watched the contest, semi-finals and all included, because for a few evenings I got unusual variety on TV, and I heard about countries supposedly also in Europe, which never appear on my local media (or only for tragic, war-related reasons). Four years ago Azerbaijan’s Ell & Nikki won with “Running Scared” and I can still sing the chorus; I wouldn’t know, however, to place their country on a map. This does not mean that a handful of songs, more or less silly, should or can conceal tensions in European politics—everyone hoped this year Russia would NOT win with ‘A Million Voices’... a pacifist song, for God’s sake! Sorry, Polina Gagarina, I know you meant well.

Love it or hate it, the Eurovision Song Contest is the only yearly event that makes this strange idea we call Europe visible—it’s Brigadoon, remember?, that little Scottish village which in the famous Broadway musical reappears only once very hundred years. Luckily, we don’t have to wait that much, yet it is to be wondered why Europe is managing so poorly to exist. Many years ago, Robert Maxwell, the Czechoslovakian-born British media mogul, founded the only newspaper with a truly pan-European vocation, simply called *The European*. Its short life (May 1990 to December 1998) and reduced market (a weekly circulation of just 180,000 against the planned 225,000) is, to me, a sign of Europe’s inability to believe in itself as a political, social and cultural entity. In this context, the festival (now reaching its 60th anniversary) is simultaneously a freak event in European life and a much necessary, basic link among the disparate nations of Europe.

How is, then, the problem of this unmanageable diversity solved? We cannot all abandon our local languages for English, which is why it is a very bad sign that so many Eurovision’s singers are doing this. If this trivial event manages to highlight so clearly what our main problems are, imagine what things must be like at Strasbourg’s Parliament... I would prefer everyone to sing in their own language, using, as I suggested English subtitles for translation; in the Parliament, likewise, they use translators even though everyone speaks English (well, I assume ...). What simple kills me is how European television is not happening at all beyond that evening every May. I have noticed that the Germans have managed to sell us lots and lots of second-rate TV movies but, beyond this, how come we have never heard of Måns Zelmerlöw, Polina Gagarina, Aminata or Knez if they are so famous in their own countries? Just to mention a few names... And will it matter for Latvia (or Estonia) that so many millions outside their country voted for their song and its multicultural lady singer?

Um, one last barb for Catalan nationalism: all those who complain that we waste plenty of money by sending Spanish singers to the contest, as they never win—wouldn’t

you be pleased if Manel won singing in Catalan? Um, what a chance to explain Catalan independence to this Europe who cares nothing for it...

1-VI-2015 THE OTHERS AND THE NEW ONES: EXAMINING MIGRATION (IN CATALONIA)

Next October we'll hold in Santiago de Compostela the twentieth, and possibly final, 'Culture & Power' conference. This is a series started in 1995 at my own university, UAB, with the aim of disseminating Cultural Studies in Spain, a much necessary enterprise then as it is still now. This, I know, sounds paradoxical as the series is, as I hint, winding down with two final contradictory messages: Cultural Studies still does not exist in Spain either as a discipline or, much less, a degree, yet at the same time we are strong enough within English Studies in Spain not to need anymore the scaffolding of the 'Culture & Power' seminar to hold us together (many of us have moved onto diverse, more specific branches like post-colonialism, popular fictions, media studies, etc.).

This new conference will deal with migration and I have finally decided to write about a long-overdue topic in my academic career... but not as part of it. I am not going to suddenly immerse myself into post-colonial methodologies, nor see how migration fits the many SF novels on colonization. No. I am going to use this excuse for an exploration of my own personal roots as a child of a series of migrant waves to Catalonia. I am using the blog post today, then, to draft the first part of my planned paper, which will deal with the representation of Spanish immigrants in the Museu d'Història de Catalunya and the Museu d'Història de la Inmigració de Catalunya. This may not be English Studies at all but, then, without what I have learned from migration to an from Anglophone countries I might not be aware at all about my own identity issues (also as an English Studies specialist...).

In the course of the recent electoral campaign to elect town council representatives, Esquerra Republicana's number two, actor Juanjo Puigcorbé, blundered pathetically when he proposed building a museum devoted to the Spanish migration to Catalonia. The blunder exposed his ignorance of the existence of such museum since 2004... at the same time it is completely understandable since very few people know that MHIC exists. There are, you can check, no comments on MHIC in TripAdvisor. I myself have never been there, daunted by the long metro trip I need to take for, yes, MHIC is not in Barcelona but in the adjacent town of Sant Adrià del Besòs, which received many thousands of migrants from all over Spain between the 1950s and 1980s. I have, then, finally found an excuse to visit MHIC and check what is bothering me: that the official Catalan discourse of immigrant integration is burying the memory of Spanish migration under a triumphal discourse focused on the new (1990s onwards) foreign migration. The 'new Catalans' are ousting the 'other Catalans' from public view.

The 'other Catalans' is an expression famously coined by Paco Candel, the man who explained to 'proper' Catalans from the fringes of the city of Barcelona who the

migrants from all over Spain were. His book *Els altres catalans* (1964) was published in the middle of a social phenomenon that peaked, precisely, in the mid-sixties and that brought to Catalan territory more than one million migrants (in 1970 only 62% of the population were Catalan-born...). In 1980 Generalitat's President Jordi Pujol appropriated Candel's discourse to proclaim that anyone living and working in Catalonia was a Catalan, a much necessary proclamation to end the insidious discrimination and marginalization I recall from my childhood (I was never called 'xarnega' but other kids of recently arrived parents were). The gigantic waves of Spanish migrants stopped in the 1980s and less than one decade later the new foreign wave started... which clearly shows there has been no time for Spanish migration to be fully assimilated, and I don't mean 'disappeared into Catalonia,' I mean 'understood,' even by the protagonists themselves. A number of recent books and a documentary have unearthed a little bit of that past, with attention narrowly focused on the shanty towns built all over Barcelona up to the 1980s. But little else...

The Museu d'Història de Catalunya offers, as I feared, no substantial comment on Spanish migration. I know that for some the label is offensive for, if you consider that Spain is a national territory and you identify migration with moving to foreign lands, then there is no reason to speak of migration at all within Spanish borders. The truth is that there is much need as, most importantly, migration to Catalonia meant coming across another language and a local culture very much fixed on it as an identity marker (clearly much more so today than under Franco's regime, indeed). Well... out of the hundreds of linear metres of exhibits that MHC offers, only 5 are devoted to Spanish migration.

The first metre-long exhibit is occupied by panel 31.j 'La Inmigració' which explains that the first migrants arrived from País Valencià and Aragón to make up for the rural population deficit—it doesn't say when. The 1920s public works, I'll add 'for the 1929 Universal Exhibition,' increased the arrival of migrants, mainly from Murcia and Eastern Andalucía, each contributing about 80,000 souls (it seems they colonized l'Hospitalet de Llobregat). The next panel, 39, 'L'onada immigratòria' is a bit longer at two metres but very confusing as it refers to 1936-1980 without examining what happened to the first wave, nor in which ways they settled down. A funny thing I noticed is that even though visitors are told that life was not easy for the newly arrived there is no comment on the fact that Catalan businessmen were responsible for their exploitation. Very cheerfully, the panel concludes that low salaries and poor housing were soon overcome by "economic expansion and an open social structure which allowed to prosper. The migrant wave was replaced by a baby-boom." Deep sigh... now, I wonder how many of these baby-boomers and their descendants are bearing the brunt of the current crisis... still stuck in their neighbourhoods... The MHC also claims that Catalan society welcomed all the migrants, despite its own difficulties to express its own identity and that "Soon the 'other Catalans' identified themselves with the country and contributed to the construction of a 'common future'." Not what I have seen.

The final segment in the museum, 'Catalunya.cat: Un retrat de la Catalunya contemporània 1980-2007' exhibits a collection of photos showing nicely dressed,

smiling people intended to represent current multicultural Catalonia. The places and dates of birth are supposed to show that the 7 millions living here do so in total harmony and content. I will not argue that the tensions are grave, for this is not at all the case—everything considered, Catalonia works well. But what I do not accept is the plainly false statement that according to recent statistics “the ‘new Catalans’ have progressively integrated Catalan as their own language at home and the numbers considering it their own language is growing.” Well, I might accept the second part but by no means the first one –do you really think that migrants from Ecuador (the third biggest community) are switching to Catalan?? Come on... The complicated linguistic practices in my own family would occupy several research papers...

Precisely, I started thinking of these matters when an Ecuadorian friend of mine told me we in Spain are totally homogeneous (I think he meant in comparison to the mixed ethnicity of his homeland, of which he is—handsome—living proof). Not at all!! I exclaimed. Look at my family: I have counted at least 4 migratory waves, my paternal great-great-grandmother in the 1900s, my paternal great-grandmother in the 1910s, my paternal grand-mother in the 1930s, my paternal uncle in the 1970s... and all my mother’s parents in the 1940s, with her, born outside Catalonia, in tow. What I have seen in my family, besides, is a series of conflicts based on, shall we say?, migrant seniority and the matter of how Catalan you are if your mom or dad is from elsewhere. This is the story I am trying to reconstruct now and, believe me, it is not easy.

Particularly because it is nowhere to be seen, or heard. Not at MHC. I’ll see what MHIC shows me...

9-VI-2015 REMEMBERING DAVID BELASCO: BROADWAY BEFORE MODERN HOLLYWOOD

One month ago I published a post on Pablo Iglesias Simón’s monograph *De las tablas al celuloide* (2007). Iglesias devotes a good deal of his volume to Henry Irving (British) and David Belasco (American), both great stage-managers who shaped their local theatrical practice. Irving was, of course, also a star; for Belasco (1853-1931), in contrast, acting was just a minor aspect of his long career. Since Iglesias often refers to Belasco’s memoirs *The Theatre through its Stage Door* (1919) I eventually read them (see <https://archive.org/details/theatrethroughits00bela>). What a pleasure!!

Belasco’s engaging text is a snapshot of a transitional time when cinema was still silent and avant-garde theatre was being born. Irving and Belasco embody the kind of well-made, (pseudo-)naturalistic theatre that still pleases crowds but that is now regarded as less than artistic. To understand the limits of the magnetic Belasco’s task in Broadway, consider that he praises Sir Arthur Wing Pinero’s *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray*, as “the most vital and truest picture of human experience;” today this is seen as a mere period piece aimed at philistine bourgeois audiences. Belasco certainly shows himself at a loss about how to deal with the new avant-garde theatre, which prefers a few splotches of colour to generate mood rather than his very elaborate

lighting effects. This is why reading his book leaves a bitter aftertaste for it is a chronicle of a lost battle for artistic acknowledgement. Although the plays he describes seem trite and even silly, I can very well imagine the immense aesthetic pleasure his productions must have been. This was, remember, the time before colour movies existed and nothing but Belasco's productions could equal the pleasure cinema would later provide. The plays, however, are another matter...

I'll refer here extensively to his fascinating chapter on 'motion pictures,' "The Drama's Flickering Bogy." Belasco inserts a footnote warning that his arguments are only valid for 1919 cinema: "The growth of the motion picture has been rapid and, consequently, the trend of its future development is difficult to foretell." Unlike many of his theatrical colleagues, Belasco defends the movies, maintaining that amusement must always be welcome and that, anyway, his stage productions are not in direct competition with the then silent, black-and-white movies. He also praises the ability of the moving image to bring home the landscapes of the world, until then only accessible "on faith" from the printed page. He does realize, however, that unlike former competitors of 'legitimate' drama the movies "have undoubtedly come to stay." Also, that "all inferior forms of theatrical amusement have been hard hit by the motion pictures," particularly minstrelsy, and the cheap stock companies. Vaudeville, which tried to survive in the company of the new screens "has become their victim." Belasco, nonetheless, has faith in the future of quality drama (and of spectacular musicals): "I have always found that the public will never ignore a good play." Belasco highlights the educational and scientific applications of movies but remains quite sceptical about their ability to offer "spirit" rather than "surface." He finds, above all, the lack of spoken dialogue, the dependence on inter-titles and the clumsy narrative strategies (close-ups, medium shots, sped-up action...) a serious hindrance for the movies ever to be truly artistic. You see in this appreciation the seeds of Belasco's defeat as eventually the human voice, colour, a fluid grammar of edition, etc. conquered cinema, allowing it to fully express human emotion.

