

THE JOYS OF TEACHING LITERATURE

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PLEASE, NOTE:

These are the posts that I have published in my academic professional blog *The Joys of Teaching Literature* (blogs.uab.cat/saramartinalegre/, since September 2010-) between September 2016 and August 2017. The volume, like the six previous ones, covers, then, a complete academic year. I have not re-edited the texts. They may show some dissimilarities with the final published posts. The differences are, however, negligible.

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6 September 2016 / ON THE VERGE OF OBLIVION: HOW WRITERS (MAY) FADE FROM SIGHT

We, readers, seem to believe that the permanence of writers is automatic. Nothing needs to be done to have any book we want at our command, whether it is first-hand or second-hand. Only irrelevant authors and works sink into nothingness. We smile smugly whenever someone praises a long-forgotten author nobody else has heard of, never mind that this person was a best-selling writer in his or her time. Matters, however, are not that simple and the process by which the machinery that moves forward a writer's career grinds to a halt is always worth-considering.

These musings come about because of the two dead authors occupying much of my time this summer and for very different reasons: Patrick O'Brian and Manuel de Pedrolo. I have now started reading the ninth novel in the highly addictive Aubrey-Maturin series by O'Brian, which expands to twenty finished volumes and an unfinished one. As I have narrated here in this blog, I have translated Pedrolo's SF masterpiece *Mecanoscrit del segon origen* from Catalan into English (I'm celebrating that Wesleyan University Press has accepted publishing it!). Both writers have something in common, despite their very different positioning at an international level and in terms of their success: they hardly exist for academia and, thus, being dead, they depend now on their readers for their survival into literary immortality. In very different circumstances.

The size and the depth of the Aubrey-Maturin cult is simply staggering. It's what we call in Spanish 'un secreto a voces', which sounds more colourful than the English 'open secret', for we mean 'loud'. I recently came across an article in *The Guardian*, "Why Patrick O'Brian is Jane Austen at Sea" (<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/nov/28/why-patrick-obrian-is-jane-austen-at-sea>) and I was fascinated by the many comments from readers, explaining that they have read the series several times over, each time loving it even more. I was mystified by a woman who objected to the view that you can enjoy the books without

caring very much for the nautical detail by answering that in her all-female weekly reading group they discussed all that detail down to the last nuance. I don't quite see myself discussing when topgallant sails should be displayed. Um, perhaps not yet.

Since the series is rich not only in nautical lore but also in other matters such as the state of natural philosophy in the early 19th century, O'Brian has inspired that kind of internet resource and companion book that unpacks all the research that he packed into his books. It's a wonderful nerdish pursuit but I worry that the work done to clarify what kind of dessert is a 'drowned baby' (a boiled suet pudding with raisins, see <http://www.wwnorton.com/pob/vol3ii.htm#pudding>) may throw the baby out with the bathwater. No matter how much information you assemble about a favourite narrative, whether this is the Aubrey-Maturin series or SF equivalent *Star Trek*, data cannot satisfy if analysis is missing (and for the SF nerds, yes, maybe I'm cracking a joke at Data's expense). As I noted in my previous post about O'Brian, the number of MLA-registered academic pieces on the series is a scant 32, not including the thesis that my colleague John Styles penned and almost managed to lose. How's that low figure possible, I wonder?

The negligible academic attention paid to O'Brian (and to many other writers of a much higher impact like Terry Pratchett) apparently obeys the classic prejudice against so-called escapist fiction. In an attractive collection of articles by Neil Gaiman which I have read this summer, *The View from the Cheap Seats*, he wrongly attributes to C.S. Lewis a witty retort against escapism, which actually came from the mouth of Lewis's friend, J.R.R. Tolkien: "What class of men would you expect to be most preoccupied with, and hostile to, the idea of escape?", he asked Lewis. Tolkien himself gave, Lewis tells us, "the obvious answer: jailers". And so, as crowds of readers enthuse over O'Brian, academics take him with pincers and in very small doses, and just because he reminds them of Jane Austen. This, in view of the frantic activity that Jack Aubrey and Stephen Maturin display in their journeys and of the massive research that O'Brian displays in his books, is a very lazy comparison. Yet, the academic lashing of O'Brian onto poor Jane's back has given Jack and Stephen's father at least a foothold onto Literary history, if only as a footnote, and what a strange one, in Austen's modern legacy.

I don't think that O'Brian and Manuel de Pedrolo ever met, though O'Brian, who lived in Colliure (Northern Catalonia) and created in Maturin the most important Catalan character in international literature, would have enjoyed the meeting. After all Maturin and Pedrolo share the same political views on Catalan independentism. The lesson I'm learning these days about Pedrolo is that it is not always clear why writers approach the brink of oblivion. Let me explain the case.