Belasco describes on the basis of first-hand experience how primitive cinema borrowed from the stage its plots, its actors, even the theatre itself to exhibit the new films: "from their very outset," except for what we call now documentaries, "motion pictures have been a parasite feeding upon the arts of the theatre." This is why he rightly claims that cinema can only "hope to challenge the regular drama seriously" by developing "some form of art distinctly their own, and educate their performers in an entirely new technique." He is particularly critical of movie acting, stressing that actors only give their best when facing an audience (something that TV sit-coms still exploit); for him, the most successful movies rely on plot. In cinema "Whatever appeal the performers make to their spectators must depend upon physical attractiveness." Um, yes, it is hard to think of Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie triumphing on a stage.

What I had not quite realized is that early cinema undermined its contemporary theatre by sapping it of its best talent—the real competition, Belasco argues, was not for audiences but for actors. Hollywood could afford to pay high rates even for secondary roles, as the huge distribution networks of the movies guaranteed, as they do now, very high returns for a relatively low investment (which theatre producers like

Belasco could never meet). Movies stole all kinds of talent from drama, not only, as Belasco shows, that of already famous actors, or stage-managers, but also budding talent still in need of development that chose the more profitable path of a movie career. Popular actors found “that by capitalizing the prestige they have won on the dramatic stage they can earn in the studios, in a few weeks, more money than they could command in the theatre in an entire season.” Less talented actors discovered that the far less demanding cinema allowed them to cut years of stage training. The queues of eager applicants Belasco was used to dwindled dramatically. Likewise, many playwrights were lured by Hollywood to become better paid, though much less respected, screen writers. Belasco grants that some actors are born movie actors: Douglas Fairbanks, Mary Pickford (whose career as a child actress he launched), and even vamp Theda Bara. In contrast, he cautions theatre stars not to risk their reputation for money. Belasco never contemplates combining the two media, for “No one who aspires to be an artist can hope to inhabit both.”

There is a peculiar moment when Belasco brings David W. Griffith, the great silent cinema director, into it. As he recalls, he met Griffith, “who has raised the picture spectacle to what I believe to be its highest point of interest,” as a young aspiring actor in the West “when the invention of the camera was practically new.” He applied for a position in Belasco’s company but none was available at the time. Griffith joined then Vitagraph, a movie company, soon becoming a director... Whether by accident or fate, the future of American cinema passed this way through Belasco’s hands. He shows throughout great admiration for Griffith, never regretting that he did not hire him as an actor, though Belasco feels that his movies would gain by being less full of crowds, more intimist. This is the kind of movie Belasco imagines himself directing, though he has “never felt an ambition to direct a motion-picture play.” His dream movie, with “a very human story adjusted to the simplest backgrounds,” and “very few characters” anticipates Ingmar Bergman or, in America, John Cassavettes. Funnily, Belasco thinks that emotion in movies can only work if scenes are shot in chronological order, which shows how impossible it would have been for him to triumph in Hollywood. In any case, the movie traits he wishes to avoid give a very clear impression of the weaknesses of early cinema.

“The theatre in which I live and work can never be endangered from the outside,” Belasco concludes. In the following chapter he shows how the main danger comes from the inside—from the European avant-garde. He is bitter that he himself, who pioneered many avant-garde techniques, such as the suppression of footlights, is not acknowledged as an advanced artist. Writing his memoirs aged 66, after already 50 years in the theatre and facing the last 12 years of his career, Belasco’s voice is already nostalgic—or it seems so to me in hindsight. The photos in the book reveal a mixture of incredibly advanced technology and old-fashioned acting styles which may have pleased Broadway audiences but surely set the teeth of modern 1920s spectators and avant-garde theatre artists on edge. Time, however, puts everyone in their place and Belasco occupies an undeniably important position.

I wonder what he would think of movies today and to what extent they are indebted to his constant search for technological innovation.

15-VI-2015 MIND THE GAP: IN SEARCH OF TRUE ACADEMIC GLOBALIZATION

I'm starting here a long overdue reflection on the invisibility of second-language Literature teachers in the academic world where we supposedly belong. I am actually drafting an essay which has been spinning around in my head since I started preparing the science fiction course I am going to teach next Spring (see the syllabus at <http://gent.uab.cat/saramartinalagre/content/teaching-0>). My worries do not concern only SF, as I will show, though SF tends to stress a situation on which, judging from my quick bibliographical search today, nobody has written. (Well, there's a doctoral dissertation from the Universidad de Sevilla I need to check...).

It's the typical problem. I teach, as my readers know, 'Victorian Literature.' It took me a while to find an introductory volume which second-year, second-language students would find accessible: Maureen Moran's *Victorian Literature and Culture* (Continuum, 2006). In my time I went through the whole *Penguin Guide to English Literature*, which accompanied me, one volume at a time, through the years of my 'Licenciatura.' Whether I think of this multi-volume text or of Moran's slim, slick presentation of the Victorians, the problem is the same: they have not been written for us, foreign students of Anglophone culture.

Now, there are two perspectives on this. Either the world-wide academic market treats all persons interested in English Studies as if we were, in practice, honorary Anglophones. Or, as I suspect, they do not acknowledge we exist. You might think that a) a market flooded by titles such as *English Literature for Italians* or *American Culture for the Japanese* would make little sense, or b) we, the foreigners, should provide the comparative, culturally adapted materials our students require. Option b) sounds very nice to me but we just don't write these materials for lack of time (and of academic incentive as they 'do not count' for research assessment). We make do with what British and American printing presses produce.

The bibliography I have come across mostly considers the teaching and learning of foreign Literature within the pedagogical practice connected with EFL. Although I know very well that I work in a second-language environment, and I am certainly well aware of the difficulties my students experience in reading, speaking and writing in a foreign language, the funny thing is that at the same time I must pretend to be a fully functional native speaker for the purposes of publication.

I do not mean that I pass myself off as a native Anglophone, though I could—aided by simply suppressing the accent on top of the *í* in Martín. No, what I mean is that if I try, say, to publish in the *Shakespeare Quarterly*, I will be competing with the 'real thing,' with the native speakers, which means that I will have to sound linguistically and culturally impeccably *not me*. Actually, I have started adding footnotes commenting on my own origins and position, as I was recently mistaken for an Anglophone by the

editor of one of my recent articles—to my chagrin, as the point I was making is that foreign cultures have much to say about Anglophone culture.

Now, take the case of SF, which is now occupying my energies. I have gone through six handbooks, apart from the few introductions I already knew, before selecting for my students *The Science Fiction Handbook* (Nick Hubble & Aris Mousoutzakis, eds., 2006). Again, the criterion I have used is accessibility. And clarity. By this I mean that the other volumes, though very good, included a staggering amount of literary theory which our local students simply cannot grasp, as their energies are not 100% devoted to studying English (a degree about Literature) but English (the language).

I asked one of the authors whose introduction I read, Brian Baker, of Lancaster University, and his view was that local English students are not as sophisticated as I assumed theory-wise. I still fail to understand when they learn all that theory. Baker was very much surprised when I told him that I might be the second person in Spain (after my colleague Pere Gallardo in Tarragona) to teach a BA-level course in SF, at least within English Studies (anyone who knows differently, please let me know). That's not possible, he told me, college courses in SF have been taught in the USA regularly since 1960s. Oh, well...

So, let me recap: here I am planning a course on SF for my local Catalan/Spanish students and I need help from those who have been teaching the stuff for decades. I read, finally, *Teaching Science Fiction* edited by Andy Sawyer and Peter Wright (2011) and, again, the same problem—their context is not my context, the proposed reading list is impossibly long for my students, the theory much more than I can fit in one semester, there is not any comment on second-language teachers and/or learners.

There is an article by Elizabeth Ginway, which catches my attention: "Teaching Latin American Science Fiction and Fantasy in English: A Case Study." I email her to ask, please, which degree her students are taking, as she does not say, and why she is using translation. Her reply is "The essay collection is directed towards the English-speaking population of the United States and United Kingdom. I teach SF in both Spanish and Portuguese, but I did not publish on that because it is not much help to those who do not speak those languages." This, as we say in Catalan, 'makes my head dance' (or spin). Later she very kindly emailed me the syllabi for her Spanish and Portuguese-speaking students.

When I was an undergrad I noticed that in the field of Spanish Literature foreign specialists were as prominent and respected as native Spanish-speaking academics. I failed to notice, though, in my naivety, that the foreign academics I was asked to read were all Anglophone and working in American and British universities. I assumed back in the 1980s that foreign academics working on Anglophone culture would be similarly visible for Anglophone students but this is not at all the case.

Possibly the most spectacular exception within SF is that of Croatian Darko Suvin, one of the biggest names in the field. Suvin, however, did not make his name working from his home-town Zagreb but after becoming Professor at McGill University in Montreal.

So, there you are: there is still a long way to go for true academic globalization to happen...

21-VI-2015 EXAMINING MIGRATION (IN CATALONIA), PART II: VISITING MHIC, THE MUSEU D'HISTÒRIA DE LA IMMIGRACIÓ

As announced in my post of 1 June, I decided to visit the Museu d'Història de la Immigració de Catalunya, MHIC, as part of my research for a paper on how local Barcelona museums portray the Spanish economic migration to Catalonia (1930s-1970s). In this other post, I presented a negative view of the Museu d'Història de Catalunya for devoting so little space to a process which is absolutely crucial to understand 20th century Catalonia. Paradoxically, my impression is that MHIC, although a more specialised museum, also fails to present a thorough portrait of Spanish migration. In a sense, this is an even worse failure than that of MHC, though, as I will try to explain its root is very different. And even justifiable.

MHIC, as I explained, is not even in Barcelona but in the "adjacent town of Sant Adrià del Besòs, which received many thousands of migrants from all over Spain between the 1950s and 1980s." The L2 metro line takes you quite close to MHIC, yet the territory between the Verneda stop and Can Serra, the building housing the museum, is a rough urban landscape. Balmes Street is a collection of industrial stores and factories, leading to a busy roundabout boasting a huge gas station and a big McDonald's outlet. No houses, no shops. I wondered what reaching the museum on a rainy winter day was like... Faced from the gas station, the museum looks half covered by a big metallic fence, separating it from the constant traffic of the Ronda, the highway encircling Barcelona. How different from the Museu d'Història de Catalunya, down by the marina, with its classy restaurant and bookshop, and nearby Barceloneta so full of tourists...

I think this has been one of the strangest museum visits in my life. I had not realized that MHIC is basically an open-air museum so what I took for preliminary information (a series of panels skirting the entrance corridor and surrounding the main building) is the real thing. I didn't know where to get my ticket, so I asked a guy enjoying a cigarette in the garden. He turned out to be in charge of the museum which, by the way, is free, no entrance fee. Throughout my hour-long visit, he kept a discreet watch on me, pointing out what to see as he greeted warmly the people working the substantial urban orchard attached to the garden. I was the only visitor on a sunny summer Friday morning. My 'guide' told me the museum does get many visitors but I suspect these are mainly school groups. It takes, as I see it, determination to take the metro or grab a car and go on your own there...

The panel installation offers an overview of the history of migration, presenting migration as a common process in all periods and lands on Earth. The other main exhibits are a glass box which, again, presents a general overview based in this case on showing objects brought by migrants from all over the world, and naming the factors

conditioning integration, from education to sports. Next to this, a metallic mesh fence shows the visitor the many obstacles migrants face when attempting to cross borders, with examples from all over the world.

As you can see, the 4 sections I have mentioned so far present migration from a world-wide, not a local, perspective. This is reserved for MHIC's star attraction: a wagon of the train known as 'El Sevillano.' The exhibition on board this wagon focuses on the experience of the long voyage to Barcelona from places distant even more than 1,000 kms but still in Spain: mainly Galicia and Andalucía. The tone of the panels, oral narratives, photos, spaces and video is optimistic, with the hardships—which must have been many in trips lasting over 20 hours with no seats guaranteed and in overcrowded trains—compensated by the excitement of seeing the sea for the first time or reuniting with a husband unseen even for years.

I learned that Franco initially restricted internal migration from the countryside to the cities, as he thought that agriculture should be a key economic sector for his autocratic regime. The Guardia Civil could return you to your village of origin if you failed to produce your Carta de Trabajo, and they did this to thousand of migrants 'sin papeles.' When Franco finally saw in the 1950s that migration could not be stopped as peasants would no longer put up with the misery of their extremely poor lives, he decided to exploit the flow for his own 'desarrollista' plans. He ordered RENFE to build cheap trains for the migrants... but neglected to build housing for them in their place of destination. Many found themselves leading lives of utter squalor in Barcelona's many shanty towns. You should see the photos of the beach, from Barceloneta to Sant Adrià, in the 1950s and wonder how people survived in those ramshackle huts. Think Brazilian favelas...

I do not want to be unfair to MHIC as I think this is an institution struggling to merely exist. What I wonder is why. A press note issued by the local town council of Sant Adrià announced in 2011 a project to build a third space, a handsome, modern building designed by Mizien Arquitectura, of 600m² and a cost of 400.000€ to be funded by the Spanish Ministry of Culture (not the Catalan Generalitat!!). I'm not sure whether the fences surrounding one side of MHIC are hiding the works from view but I suspect they're not. The official leaflet presents this new building extensively but mentions no opening date.

In an article of 2005 in *La Vanguardia*, Arcadi Espada complained that the local Catalan Government, then headed by Pasqual Maragall, showed as little interest as that of his predecessor Jordi Pujol in supporting the museum. For Espada, the new, foreign migration made the existence of MHIC even more necessary, particularly for Maragall's left-wing Government, to consolidate the idea that all kinds of migration deserve attention. 10 years later and under Artur Mas' right-wing, pro-independence policies MHIC still looks like a very poor relation of the openly nationalist, well-provided Museu d'Història de Catalunya. Perhaps this is in the end the problem: the migrants, old and new, complicate the idealized picture of a homogeneously Catalan-speaking nation walking unanimously towards independence. The old Spanish migrants are, in this sense, more of a 'problem' since people with strong family ties to other areas of Spain

will hardly want to see Catalonia go its separate way. Better, then, not mention them too much. And leave MHIC to survive as well as it can...

I have visited Ellis Island, possibly the museum that has most impressed me, even above El Prado or London's British Museum. I was deeply moved by the ability of the Ellis Island museum to transmit the personal experience of migration. At a much more modest scale the beautiful Museo de la Emigración of Colombres in Asturias, has the same effect. I just hope MHIC can one day be as moving as these two other museums are.

So much to tell, so few resources. I just hope that neither malice nor indifference but just plain ignorance keeps the voices of the Spanish migrants from finding a better place than the current MHIC. I do look forward to see the new MHIC house one day those voices.

25-VI-2015 JUVENILIA: APPRECIATING THE LITTLE WRITERS

I'm borrowing from Merriam-Webster a definition of juvenilia: "compositions produced in the artist's or author's youth." As you can see, problems begin at once, as juvenilia tends to include childhood and our current conception of youth seems to extend to 40. Then, authors who start 'composing' as children, may actually do so before they know how to read: pre-literate, precocious R.L. Stevenson dictated his early tales to his mother. For the sake of mutual understanding with my reader, I'll consider as juvenilia whatever budding authors and artists produce between 5 and 20, which would exclude young prodigies publishing significant work in their twenties—like Leo Tolstoy, who published his autobiography then, starting with *Childhood*, when he was only 22.

I have learned all this in the course of attending some sessions of the meeting organized by my colleague, David Owen, the Fourth International Conference on Literary Juvenilia (<https://barcelonajuveniliaconference2015.wordpress.com/>). I tried to submit a presentation, focused on a fantasy or science-fiction writer and I did find a most interesting case—Marion Zimmer Bradley—and a thrilling anthology: *First Words: Earliest Writing from Favorite Contemporary Authors*, edited by Paul Mandelbaum. I did not find, however, the time to enter a completely new territory, which is even new to specialists if I take into account that my choices were contemporary and within the fantastic.

I asked David, who has edited Jane Austen's *Lady Susan* for the Juvenilia Press, why so much work is focused on the past, as the title of Christine Alexander and Juliet McMaster's book *The Child Writer from Austen to Woolf* (2005) suggests. David answered that interest in juvenilia simply started with canonical authors like Austen but need not be at all confined to them. Christine Alexander, who attended the conference, and gave a wonderful presentation on Stevenson, is General Editor of the Juvenilia Press (<https://www.arts.unsw.edu.au/juvenilia/about/>). This is a university press, supported by the University of South Wales in Australia, "originally conceived as

a university/classroom project.” Indeed, David, who published *Lady Susan* with this Australian press, presented the volume on Hannah More’s juvenilia, edited by his three doctoral students: Noelia Sanchez, Alexandra Prunean and Reyhane Vadidar. It was beautiful to see two of these aspiring scholars presenting already very solid scholarly work. Incidentally, checking the website of the Juvenilia Press, I realize that my first impression was, nonetheless, misguided and that the list of 20th century authors whose juvenilia has been published (or is going to be) extends to 16, among them Margaret Atwood and Harold Pinter.

In her delicious presentation on Stevenson, Christine Alexander showed us work autographed by the very young R.L. Stevenson, including a re-telling of *Exodus*, produced age 7, with the wandering Jews dressed like his contemporary Victorians, tall hats and all. She told us the very cruel story of how Thomas Stevenson paid of his own pocket the publication of his son’s *The Pentland Rising* only to soon destroy all copies, finding it a fanciful poem rather than the historical study he expected. Stevenson was then 16, and the shock must have been immense, poor thing. This reminded me of the sentence that American novelist Christopher Bram puts in the mouth of his fictional version of British director James Whale in his beautiful novel, *Father of Frankenstein*. Whale tells a young friend about his working-class family’s unease with their artistic child: “I forgave and forgot my parents long ago. They meant no harm. They thought I was just like them. They were like a family of farmers who’ve been given a giraffe, and don’t know what to do with the creature except harness it to a plow.” (105)

I did not attend, regrettably, all the conference presentations and I cannot say whether the study of juvenilia is leading towards an individual or a collective understanding of how the future writer progresses. My own childhood productions suggest, besides, that not only future poets and storytellers produce juvenilia—I produced essays non-stop, both of the short variety we wrote in class (‘redacciones’) and longer works. I’m sure many other academics (or journalists) must follow the same pattern, funny as this may sound. Precisely, the ‘patterns’ are what concerns me: I don’t know whether the juvenilia specialists consider primarily how in each case the adult author is already visible in the young author, or whether there is a significantly similar pattern linking all their juvenilia. If so, a well-trained specialist should be able to see by glancing at the scribblings of a six-year-old whether there is something worth cultivating in them, or just the kind of effort that most children seem to enjoy producing spontaneously—until a mysterious x-factor makes them lose interest and stop.

As happened to Whale, most working-class families have no idea about how to deal with their ‘giraffes’, except asking a teacher when the giraffe’s eccentricities become a little too much to handle (or even a social impediment—is this where so much talk about exceptionally gifted children comes from?). The ‘problem’ are middle-class families, educated enough to notice the beauty of their giraffe patterns but unable to say whether s/he’ll grow into a graceful artist. You have two syndromes here: the dotting parents, who think their child is an absolute prodigy, and the over-cautious parents, who may downplay talents obvious to everyone else. The middle-ground seems most desirable: encourage, teach, help but don’t overdue it. Obviously, Thomas Stevenson is not the example to follow.

Above all, treasure your children's juvenilia. If you're an adult connected with a scribbling, daubing child, keep their work—particularly away from their own hands, which are most likely to accomplish the mischief of destroying their own work as they grow older. In this time and age in which we document our children's lives to exhaustion, I'm sure someone will soon come up with the idea of some social network to share early artistic work, as kids share pics on Instagram... But, above all, keep in a safe place the cardboard folder with their compositions until they're old enough to overcome their embarrassment and can rationally decide what to do with those. Stevenson's mother was that kind of committed custodian and we have, apart from exhaustive records on his progress, his actual juvenilia; in contrast, it seems that Dickens burnt all the early texts he could lay his hands on. Horror and consternation!!

If you Google images of 'child writing' you'll see something else which is quite pleasing: whether little boys or, more frequently little girls, all the kids are shown using pen and paper, not a computer. I have edited as computer files my nieces' own juvenilia to better preserve it (from their little destructive hands...) but there is a singular pleasure in reading from the original handwritten texts that is lost in its electronic version, no matter how prettified. It was the same with Stevenson's originals: the evolving handwriting gives a charming impression not only of the little kid behind it but of the brain at work fast overcoming obstacles. I don't know whether the Juvenilia Press includes facsimile versions in their editions, but it would make sense.

So, yes, pester the kids in your family or friends circle for drawings, poems and stories. Give them crayons and notebooks as presents and encourage them to stay away from computers. Don't forget to give them as well good books to get their inspiration from, and tell them stories, they love it. Anything they produce, keep it, cherish it, for it is precious. Even if they turn out to be as adults boring accountants rather than accomplished artists. For producing juvenilia, this I my final thought, is, happily, not limited to a small number of artists, but a central part of all children's lives. Or it should be.

29-VI-2015 ACADEMIC TRENDS/FASHIONS, INTELLECTUAL OBSOLESCENCE AND AFFECT THEORY

In the last fortnight I have attended two seminars on Affect Theory, one organized by the research group I am a member of, *Construyendo Nuevas Masculinidades*, and the other presented as a meeting between two research groups, one headed by Helena González of UB (Centre de Dona i Literatura) and the other by Belén Martín of the Universidad de Vigo. I can very well say that the two meetings have 'affected' me in deep academic ways of which I'll try to make sense here.

I first heard about Affect Theory (a noun pronounced with the stress on the 'a' unlike the verb, pronounced with the stress on the second syllable) possibly a year ago, when I learned from Xavier Aldana (a lecturer at Manchester Metropolitan) that he was

working on a book which considers the effect that 'body gothic', focused on the extreme destruction of the human body, has on the somatic reactions of the spectators/readers. The somatic reactions (=how the body responds) is what, if I understand this correctly, interests Affect Theory. This is not focused on individual emotion (conditioned by your own culture) but on the bodily reactions that are seemingly common to all human beings and that pre-condition how we react to, in the case that interests me, certain stories. This makes perfect sense for Gothic. Indeed, reading John Clute's glossary *The Darkening Garden*, I found that he refers to 'affect horror' (which the translator calls 'horror de impacto') as the kind of gross-out Gothic which aims at affecting primarily your guts (a trend started back in the late 1970s by, among others, novelist Peter Straub or film like *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*). I assume that Affect Theory must also be very useful to analyze porn...