Pedrolo is remembered for *Mecanoscrit*, the best-selling, most widely read novel in the Catalan language, with sales up to 1,300,000 copies since publication in 1974 (we are approximately 10 million speakers). It turns out he loathed its success and often declared that if he'd known he'd be remembered for *Mecanoscrit*, the book would have never been written. In the excellent documentary by Eduard Miguel *Manuel de Pedrolo: Trencant l'oblit* (2015, <https://vimeo.com/131804610>), Antoni Munné-Jordà

aptly compares Pedrolo's case to that of French writer Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, a highly accomplished author today remembered only for the children's book *The Little Prince*. Understandably, Pedrolo, who poured his endless energy into more than 120 volumes, felt chagrined that a book he regarded as a minor piece would represent all his production and even obscure his best work (the 11-volume series *Temps Obert*). This is why his daughter Adelais has poured her own energies but limited resources into building the Fundació Pedrolo (established 2005) to maintain the memory of her father alive. Not that this is an easy task.

When I attended this last Sunday a presentation of Pedrolo's novel *Procés de contradicció suficient*, rescued and re-issued by Hugo Camacho's small press Orciny, I learnt from Adelais de Pedrolo herself that only four of her father's long list of books are available from Catalan bookshops. She is hopeful that by 2018, the centennial celebration of the author's birth, the list will extend to 10 titles. I'm speaking of an author who is simply indispensable in Catalan literature, a man who was, as Jordi Coca has said, a complete Literature by himself—he wrote poetry, drama, essays, articles, memoirs, letters, short fiction, novels... and in all possible registers from the poetical experimental to the functional prose required for fast-driven plots. Yet, the bibliographical search I have been doing these days has resulted in a list of similar dimensions to the one for O'Brian in MLA, perhaps with just a few more monographic volumes but still with no major study of the works. Even more surprisingly, the number of doctoral dissertations on Pedrolo which I have located is only four, of which none has been produced by a Department of Catalan in Catalonia.

One of these dissertations was submitted in Salamanca, within a doctoral programme in aspects of Spanish fiction, which would have horrified Pedrolo. The author never appeared in the Spanish media and always maintained that Catalonia was a colonized nation. Now, here's the paradox: having suffered terribly from the restrictions of Franco's irrational censorship (Pedrolo was the most heavily censored writer between 1950 and 1970), he nonetheless managed to antagonize the Catalan political and literary establishment of his time. Hence, the story goes, his odd ostracizing.

According to Adelais, he was a painfully shy man who was simply bad at small talk and who hated the socializing rituals of his writing peers. Yet, if, despite having been honoured with the Premi d'Honor de les Lletres Catalanes (in 1979), he was buried in 1990 with the only company of his wife and his daughter, something else is amiss. Eduard Miguel's documentary suggests that Pedrolo's fierce independentism earned him the enmity of the Catalan nationalists then involved in the delicate process of the Spanish Transition. These nationalists, so the thesis goes, would have blocked Pedrolo out of any significant public positioning, implicitly including the study of his work at a university level. Arguably. Twenty-six years after his death the political situation has changed so much that Pedrolo's opinions have been embraced by the same political party that back in 1980s labelled him a problematic writer. Yet, he does not seem to be re-emerging from academic limbo, or only very slowly. In the meantime, let's recall, his books have been practically abandoned by those with the power to make decisions about publishing them. It seems to me that, for whatever reasons, the potential cultural capital embodied by the 1,300,000 persons who bought a copy of *Mecanoscrit*

and its many more readers has been sadly squandered. Please, Catalan Literature colleagues, do something!

All this brings me back to my starting point: how dead writers approach the brink of oblivion. O'Brian, who died in 2000, is still alive in the many readers who praise his work. From what I see in GoodReads, he seems to be recruiting new young readers, some of whom might eventually produce the academic work that turns a popular classic into a canonical figure. Here I'm using canonical in the humble sense of worth writing about from an academic point of view, and not meaning 'firmly in the canon' (like, um, Jane Austen). The Anglo-American university is demonstrating a notable flexibility in the incorporation of successful, popular, cultish fiction.

The case of Pedrolo is far more worrying because there is an ill-defined ideological component interfering with the purely academic approach. The rise of independentism may benefit the cause of Pedrolo but let me tell you that I didn't see any young readers waving independentist flags, literally or symbolically, in the presentation I attended, which was part of the Setmana del Llibre en Català. We'll see, then, whether the 2018 centennial pushes Pedrolo away from the brink of oblivion and for the best possible reasons: our admiration for the high quality of his immense literary output.