Like most of my colleagues attending the seminars I am unfamiliar with the key texts in the field of Affect Theory, one of which, psychologist Silvan Tomkins' *Affect Imagery Consciousness* dates back to 1962. Brian Massumi was constantly mentioned in the seminar that Todd Reese offered to my group, whereas in the case of the other meeting, oriented towards feminism, the two names that most often popped up were Rosie Braidotti and Sarah Ahmed. I'm not sure how to place them. Affect Theory, anyway, which is really, as I notice, a branch of psychology, entered psychoanalysis and from it the Humanities with the work of, among others, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. This sounded promising for Masculinities Studies, as she is famous for her seminal volume, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985). Yet, to be honest, we had serious difficulties to understand how exactly to apply Affect Theory to Literature and cinema—and the example I saw at the feminist seminar was, actually, quite scary.

The idea, if I understand correctly, is to shift the focus from what the text says to how the text says it, considering how this affects the body. What makes me nervous is that this smacks a little bit too much of traditional formalist criticism of the kind that we, in Cultural Studies, have been disputing since the 1970s. The material conditions of production and consumption, the actual bodies doing the reading and the viewing and, certainly, the content of the stories and who they address matter to me very much. In the presentation I saw on Andrea Arnold's *Fish Tank* the lecturer focused on the aesthetics of an uncomfortable dance sequence, showing the young teenage protagonist trapped by her native housing estate. The idea was to interrogate how the spectator is bodily affected by this joyless sequence. I almost ended up quarrelling with the lecturer when I pointed out that this patronizing film seems designed to depress working-class girls like the protagonist into committing suicide, which is why it is important to know who has watched the film and what for. She called this Cultural Studies approach 'traditional' and stressed that there was no point in asking actual members of the audience who they are. I ended up defending *Yo soy la Juani* as a proper feminist text, so you see how things escalated.

What worries me here is not just my own personal intellectual obsolescence (already?) nor the feeling that I *must* understand Affect Theory, whether I like it or not, but the political implications of all these academic trends. Perhaps this is because I started my

dipping into Affect Theory by reading Ruth Leys' article "The Turn to Affect: A Critique" (2011); in it she points out that the main theorists suggest that affect is "independent" and "even prior" to ideology, an irrational substratum present also in politics. Yes, well, look at the emotional energies generated in Spain by Podemos and I see what is meant. Yet, I cringe.

In this new paradigm, feeling is personal, emotion social and affect pre-personal, whatever that means. The body speaks a language irrespective of language and culture (an animal language, I wonder?). Leys is particularly critical of the assumed split between mind and body as separate cognitive systems, and I agree with her (we're fighting this battle too against the transhumanists). Her arguments are too complex to summarise but basically she ends by wondering why the turn towards anti-intentionalism in psychology and the affective neurosciences "exerts such a fascination over the cultural critics and theorists (...)—especially since one price their views exact is to imply such a radical separation between affect and reason as to make disagreement about meaning, or ideological dispute, irrelevant to cultural analysis." If debating meaning and ideology is no longer part of cultural analysis, then, what are we supposed to do? Become scientists?

I'm going back to Gothic. I wrote my dissertation on monstrosity so I do know that at a very basic level there is an animal affect called 'fear'. Those who love horror fiction enjoy the loss of control over their bodies: the adrenaline rush, the ice in the guts, the tingle down the spine, the uncontrollable scream and that bizarre jumping off your seat. Gothic Studies have, of course, used psychology and psychoanalysis abundantly to delve into the writer's imagination and the spectator's reactions. Yet, I'll insist again, as I did in my post here on Xavier Aldana's excellent *Body Gothic: Corporal Transgression in Contemporary Literature and Horror Film* (2014) that it is important to specify whose body, as identity is crucial to understand ideology. Women tend to eschew body gothic (and affect gothic more generally) because the bodies too often tortured and destroyed are female bodies. Also, Gothic still is predominantly a narrative mode still mainly produced and enjoyed by white, male, middle-class, privileged persons facing no real situation of danger in their daily lives.

This is the main core of my worry: formalism, post-structuralism and now Affect Theory are telling us that there are universalist principles in the making and the reception of storytelling that can be theorized beyond who is found at each end of the process and how they connect. Understanding how the grim aesthetics of *The Walking Dead* affect the generic body of the spectator is, I think, a valid academic project. Yet, this project must be complemented by a consideration of how ideology works in this very suspect patriarchal, survivalist text. Why? Because if we reject the unmasking of ideology as a *passé* academic pursuit, we are falling into the most monstrous ideological trap: the pretence that ideology that does not exist. This, I certainly, don't want to encourage.

I've run out of space to consider the matter of what an academic fashion is and why Affect Theory is now all the rage. I'll repeat what we determined in the feminist seminar: one thing is embracing a theory out of a profound conviction and following

the logic of one's career and another quite different (this would be the fashion) is jumping onto the band wagon just because, as a participant noted, certain keywords will make your work look cooler than others. I am not, *obviously*, opposed to importing refreshing, challenging new ideas, for this is what academic debates are about—but I am growing quite suspicious of why particular ideas climb to the top. Also, I long for the day when a local Pérez, García or Martínez will originate an internationally acclaimed academic trend... instead of meekly submitting to someone else's ideas.

9-VII-2015 GAME OVER: LITERATURE NO LONGER COMPULSORY IN SECONDARY EDUCATION

I learned a few days ago that Minister Wert's horrendous legislation on education in LOMCE, has done away with the obligation to study Literature in secondary education (I mean 'bachillerato'). The subject has been reduced from four to two weekly hours, it is now formally an elective and does not count for the average mark which conditions university admission. In Catalonia this affects both Catalan and Spanish Literature, subjects, anyway, only compulsory in the so-called 'Bachillerato Humanístico'. So-called because I have no idea what Humanities are left in it after this assault and the previous one perpetrated against the classical languages and Philosophy recently.

In a blog post for *El público* (24 June), Juan Tortosa lamented that the study of Latin and music is gone from what should be a basic education for all (and not just secondary education for some). As he very well says, "Arrancar de cuajo las humanidades de la enseñanza es privar a las generaciones que ahora crecen en nuestro país de un instrumento imprescindible para amueblar sus mentes y reforzar su sensibilidad" (<http://blogs.publico.es/juan-tortosa/2015/06/24/la-muerte-de-la-ensenanza-de-la-literatura/>). It should be obvious that downgrading Literature in this way ensures not only a specific ignorance of writers and texts but also makes explicit the malicious, evil intention to deprive younger generations of the tools needed to maintain a critical spirit. This is what we do in the Literature class: we teach people to read, think, argue ideas, be critical. The Language teachers cannot do that for us, busy as they are teaching how grammar, syntax, etc. work. Without an ability to read in depth the younger citizens are rendered not only functionally illiterate but also political idiots. This is the real plan.

This process, of course, started long ago, with LOGSE. Its first victims reached us here at the university about 20 years ago and since then, literacy has gone truly downhill. Further proof of this is a recent article in *El País* (http://cultura.elpais.com/cultura/2015/06/30/actualidad/1435650757_013490.html) commenting on the drop in sales of Literature volumes, which is no surprise at all. This amounts to 30'5% in 5 years which, being those of the crisis, can be explained by the usual plunge into piracy: keen readers have got themselves an e-book reader and download illegally all they can. Um. What is more surprising perhaps is that *El País* actually calls Literature all the novels read for pleasure (not for any of the educational levels). This means that there has been a general drop in the sales of *all* genres, from

the commercial general fiction to specific genres like SF or romance. An optimistic interpretation suggests that creative Literature is not faring worse than popular fiction; a pessimistic one suggests that the literary avant-garde may be dying, no longer addressing a committed readership, sinking fast.

Another article, also from *El País* (http://cultura.elpais.com/cultura/2015/06/25/actualidad/1435257178_961935.html) suggests that not all is lost as a) children and young adult books have generated bigger joint sales than adult fiction and b) on the whole, the ebook reader has resulted in an unexpected demand for fewer commercial novels and more literary works. Um... now the question is whether the young readers will become adult readers without the intervention of secondary school Literature teachers, whom they may never meet. I was myself the keenest young reader you may imagine, but without Professor Sara Freijido in my pre-university year I would never have met the challenge of becoming a much better, far more sophisticated reader. So there we are...

Now, a little press note on my university's website made me see things from another angle. Only 40% of all European university teachers, it seems, use films and documentaries in class (<http://www.uab.cat/web/sala-de-premsa/detall-de-noticia/nomes-el-40-dels-professors-europeus-utilitza-pel-licules-i-documentals-a-classe-1345667174054.html?noticiaid=1345686949759>). Of course, there is an enormous difference between using film to illustrate a point about something else and teaching film. In Spain, let's recall, we don't have a degree called 'Film Studies.' We don't have, either, a degree called 'Literatura (Española, Catalana, English...)' but 'Filologías' disguised as 'Estudios' and that strange hybrid, 'Literatura Comparada y Teoría de la Literatura.' Anyway, the study reveals that 78% of all European teachers complain that they face difficulties to introduce cinema in their syllabi, "which constitutes an obstacle for audiovisual literacy." Certainly.

I myself feel illiterate despite having very often taught film, film adaptation and documentary in class because I have never been trained in the basic grammar of cinema. Now, if you think about it, the current audiovisual illiteracy mirrors what will soon happen with Literature. Since they have never studied film in class, my students (born in the early 1990s) are not only incapable of commenting on how a film functions aesthetically (same problem for me) but also ignore that there is a canon and a film History. How could they know about this? Remember they were born together with private TV in Spain, which eliminated from their cultural horizon all films previous to 1990. *Apocalypse Now*, just to mention a title among thousands, does not exist for them, just as soon *La regenta* will exist for nobody. Except in both cases, film and Literature, for the curious and for the ones committed to their own self-improvement, to use a Victorian term I am in love with.

Teaching Literature in the university to first-year students is going to be soon the strangest kind of teaching practice ever. The keen readers will have read mainly young adult fiction, not a single classic. The ones uninterested in reading will have read nothing at all. Neither group will have received the least training in the practice of understanding the content of a text, much less in reading critically. This functional

illiteracy will necessarily have an impact in all subsequent courses and it is to be wondered what doctoral dissertations on Literature will be like in the future. Game over, as I say, for Literature teachers.

What can you expect, on the other hand, in a land where 'culturista' means 'bodybuilder' and not 'someone committed to cultural self-improvement'. Every time I hear this word or I read articles nagging everyone into joining a gym, I wonder what it would be like if people went to libraries to read three hours a week as they go to gyms. My only hope is that as Literature becomes residual in secondary education it also becomes an object of curiosity for, as we know, nothing kills the pleasure of reading as the obligation to read and pass exams. A young person who would never read a classic for class might well feel curious if not forced to read it. And, you see, curiouiser and curiouiser... Just as Spain managed to generate that curious figure, 'el cinéfilo', specialized in seeing the least popular films, there is still hope that we can generate 'el lectorfilo' ('el bibliófilo' exists, s/he loves books rather than reading).

Or not, and this is it for the art of writing... beyond tweets and whatsapps...

14-VII-2015 THE DIFFICULT ART OF SELECTING SHORT STORIES (CHOOSING SF STORIES FOR MY COURSE NEXT YEAR)

Whenever I think of short stories, I think of the late Prof. Guillermina Cenoz, from whom I learned to appreciate this genre. I took an undergrad and a post-grad course on short fiction with her and, later, already as a teacher, I inherited her undergrad course. This, I have taught twice: a first edition (1999-2000) in which I taught an ambitious selection of 24 stories, all adapted for the screen; and a second edition (2004-5) in which I limited myself to just 8, all of them SF and gothic fiction also adapted for the screen (yes, I used time for the films, which I had not done the first time around). Here is the complete reading list including both courses (the film adaptation has the same title, with the exceptions mentioned in parenthesis):

- Asimov, Isaac. "The Bicentennial Man"
- Barker, Clive. *Books of Blood*, Vol. 5: "The Forbidden," [*Candyman*]
- Bierce, Ambrose. "An Incident at Owl Creek Bridge"
- Carter, Angela. *The Bloody Chamber*: "The Company of Wolves"
- Conrad, Joseph. "Amy Foster" [*Swept from the Sea*]
- Conrad, Joseph. "Heart of Darkness" [*Apocalypse Now!*]
- Dick, Philip K. "Minority Report"
- Doyle, Arthur Conan. *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*: "A Scandal in Bohemia"
- Du Maurier, Daphne. "Don't Look Now!"
- Du Maurier, Daphne. "The Birds"
- Gibson, William. *Burning Chrome*: "Johnny Mnemmonic"
- Greene, Graham. "The Basement Room" [*The Fallen Idol*]

- Irving, Washington. *Tales from the Alhambra*: “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” [*Sleepy Hollow*]
- James, M.R. “Casting the Runes” [*The Curse of the Demon*]
- Joyce, James. *Dubliners*: “The Dead”
- King, Stephen. *Different Seasons*: “Apt Pupil”
- Kipling, Rudyard. *The Jungle Books*: “Mowgli’s Brothers” [*The Jungle Book*]
- Le Fanu, Joseph Sheridan. “Carmilla” [*The Vampire Lovers*]
- Lovecraft, H.P. “Herbert West: Re-animator” [*Reanimator*]
- McCullers, Carson. “The Ballad of Sad Café”
- Poe, Edgar Allan. “The Fall of the House of Usher” [*House of Usher*]
- Runyon, Damon. “The Idyll of Miss Sarah Brown” [*Guys and Dolls*]
- Singer, Isaac Basevis. “Yentl: The Yeshiva Singer” [*Yentl*]
- Stern, Philip Van Doren. “The Greatest Gift” [*It’s a Wonderful Life*]
- Stevenson, R.L. “The Body Snatcher”
- Van Vogt, A.E. “Black Destroyer” [*Alien*]
- Woolrich, Cornel. “Rear Window”

These are all stories I love and I would certainly be very happy to teach them again.

Then, in 2006 I was paid just 500 Euros, would you believe this?, to translate a collection I called *Siete relatos góticos: Del papel a la pantalla*. This included a commentary on each of the seven film adaptations of “The legend of Sleepy Hollow”, “An Incident at Owl Creek Bridge”, “Hoichi, the Earless” by Lafcadio Hearn, “Casting the Runes”, “Spurs” by Clarence Aaron ‘Tod’ Robbins (which inspired *Freaks*), “The Most Dangerous Game” by Richard Connell and “The Devil and Daniel Webster” by Stephen Vincent Benet. The collection, by the way, is available from <http://ddd.uab.cat/record/116808>, or you may download the Epub and Mobi files from my web at <http://gent.uab.cat/saramartinalagre/content/books>). I would like very much to have time to produce a sequel called *Ocho relatos*, both gothic and SF, but a) I don’t particularly enjoy translating, b) this is very hard work that counts for nothing towards my research assessment exercise. Perhaps when I retire...

Why the specific interest in the short story and cinema? No particular reason. I have always been interested in film adaptation and the short story happens to be arguably the most often unacknowledged source in terms of academic interest and popularity. With one exception: the many adaptations of stories written by Philip K. Dick.

This brings me back to SF, a genre (or mode?) for which short fiction is essential, as 20th century SF grew basically out of the specialized magazines, beginning of course with Hugo Gernsback’s *Amazing Stories* (1926). I am not really a good short story reader, preferring instead novels. Yet, feeling curious about the function of short fiction in the development of SF and aware of the many gaps in my SF reading list, I have set out to fill this summer with all I can lay my hands on. Not randomly...

Here’s the idea: students taking my elective ‘English Prose: Considering Science Fiction’ next Spring will have to read the 5 novels I have selected. They will also be offered a selection of 40 to 50 short stories. Each student will be assigned a story and she or he

will do a class presentation based on it, followed by writing a brief index card. I'll collect the index cards and in this way we'll produce a nice online booklet to help other SF readers locate and read the stories. If students feel like reading the 40/50 stories, they're welcome, though this is not compulsory. I just hope they get to hear in this way about many other SF writers apart from our 5 novelists.

I started a while ago the process of choosing the stories, which is, in one word, mindboggling... I am using Hugo and Nebula lists of winners, and of short-listed authors, my own memories of stories I have read or heard about, and a wonderful website called Free Speculative Fiction Online (<http://links.freesfonline.de/index.html>). Even so, I despair... for I want the final list to be balanced chronologically and also in terms of nationality, gender, ethnicity... This means that I am working in two directions: selecting famous/representative texts and finding texts for famous/representative authors. I calculate that for the final 40 to 50 titles I will have to read 200. Am I complaining? No!!!!... it's wonderful to have the excuse to do this... It was about time...

In the first edition of the short fiction course I gave students the option to submit for assessment either a paper or a short story of their own. Many tried writing a short story (I'm so sorry I didn't keep them...) but then complained it had been much, much harder than they thought. This year, I am also planning to have my students write SF short fiction though not for assessment. Last June I was a member of the jury judging the entries to the Spanish SF short fiction contest *Inspiraciència* (<http://www.inspiraciencia.es/ca/>) and I aim at convincing my students to submit their own stories next year. I think the 800-word limit will help...

To finish, let me teach you a typical SF concept: the fix-up. What's a 'fix-up'? A novel made up of diverse short fiction pieces. That would explain why Charles Stross's *Accelerando* (2005), one of the best-known recent fix-ups, is such a crazy, demanding book... The first piece, "Lobsters" is for now in my selection. We'll see...

Back to reading SF short fiction, then, and loving it!

6-VIII-2015 ALL THOSE GIRLS FROM THE PAST AND THEIR NARROW CHOICES: FROM ALICE TO SYBYLLA...

[Warning: plenty of spoilers here, novels' endings discussed]

I am not sure whether I have really taken a break from writing this blog as I realize that I seem to have been preparing today's post all along in my free time. What is a summer break for if not for reading widely and wildly in between outings? Yet, as you will see, I have been reading less wildly than I assumed, and quite focusedly at least as regards one topic: young women's agency between the 1890s and the 1920s. Blame this on my Kindle, which demands fuel all the time. Legal downloads go back now to authors who died before 1945 (books are 'liberated' for free circulation following 70

years from the author's demise, a total scandal of you ask me... copyright should never be inherited). This explains, I think, the accidental coherence of my summer reading.

Re-reading some of the papers I wrote for my doctoral courses, I notice I focused much of my work on the tension between the women who did and those who didn't... survive. I absolutely hated then and still hate middle-class novels in which the heroines commit suicide rather than work: Edith Wharton's Lily Bart in *House of Mirth* (1905) and, ugh, that Edna Pontellier in Kate Chopin's absurdly overvalued *The Awakening* (1899). Being myself a working-class student, my heart went 25 years ago to Theodore Dreiser's spunky *Sister Carrie* (1900). This summer it has gone again to Booth Tarkington's *Alice Adams* (1921), the story of a cheerful low middle-class girl who, losing her chance to contract the upper middle-class marriage which her mother so frantically wishes to secure for her, decides to train herself for useful work and financial independence.

Perhaps I am misreading Alice's ending and contemporary readers saw her condemned to spinsterhood, I don't know, yet I was glad that she makes a sensible decision. Tarkington, who had already won the Pulitzer Prize in 1919 for *The Magnificent Ambersons* won it again in this novel in 1922. In between, Edith Wharton became the first woman to be awarded the Pulitzer for *The Age of Innocence* (1920), a story set in the 1870s in upper-class New York. Wharton's story is indeed a failed love story but I like to read it as the story of Ellen Olenska's refusal to submit to pressure and return to her abusive husband. In Tarkington's novel, set in the aftermath of WWI, Alice finds herself falling out of the marriage market aged 20, for being too poor to catch an upper-class husband. At 16 she is pretty enough to have the nicest boys in town crowding "the Adamses' small veranda and steps"; by 18 she is only attracting "the older men". Without a chance to attend a finishing school or get a college education, by 20 she can no longer compete: "She had been a belle too soon".

Stephen Crane's bleak, naturalist tale *Maggie, a Girl of the Streets* (1893), in which the downward spiral of a poor girl can be chronicled but not stopped, has reminded me that *Sister Carrie* was scandalous precisely because Dreiser refused to condemn his proletarian girl, giving her instead a career on the stage, no matter how dubious. Again, I might be idealizing Carrie's ending as I idealize Alice's but work seems in both cases a pragmatic solution. In contrast, I have been much irritated by the endings of H.G. Wells *Ann Veronica* (1909) and of Australian Miles Franklin's *My Brilliant Career* (1901), though they are as antithetical as they can be.

Ann Veronica, which was quite a scandal at the time of publication, focuses on the New Woman's predicament. As Hetty, a friend of Ann Veronica's, explains: "The practical trouble is our ages. They used to marry us off at seventeen, rush us into things before we had time to protest. They don't now. Heaven knows why! They don't marry most of us off now until high up in the twenties. And the age gets higher. We have to hang about in the interval. There's a great gulf opened, and nobody's got any plans what to do with us. So the world is choked with waste and waiting daughters. Hanging about! And they start thinking and asking questions, and begin to be neither one thing nor the other. We're partly human beings and partly females in suspense."

Already 22, Ann Veronica decides to leave her father's home and support herself, taking as her inspiration G.B. Shaw's Vivie Warren from *Mrs Warren's Profession* (1893, first performed 1902), a young college graduate who earns a living as an accountant (if I remember correctly). Ann Veronica, however, concludes that Vivie is just a fiction and finding no work decides to give herself an education (borrowing money from a man, wilfully ignoring in what position of dependence this leaves her). I had hopes for her as she chooses Biology but, guess what?, her biology teacher, Capes, a man married but separated, ends up providing all she needs—the couple may be unconventional but the ending is as conventional as they come. Ann Veronica seemingly learns nothing from the suffragettes surrounding her and abandons her scientific career as soon as she can. Argh.

Like many other readers I originally supposed that Miles Franklin, author of *My Brilliant Career* (1901) was a man, until I learned this was Stella Maria Sarah Miles Franklin, Australia's best-known female writer. Also a fierce feminist and, like Jane Austen, a woman who never married despite her diverse suitors. I am not mentioning Austen by accident, as *My Brilliant Career* is not the story of young Sybylla Melvyn's writing career but of how she rejects the best possible suitor since Darcy for the sake of starting this career. Sybylla is stranded between the dire poverty of her own family, blamed on the incapacitating alcoholism of the father, and the middle-class background of her mother's family. She is, so to speak, working-class by professional situation but middle-class in her cultural training (she reads voraciously, plays the piano, etc.).

The novel, written by a still teenage Franklin, has us believe that the tomboyish heroine attracts, for no clear reason, the Darcyesque Harold Beecham. This young man is said to possess a horrid temper, which is certainly a gigantic obstacle for a happy marriage, yet throughout the story he is as self-possessed as a man can be. There is a horrifying moment in which, right after Sybylla accepts his marriage proposal, he stoops to kiss her (this would be their first kiss). She, "hysterical" and offended by Harold's "calm air of ownership", takes his riding-whip and brings it "with all my strength right across his face", drawing blood and almost blinding him in one eye. She expects he'll strike her but instead he forgives her and pretends he has had a domestic accident. Gosh. You may read this as a feminist attack against patriarchal man but I was very much disgusted, as disgusted as with Charlotte Brontë's decision to maim Rochester—which is why I refuse to teach *Jane Eyre*, much to my students' amusement.

In a later scene, in which masochistic Hal insists on marrying this idiot girl who clearly does not love him, she confesses she's "queer" and is "given to something which a man never pardons in a woman". Just when poor Hal must be thinking she is secretly the most promiscuous woman in Australia, Sybylla blurts out "I am given to writing stories, and literary people predict I will yet be an authoress". Hal, to Franklin's credit, laughs. Here's his offer: "(...) if you will give me a hand occasionally, you can write as many yarns as you like. I'll give you a study, and send for a truck-load of writing-gear at once, if you like". This, she rejects.

Considering her own mother's very unhappy marriage and her obvious reluctance to having children, Sybylla's decision might make sense. Still, as a 21st century woman who wants to have it all, the loving partner and the successful career, I very much wanted to use the whip on her as she did on Hal. Funnily, I was thinking all the time not of Austen's Darcy, whom Beecham so much recalls, but of Leonard Woolf, who married Virginia in 1912, and became the main support of her own brilliant career. Um, yes, she committed suicide but it was in spite of Leonard and her success and not *because* of them...

Reading about all these girls and their narrow choices and marvelling at how different their 21st counterparts are, I wonder whether their dilemmas are over. Harold Beecham is now Christian Grey and as for the Leonard Woolfs of today, is there any? The anxiety to be a 'belle too soon' somehow persists and so does Sybylla's fear of losing control over her body and life if she marries.

This is why their stories are still so appealing...

11-VIII-2015 CHARLES AND BENITO: A CELEBRATION OF INFLUENCE

My title throws a barb at Harold Bloom's famous 'anxiety of influence' theory from his 1973 book. Bloom argued in it that poets are prompted to write in awe and admiration of particular predecessors. They, however, always struggle to find their own voice, fearing that they can only produce imitations of their chosen masters; hence, they labour under a constant 'anxiety of influence'. In contrast, the attitude that Spanish novelist Benito Pérez Galdós (1843-1920), showed towards his much admired Charles Dickens (1812-1870) seems to have been always celebratory—perhaps because from the very beginning Galdós had a clear voice of his own and also because there was no way 19th century Spain could be depicted exactly as Dickens depicts his native England.

I wrote a post back in 2012 (4th November) on the similarities between the young Charles Dickens and our own Romantic genius Mariano José de Larra, based on their showing a similar 'zest for city life' as journalist *flâneurs*. I did not know then about the literary connections between Galdós and Dickens, though having read half a dozen novels by Galdós and almost the full dozen by Dickens this should have been obvious to me. Possibly, Galdós' 'castizo' characters threw me off the path.

What has brought me back to it is my very enjoyable reading of Galdós' quirky first novel, *La Fontana de Oro*, published in 1870, the same year Dickens died—yes, a peculiar coincidence, or yet another proof of Spain's cultural belatedness. It might well be that this is Galdós' closest imitation of Dickens. Suddenly, it was crystal clear to me that the Spanish novelist was applying literary strategies learned from the English master to his first attempt at narrating chaotic Spain. The colourful character descriptions, the fine attention to the grotesqueries of life, the droll authorial stance, the intense hatred for those who live to oppress others... all sounded familiar. Dickens would have loved it.

As it turns out, there is proof of Galdós' admiration for Dickens: he translated into Spanish his first novel, *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club* (a.k.a. *The Pickwick Papers*, 1836). Galdós was just 24, he cheekily claimed to know English and found a gullible editor in a Spanish newspaper who believed him. As diverse academics have proved, though, he actually translated Dickens from the French (see for instance <http://mdc.ulpgc.es/cdm/ref/collection/galdosianos/id/1210>). The result, Ricardo Bada laments (<http://www.elespectador.com/noticias/cultura/cuando-galdos-tradujo-dickens-articulo-324923>), is appalling...: "es una catástrofe literariamente homologable con la marítima del infeliz Titanic". Galdós never translated a work again, though he seems to have been able to read in English and was no doubt well-acquainted with the work of other English writers beyond Dickens.

In his *Memorias de un desmemoriado* (1915-6), Galdós recalls his trip to England in 1889 to visit Shakespeare's house. In an often quoted passage he recalls visiting as well Dickens' grave in the Poets' Corner of Westminster Abbey: "Consideraba yo a Carlos (sic) Dickens como mi maestro más amado. En mi aprendizaje literario, cuando aún no había salido yo de mi mocedad petulante, apenas devorada *La comedia humana*, de Balzac, me apliqué con loco afán a la copiosa obra de Dickens. Para un periódico de Madrid traduje el *Pickwick*, donosa sátira, inspirada, sin duda, en la lectura de *El Quijote*. (...) Depositando la flor de mi adoración sobre esta gloriosa tumba me retiro del panteón de Westminster". The literary loop is thus nicely closed: Dickens learned from Cervantes and Galdós learned from him.

I have not read *Pickwick Papers* yet, which will complete my pet project of reading all the novels Dickens published—then, the short fiction. Reading Galdós' novel about the 'trieno liberal' of 1820-3 and the simply nauseating figure of King Fernando VII, I realized I know very little about the complicated Spanish 19th century. A perfect solution to this shameful blank is, of course, reading Galdós' series *Episodios nacionales*. Now, here's the rub: the series, which famously begins with *Trafalgar*, runs to 46 novels, published between 1872 and 1912. Don Benito's complete list of publications runs to more than 100 titles, not including a long list of essays, plays and short stories... Someone should do research on why and how certain writers are so prolific. Is it a mutation in the brain? I also wonder about the kind of readership and book market capable of absorbing so much from the same pen.

The acerbic Valle Inclán dubbed Galdós 'Don Benito el Garbancero' as I learned back in secondary school when my wonderful teacher Ana Oltra made us read Galdós' *Tormento*. I read Valle Inclán's play *Luces de Bohemia* the following year, 1984, and saw it in the theatre with some classmates—we were very different from today's teens, I guess... this was no school outing but our own idea. 'Garbancero' has no apt English translation beyond 'chickpea dealer' though Valle Inclán used its second sense: 'vulgar'. Although my teacher was quite a Galdosian fan, and I loved *Tormento* much better than *Luces de Bohemia*, the prejudiced sobriquet somehow stayed with me. It was nevertheless dispelled by TVE's excellent 1980 adaptation of Galdós' masterpiece *Fortunata y Jacinta* (see the series here <http://www.rtve.es/television/fortunata-jacinta/>), a product of a now defunct time when TV did offer highly cultured

entertainment. This was our *Brideshead Revisited* (1981) and I count myself fortunate that these smashing series are part of my literary biography. I doubt even BBC would be up to the task of adapting the *Episodios nacionales* but I certainly do not see RTVE attempting even to adapt any other of Galdós' novels. Instead, we are being offered the crude period soap operas that dominate afternoon TV (*Amar es para siempre*, *El secreto de Puente Viejo* and so on...). That is 'garbancero'.

Charles Dickens, by the way, was also labelled 'garbancero', though in this case by an illustrious academic. The Modernists regarded him mostly as an example of the ills that the commercialization of the novel inflicted on highbrow Literature throughout the 19th century. As the Modernist-inspired leading academic F.R. Leavis sentenced in *The Great Tradition* (1948), his reason "for not including Dickens in the line of great novelists" was that, though great, his was the genius "of a great entertainer, and he had for the most part no profounder responsibility as a creative artist than this description suggests" (1950: 18)—he was, in short, a 'garbancero'. Leavis only concluded as late as 1970 that Dickens was also a great 'creative artist' in *Dickens the Novelist*. Luckily, the BBC never doubted that and has so done much to undo Prof. Leavis' unfortunate early judgements.

So, back to the beginning, Galdós' love for his master Dickens can be called a 'celebration' of influence, rather than anxiety. I am not denying the widespread existence of this 'anxiety'—think of Martin Amis comparing himself to his novelist father Kingsley if you need an example. I am just claiming that literary anxiety has a potent counterpart in avowed, gleeful admiration—though I would grant that only a genius like Galdós can turn his awe for a master into unrestrained inspiration and, ultimately, an equally potent voice of his own.

When 2043 arrives and Spain gets the chance to celebrate Galdós' bicentenary as joyfully as the British celebrated Dickens' own back in 2012, we can discuss how the two cultures compare when it comes to celebrating the literary best they have produced...

16-VIII-2015 TEACHING VICTORIAN ROMANCE IN THE AGE OF TINDER

Tinder is not only easily combustible material but also the name of a very popular dating app, launched in 2012. Its use involves swiping photographs of possible matches on your cell phone: right for those you like, left for those you don't. If someone swipes you back, then you can text each other, set up a date, etc. In an inspired feat of social engineering and personal psychology, Tinder does not communicate to you the rejections. The right-hand swipes, on the contrary, are duly noted which, I'm sure, must be a great ego-booster.

The rationale behind this dating system is not only the classic chance to pre-select a date companion, already provided by any dating service, but the ease with which it can lead to a face-to-face meeting, as it also based on geo-location systems (you can see

which Tinder users are close-by). As of today, Wikipedia informs, Tinder processes one billion swipes a day with twelve million matches—the actual figure for dates is unknown, but the phrase ‘Tinder date’ has already entered English. 50 million people all over the world use the service in 30 languages.

Why am I interested? Well, I am not. What called my attention was the article by Nancy Jo Sales for *Vanity Fair*, “Tinder and the Dawn of the Dating Apocalypse” (<http://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2015/08/tinder-hook-up-culture-end-of-dating>). So much so that I have decided to set my teaching next autumn of Anne Brontë’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848) against it as background to discuss how human mating rituals have altered (recently). My point is that for my students to understand a novel from the ‘remote’ Victorian past first they need to be made aware of how the debate on similar topics stands today. Also, I need to explain to them that romantic fiction about love must operate within the personal, social and legal constraints of its time. Hence, I need to test what they know about those applying to their own generation. First, then, here are some points of Sales’ lengthy article—a piece which made me feel positively Victorian if not Jurassic.

Sales does not clarify how compulsory having a Tinder account is in the twenty something American urban middle-class culture she explores (Manhattan, basically). Reading her piece I got the impression that not having an account in this or similar dating services is little short of a social aberration, rather than a personal choice. She, subtly but firmly, exposes the persistence of the double sexual standard despite the apparent growth of sexual freedom (for this what Tinder is for—getting sex partners).

Although, obviously, hetero men could not get hetero girls to have sex with them via a Tinder ‘come on’ unless the girls were willing, the picture Sales draws is one in which men get all the (promiscuous) fun and the girls get constantly frustrated because a) sex does not lead to regular dates, much less a relationship and b) in the end the endless succession of lovers is unable to provide them with orgasms. Remember that in the Victorian texts I teach couples get engaged without even exchanging a first kiss (and in the girls’ case it is often *the* first kiss). Now try to make sense of this to the kids born in the mid 1990s.

Before I ramble on... Here are a few selections from Sales juicy report:

*a male Tinder user explains he’s organizing several dates at the same time as “There’s always something better” (call that the channel-hopping effect)

*the same guy adds that “You could talk to two or three girls at a bar and pick the best one, or you can swipe a couple hundred people a day—the sample size is so much larger”. He aims at sleeping with 100 ‘Tinderella’ girls in a year. Hot ones.

*this serial Romeo further explains that although he clearly announces he is not into relationships, most girls accept having sex “expecting to turn the tables” (he might also be kidding himself rather than admit that girls see him mostly as a disposable sex toy)

*average texts from guys (i.e. total strangers) often include unsolicited photos of their genitalia or explicit phrasing such as ‘Wanna fuck?’ or ‘Come over and sit on my face’. And worse. Girls also send pics, boys claim, but mainly of breasts and bottoms, not vaginas.

*Tinder users highlight the similarity of the service with ordering food or shopping online. Or having a hobby. Or meeting for sport.

*the overall impression is that today men have the power to decide whether a one-night stand (or a one-hour stand...) can develop into a relationship, whereas women have the power to grant men sex (isn't this old as the hills?)

*a college girl explains that for her generation the anxiety about intimacy comes from having "grown up on social media," so "we don't know how to talk to each other face-to-face". Not even in bed.

*very restrictive dating rules have turned romance into "a contest to see who cares less, and guys win a lot at caring less"; nobody wants to appear to suffer for love.

*not only is the double standard real and inalterable; a guy claims he does not want to be in a relationship because "You can't be *selfish* in a relationship" (his italics)

*afraid of giving girls the wrong idea, guys tend to be quite insensitive; a girl recalls a lover using Tinder while she dressed up after sex... Men are not, Sales writes, "inspired to be polite".

*as a girl points out, despite the aloofness, "Some people still catch feelings in hook-up culture"—as if they were a disease.

Several *caveats* here:

*Sales does not take into account how Tinder works in different cultures and neglects to see the identity factors conditioning her informers.

*Second, as a man told me, if girls feel uncomfortable with any point of the Tinder-date process they just need to refrain from using the service, which, let's recall, is not compulsory.

*Apps like these, as the internet did in the early 1990s, have opened up the potential number of sexual and romantic partners, yet most people still marry in fairly conventional ways and try to raise families.

*Neither the idea (for hetero women) that you need to sleep first with a guy or with many before you find love is new; it's been around for decades now.

*As for hetero men, they seem to be imitating dating models typical of gay culture whereas a good number of gay men are vindicating monogamy (serial or otherwise) thanks to the legalisation of gay marriage.

In the end it's the old story: men try to get as much sex as the personal, social and legal constrains allow while women are divided into those who want to follow genuinely a similar inclination, those who tell themselves they do but actually don't, and the post-Victorian ones who value long-lasting romantic intimacy above sex. I'm not saying that this third vital stance is not attractive to many men. And I have not said a word about the bodily fascism of the whole idea of app or online dating.

A few years ago a group of eight Californian girls who enrolled in one of my classes, all beautiful and intelligent young women, told me that dating was over—and this was long before I-Phone and Tinder. Men, they complained, get too much sex and, hence, they make no effort to be in a real relationship. They were truly upset by this. All this leads me to wonder whether, unlike what Victorian novels suggest, men and women like each other at all. It seems that given the chance and at least until they decide to form a family, current young men and women are using each other mutually for sex

but without true enjoyment in each other. The taboos on sex that the Victorians suffered have this advantage: you need to talk in order to communicate. Victorian couples (and many others more recently) might spend years this way in long engagements which possibly explains, to a certain extent, why sex mattered less to them than to us (this IS a sweeping statement, I know).

In all this I am commenting on here, what irks me most is men's (alleged) aloofness. The guy using Tinder while still in the same bedroom with his new lover... Ugh... If, as it seems, misogyny is the basis of the 'hook-up' system then there can be no real progress—and no real fun no matter how many lovers a girl gets. And the other way round: I have no doubt that Anne Brontë's hero Gilbert is erotically incensed to despair by Helen because she is not sexually available. Ah, the Victorians and their erotic unavailability... how hard they are to explain in the age of Tinder.

21-VIII-2015 A CULTURAL JOURNALIST ABANDONS THE FIELD (FOR VERY GOOD REASONS...)

A friend emails me the link to an interview in the Catalan e-newspaper, *Núvol: El Digital de Cultura*, founded in 2012 by Bernat Puigtobella, whose existence I totally ignored... Likewise, I did not know who Ricard Ruiz Garzón, the person interviewed (by Montse Barderi) is. I know now that he is a relevant university teacher, writer, editor and book reviewer who has now decided to abandon cultural journalism after twenty years in the profession. This happens all the time—I am less and less aware of who the relevant people are... The interview, which you may read here <http://www.nuvol.com/entrevistes/ricard-ruiz-garzon-deixo-el-periodisme-cultural-abans-dodiar-lo/>, deals with a few juicy issues, so here we go.

Ruiz Garzón, always a free-lance reviewer, is abandoning cultural journalism because he cannot make a living out of it. The fee for a review (in Spanish and Catalan main media) is 100 euros, and he gets at the end of the month for all his hard work about 1,000. Many journalists publish articles and interviews on books they have never read, he says, but he takes things far more seriously and not only reads the book under review but, if necessary, any others by the same author. Actually, the point he makes is that good reviewing used to consist of that and now he is abandoning cultural journalism because current conditions only allow him to produce shallow reviews. This is, I think, very honest. Ruiz Garzón distinguishes carefully between the criticism that need not sell (academia work, though impact indexes have become our own sales target) and book reviewing, which he sees as "a service" like, he adds, the weather forecast. With, he notes, 200 new books every month, readers need guidance. No doubt.

The interview has a great segment on the five virtues of a good writer (honesty, willingness to assume risks, a good command of the language, being in touch with tradition, and sound technical skills). I'll focus, though, on the five main defects of current book reviewing which Ruiz Garzón highlights (my translation):

1. “writing a review so well written that it does not give you the information needed to guide you about whether the book is good or not”

This is a particularly insidious problem, endemic to Spanish and Catalan reviewing but, I find, less common in Anglophone media. The reviewer feels a strange urge to show off and may very well mention, in a language as abstruse as possible, many other obscure works only he (for this is usually a ‘he’) knows perfectly well. Never mind whether these works have anything to do with the work under review, what matters is impressing the reader with the reviewer’s superior knowledge. I stopped reading *Fotogramas*, tired precisely of the ‘cinéfilos’ who never managed to express a clear opinion and that would have made Derrida proud in their convoluted use of prose.

2. “objectivity: the issue of friends and enemies, the friend I praise; the enemy, I badmouth”

To a certain extent, this is inevitable. There are two ways out of this conundrum: a) reviewers declare their friendships and enmities, as spoilers are declared in Amazon, GoodReads, IMDB or b) reviewers specialise in totally alien fields where they have no friends, neither enemies. Blind peer reviewing is supposed to prevent ‘amiguismo’ from playing a part in academic life but, then, networking is often built on the basis of personal friendship. We’re all human.

3. “the synergies between media and publishing groups” (example: if you work in *El País*, you put your job on the line if you criticize a book published by Alfaguara, etc.)

See my solution for point 2. Again: the problem is deceiving the reader into thinking that this is honest cultural journalism. The problem, by the way, extends beyond proper journalism. Recently, I searched for reviews of Rosario Raro’s novel *Volver a Canfranc* and, since opinions at Amazon.es and Casa del Libro are so few and so unreliable, I read a couple of blog posts. To my irritation, they were both shameless ads endorsing the novel; one even had the cheek to thank Planeta for having forwarded a copy.

4. “poor research, failing to read the complete works by an author and, therefore, producing amateur reviews”; that is, a good review must be able to place novelties in the context of the author’s whole career.

This, to be honest, is ideal but also shows that perhaps Ruiz Garzón entertains too high expectations about book reviewing. Or, alternatively, this means that there should be among the cultural journalists specialists in particular authors, as there are in academia. Logically, this only makes sense if all reviewers were free-lance, though I assume that the usual practice is that one reviewer in the newspaper’s payroll gets to review all kinds of books. Yet, it is also often the case that writers overproduce. I wonder who can produce a quality review of each new novel by Stephen King...

5. “we have an uneducated, untrained readership. They prefer the headline or the slogan over nuance”

Um, perhaps this is partly the fault of the navel-gazing reviewers guilty of fault no. 1 (see above). Also, our general lack of time. Personally, I don’t look for nuance in reviews, but for insight—that is to say, the ability to point out what is fundamentally

right or wrong with a book. I very often read reviews in the middle of reading a book to check whether others share my impression. And I must point out that many readers, like myself, are fast going past the slogans and checking first the number of stars or the ratings. As I have noted here, everyone knows that a film rating below 7 in IMDB hardly ever is worth watching.

A sixth problem is highlighted in connection with point 5: “there is little criticism of popular authors, but when it is produced it has no effect whatsoever”. He mentions very negative reviews of Xavier Bosch and Albert Espinosa which did not affect at all their top Sant Jordi sales. Obviously. In general, few book buyers read reviews; they feel frequently lost among the many books on offer and just want to get the book everyone else is reading. They navigate the book market by positive advertising, not negative reviewing.

The phrase ‘crític de referència’ crops up several times in the interview with Ruiz Garzón. This is hard to translate into English but if I write Marcel Reich-Ranicki (1920-1913), you possibly know what I mean: a literary critic whose opinions are respected by both readers and authors, and who shapes with his/her reviewing the very state of Literature. In SF we have John Clute. And I recall from my childhood the peculiar figure and nasal voice of a truly great film critic working on TV, Alfonso Sánchez Martínez, a man so popular that many humorists did him the honour of impersonating him. Who do we have now that we can call ‘crítico de referencia’?

To finish, I wonder whether the case of Ruiz Garzón is symptomatic of a much larger malaise, which is the slow death of (cultural) journalism as we know it. My good friend Víctor Sampedro, who teaches sociology and communication, writes argues in his recent book *El cuarto poder en red: Por un periodismo (de código libre)* that journalism as we have known it in the 20th century is over for good, as proven by the complex Wikileaks case. He calls for a far more open journalism which is born of the collaboration between the general public and the professional journalist.

As I read the book, I thought that the key issue is where the money will be found to pay for the wages of the professionals in this new open source context. The 100 euros per review that Ruiz Garzón mentions and his own inability to make ends meet suggest that this is it: in a context in which everyone feels entitled to expressing an opinion on what they read on the net and in social networks, the economic value of professional opinion is sharply diminished. 100 euros may be a nice extra but not the basis of a full-time dedication to reading.

And so is culture diminished into an amateurism from which it may never recover.

26-VIII-2015 DUD BOOKS (AND WHY WRITERS PRODUCE THEM)

I have recently come across a good number of dud books. In this category I include a) books which I end up abandoning, despite my good will to read them; b) books which I

read to the end, often skimming and with great impatience, hoping against all hope that they improve towards the end. By 'books' I really mean 'novels' here. The common denominator of all these novels is that I have chosen them because of the hype surrounding them often in connection with an award. These are novels I very much wanted to read.

Just for you to see that I have tried all kinds, three of the most egregious duds have turned out to be: 1) *En la orilla* by the late Rafael Chirbes (Premio Nacional de Narrativa, 2014), 2) Richard Flanagan's *The Narrow Road into the Deep North* (Man Booker Prize 2014) and 3) Robert J. Sawyer's *Hominids*, first in the *Neanderthal Parallax* trilogy (Hugo Award Winner, 2003).

What's wrong with them? *En la orilla* suffers from the typical problem of Spanish literary narrative: the need to produce artistic prose eats up the need to give each character a realistic voice—if they're low-class, they cannot speak as a literary author writes. I abandoned it on page 60. Chirbes died a few days later, and you can't believe to understand how guilty I feel about giving up on him. It took me a little longer to abandon Flanagan's novel, say 100 pages. The problem? Well, if you're telling a harrowing story about Australian POWs in Burma during WWII (yes, building the same railway line featured in *Bridge over River Kwai*), why interleave it with the trite story of a pathetic adulterous affair? I don't care if both deal with the same protagonist—stick to your topic, write separate novels if you have two stories to tell.

In *Hominids* Sawyer tries hard to imagine what a civilization with Neanderthals as the surviving human species instead of Homo Sapiens would have been like. My! This is a thrilling topic, I thought. Yet, I hated the story because quite early in the novel Sawyer has the female protagonist endure a horrific rape, for no justified narrative reason, except that this terrible attack puts her off sex with the Neanderthal male lead (at least she finds the energy to comment mentally on the size of the bulky man's member... before the whole thing starts leaning towards formulaic romance). As many readers write in their reviews these days 'Meh'.

A 'dud' is something that does not work properly. In the many WWI novels I have read, soldiers are happy when a shell thrown at them turns out to be a dud, but that's the only circumstance in which duds are welcome. A Google search throws up two other meanings of 'dud books' I had not considered: a) books printed incorrectly (really?) and b) a category of bizarre books which has generated its own cult. An oldish article in *The Telegraph* refers to dud books as "truly awful books that you can't put down" (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/3656400/The-insider.html>). The author, Brian Lake, explains that the furore over 'dub books' started back in 1982, "when antiquarian booksellers were encouraged to display their 'Dud Books of All Time' at a book fair in York", running from the "unsaleable" to the "very funny". One example will do: *The Romance of Leprosy* (1949). Now, the 'dud books' I refer to here have sold well, are not funny and are the opposite of a page-turner. As Miss Mouse writes in Twitter, "After a couple of dud books I'm happily immersed in a can't-put-down-to-do-something-else one". Precisely.

Now, a book I have swallowed whole in one sitting is Miguel Dalmau and Román Piña Valls' joint effort, *La mala puta: Réquiem por la Literatura Española* (Sloper, 2014). Hemingway, the authors tell us, was the misogynist who originally called Spanish Literature a bitch and there is certainly plenty of misogyny in Dalmau's segment of the essay, which seems to forget that, apart from smothering agents and adoring wives, the world of Literature has women writers in it. To be 100% honest, he does say at one point that the women writers who are serious about their literary aspirations are braver than the men, but he leaves it at that. Anyway, I digress.

Reading this acid denunciation of the sorry state of national Spanish Literature, I realized I had forgotten about a fourth 'dud book' category: the unpublished book. Michael Chabon tells in *Manhood for Amateurs* how after writing his first novel, *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh*, he embarked on a gigantic novel which he had to abandon eventually—this dud book featured prominently in his delicious *Wonder Boys* as the novel that Grady, the protagonist writer, can never control. Dalmau has a much bitter experience to tell. He was about to publish a biography of Argentinean writer Julio Cortázar when, mysteriously, the late author's agents, Carme Balcells' Agency, withdrew her permission to use any quotations from Cortázar's books (see <http://www.elmundo.es/cultura/2014/12/08/5481b1c8e2704e72268b4591.html>). Apparently Cortázar's widow just didn't want this particular biography published.

Dalmau and Piña have many controversial points to raise about how the Spanish publishing industry burns the budding talent of new writers and how insidious marketing techniques are destroying the literary tastes of readers. I do recommend you to read the whole book. I'll highlight here just one of Dalmau's most provocative claims: the idea that writers have lost all ambition to produce work aesthetically bold, that is to say, to produce a literary masterpiece. Writers complain, Dalmau notes, that they are not rich and famous enough (em, or culturally relevant) but they never consider why there is no masterpiece among their works. Dalmau insists that writers lead a too sedate life to produce masterpieces (yes, he is of the Hemingway persuasion...) but just consider Emily Brontë or Emily Dickinson and you'll see how literary ambition has nothing to do with living la vida loca.

How's this connected with dud books? Here's my thesis: dud books are the result of this lack of literary ambition. Counterarguments: Chirbes was ambitious and the guys in the Ministerio de Cultura who awarded him the 'Nacional' were acknowledging that (supposedly). Well, yes, but here in Spain the problem is that there are no longer critics offering negative reviews—somebody says 'this is good Literature' and the rest meekly follow. Readers count for nothing. Second: does this apply to Sawyer, as well, who is not working within a genre which values literary prose? Yes it does because science fiction is far more literary than you would believe and also a genre that attracts writers keen on outstripping the rest regarding the power of their imagination. How about the Man Booker Prize? Well, Flanagan's novel is the kind which prompts the ugly question: "How could they award such an important prize to this... dud?"

Dud books respond to the culture of 'making do' (in Spanish 'si cuela, cuela'). If you start lowering standards because you want to build a book market which succeeds

financially even if it fails artistically (no matter the genre), writers stop making an effort. Those who do make an effort get no reward, either material or critical (most critics work for the same companies publishing the books, see my post on Ricard Ruiz Garzón), and either are pushed out or abandon themselves the literary field, often with great bitterness. Dalmau and Piña insist that the equivalents of, say, Borges and Steinbeck, exist today but first, they are not the big names you're thinking of and second, they probably work in total obscurity, which is why they will never produce a masterpiece.

There is another kind of dud book (sixth category?): call it the 'cute bad novel' (do I mean the 'cookie-cutter novel'?). Take Christina Baker Kline's *Orphan Train*, 4.5 stars on Amazon.com awarded by more than 16.000 voters—only 1% think this is a dud. Kline is a professional writer with a number of books under her belt and a nice list of awards and distinctions. She has a terrific subject, so far little known: how American charities shipped for decades East Coast orphans to the Midwest for adoption since there was no official system in place to take care of them. Needless to say, many of the 'train orphans' endured very unhappy experiences of abuse and exploitation. Kline claims to have done extensive research for her novel, focused on Niamh, an imaginary Irish girl adopted in the late 1920s. Yet, she chooses to endorse *Orphan Train* in her own website with a quote from fellow author, Ann Packer, which describes it as "A lovely novel about the search for family that also happens to illuminate a fascinating and forgotten chapter of American history". 'Lovely', or 'cute', or 'nice', or 'pretty' is not what you want to call an ambitious novel. Why? Because it smacks of superficiality, and this is what Kline's book is: superficial. I just wished I had read a non-fiction book about the very attractive subject.

Unfortunately, I already know that my next novel, Neal Stephenson's new work *Seveneves* is a dud. Yet I stick by him, hoping he'll publish again something as ambitious as his crazy trilogy *The Baroque Cycle*. Bracing myself for disappointment, then...

30-VIII-2015 AN INSIDIOUS VILLAIN: THE NEO-LIBERAL UNIVERSITY

In just about two weeks I have accumulated an impressive amount of articles on the pernicious effect of the neo-liberal university, mainly in Anglophone countries. Here they are:

*the conclusions of the inquest regarding the suicide of Prof. Stephan Grimm, of Imperial College, who killed himself unable to withstand the pressure of generating 200,000 pounds in grants or else lose his job.

<https://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/news/imperial-college-professor-stefan-grimm-was-given-grant-income-target/2017369.article>

<https://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/news/stefan-grimm-inquest-new-policies-may-not-have-prevented-suicide/2019563.article>

*an article also in *The Times Higher Education* supplement disclosing that “Grant income targets for individual academics (...) exist in some form in about one in six UK universities”, <https://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/node/128909>. Also, an article denouncing how British academics are embracing the “cult of no sleep” (a catchphrase coined by Arianna Huffington), <https://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/count-sheep-not-metrics>. Or insomnia as the solution to an increasing workload.

*several articles posted in Academia.edu about:

1) “Attention decay in science” (<http://arxiv.org/pdf/1503.01881v1.pdf>), a piece that discusses the decreasing ability of scientists to keep up with so many publications and, hence, the decreasing life-span of newly published papers.

2) “For Slow Scholarship: A Feminist Politics of Resistance through Collective Action in the Neoliberal University” by a collective of US and Canadian academics. The title is self-explanatory.

3) Rosalind Gill’s article (draft) “Academics, Cultural Workers and Critical Labour Studies”, in which she argues that “What is urgently needed (...) is a critical take that can move us beyond the individualised, toxic, self-blaming discourses that are characteristic of academics in the neo-liberal University.”

Something is, clearly, afoot, and it has to do with academia’s more fearsome, insidious villain: the neo-liberal university. The academic collective is asking three questions: 1) how can we stop the pressure that neo-liberal demands have put on the production of knowledge?, 2) why have we allowed this pressure to mount to these unhealthy, even lethal, extremes?, 3) how are we personally contributing to upholding values that undermine rather than exalt research? The person who drew my attention to Prof. Grimm’s suicide, a Lecturer at a British university, told me he feared scholars would soon be asked to generate not just grants for their research but income for their salaries.

The neo-liberal villain has made fewer inroads into the Spanish university because we are poorer. If the meagre public money allocated to all of us by the Ministry is even more radically cut, research will have to grind down (well, it is grinding down) for good as in Spain we are lacking the alternative sources—foundations, corporations, etc.—which the neoliberal villain has invited into the folds of the Anglophone university. The building where I work boasts a considerable amount of graffiti inviting private business to go home and leave us alone, I am not so naïve that I have missed the increased creeping in of alien funds and interests into our midst. What I am saying is that its impact is not (YET) as dramatic as it is elsewhere. There are still ways to be a university teacher and do no research, be productive at low-cost (myself), or dip into public funding now and then with no fixed target. I am, of course, talking about the Humanities. I know very well things are much worse for my scientist colleagues.

In a very peculiar way, what I read in all these articles connects with the current debate in Spain about working hours and productivity. The question we are asking

ourselves is why we produce less despite working longer hours than most of Europe; the answer is that when you force a person to be tied to their jobs most of the day their productivity slows down. If you excuse me, that is the reason why slavery did not work in the American South: slaves, knowing there was no leisure whatsoever for them, worked as slowly as they managed (and as the supervisor's lashes allowed them). Even without Abraham Lincoln's intervention the whole agrarian economy of slavery would soon have collapsed. So, back to my track: people would be far more productive in Spain if they stuck to eight solid hours and, generally speaking, a six-hour working day would benefit everyone all over the world. Also, create more jobs. This applies to academic work, as well.

A few years ago I had a serious health episode, as a consequence of my overworking. I got then told off by my doctor who, whether he lied to me or not, warned me that the ugly symptoms might come back if I overdid it again. I call the recurrent pain I feel now and then 'my speed limiter': when it hurts I know it is time to stop; if I can't stop immediately, then the sooner the better. I have, then, a very good excuse to stay away from professional e-mail on weekends and after 17:00 (if possible 16:30). Also, I have learned to limit myself to a strict daily schedule, 8:30 to 16:30 when at home. I am talking about academic work apart from reading, as I read all as much as I can everyday and weekends. This blog is part of my spare time, not my daily schedule by the way.

I am, as everyone knows, a productive academic and I'm writing all this here to show that there is no reason to subject ourselves to killing work regimes (as I used to do). Also, this summer I have answered all emails from colleagues claiming they had no proper time for a holiday, explaining that I have indeed taken a holiday, as my health is at risk and I am a worker entitled to a number of days off. Never mind how much I have read in my free days, as I would read anyway. I am learning the hard way to set limits (like, this weekend I am not available to a student who is finishing his MA dissertation, sorry).

Perhaps I am lucky that the neo-liberal villain has not yet grabbed me by the throat, I am a tenured civil servant (we'll see how this withstands the Catalan move for independence) and UAB has no grant target for me—though a few things are questionable about the teaching target. I know plenty of academics who suffer from diverse bodily and psychological complaints connected with our performance at work. When I complained to my partner, 'who would have believed that being a college teacher would be so stressful?', he, who does work for a neo-liberal multinational corporation just answered, 'well, try to do less'.

I am not asking any colleagues to publicly embrace laziness, as many still do in Spain, but to take it easy (or easier). Feminist or not, try 'slow academics.' For, after all, as the article I have named, "Attention decay in science", suggests few colleagues read what we end up producing and it is increasingly harder to stand up in a system that prefers quantity to quality.

Please, consider the sad fate of Prof. Grimm—and the cynicism of an inquest which concludes that "new policies may not have prevented [his] suicide". And shame on you

if you're thinking that the problem is this poor man was too weak to keep up with the demands of research. For the worst aspect of the insidious neo-liberal villain is how many claim there is no villain –and how it makes villains of us all.

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