13 September 2016 / THE PROBLEM OF THE DWINDLING ATTENTION SPAN: HOW IT AFFECTS TEACHING LITERATURE

If you check the internet you will soon come up with a flurry of news items and articles explaining that the human attention span is now shorter than that of goldfish. Whereas goldfish can focus their whole attention for 9 seconds, humans can only manage 8. The figure for 2000 was 10 seconds, which is why researchers in psychology are claiming that our crazy, highly addictive use of smartphones and tablets has much to blame for attention span deficit (the smartphone-tablet revolution started more or less with the 21st century).

My own impression, allow me to digress, is that the dwindling attention span is also (or mainly) connected with the editing styles of music videos since the 1990s. When MTV started back in the 1980s music videos were often narrative, rather than performative (=showing musicians playing and singers singing), and used much longer cuts than today; in some cases they were mini-films, like John Landis's landmark video *Thriller* (1983) for Michael Jackson. Today most music videos boast a convulsive editing style which seems designed to show the corresponding (female) star in as many outfits as possible; choreographies are also chopped down to the point that it is hard to say whether performers can dance at all, or for more than 3 seconds. I used to enjoy watching music videos but now I find myself unable to watch one for 3 minutes as, ironically, I get bored with so many different shots... Our attention span, as you can see, depends on each media and within these, on each text.

The editing style of music videos was transferred in the late 1990s not only to cinema (as video directors became film directors) but also to many new-style children's cartoon series and, more recently, to the self-presentation strategies of the myriad YouTubers, who, like modern-day Hamelin players, enchant the young and are destroying TV. All—music videos, Hollywood films, cartoon series, YouTubers videos and, I'm sure, plenty of video games—affect the younger generation by shortening their general attention span, no doubt about this; at the same time, all these media must adapt their storytelling strategies to the diminishing attention span they have generated, resulting in your classic vicious circle.

Funnily, films are much longer than they used to be: 90 minutes was the classic Hollywood measure, now most films run to 120 minutes or more. At the same time, children and, above all, YA fiction is also full of very long series, beginning with the *Harry Potter* heptalogy. As I'm sure you, reader, have noticed, the films—and I mean here the blatantly commercial Hollywood films using genres such as SF, fantasy, superhero comics or videogames—are a messy succession of independent scenes that hardly cohere into a logical sequence, if at all. They are intended to be full of thrills to keep (young) audiences engaged but most often turn out to be as boring as any current MTV video. This is fine with film studio executives as they expect to make money in just the first two weekends, enough to fill their pockets and keep the machinery greased. However, many are commenting on this summer that this kind of expendable blockbuster is flopping hard—perhaps because older audiences, who enjoy a well-told story, are turning their back on them. The 1959 *Ben-Hur* remains a solid achievement whereas the 2016 version is painfully embarrassing.

Now, for the books. And teaching Literature. I learned from my experience with the *Harry Potter* books as a lecturer that the attention span of the very young (7 upwards) can stretch amazingly if given an exciting text. I am also learning, nonetheless, that not even *Harry Potter* works if the child in question rejects reading as entertainment. The young, here is my point, are divided and have always been divided into two classes: persons with a remarkable attention span (good readers, hence good students) and persons with a short attention span (poor readers, hence poor students). I'm afraid that what is fast diminishing is not the attention span of *all* young children but of those who do not have an inborn long attention span. Since children with a long-lasting attention span are always in the minority, and since the impact of the computer-related technologies on *all* the young (and not so young...) is undeniable, the current panorama is moving towards a situation in which only a few (readers) will be able to compete with the goldfish. This is tragic for humanity in general and for Literature teachers in particular, as we, needless to say, work with texts that require a very steady attention span from readers.

I'm not going to get again into the matter of why young persons who simply loathe reading register for a degree in the Humanities. I want to make the point that the resistance to reading is connected with this problem of the diminishing attention span. In the age of Twitter and the 140 characters 8 seconds are all we are willing to give up of our time and attention, both to read and to write. Here in this blog I have been gradually aiming at readers with a longer attention span: I started with 500-word posts

six years ago, now I'm past the 1500 word count in most posts. For many, this will be too much, but, then, I'm not satisfied that 140 characters express anything worth considering (this is, ironically, a very good measure for insults, hence the many trolls plaguing Twitter users).

Children's attention is scattered among the many invitations by different media to do something fun and in a short period of time. Reading seems to them time-consuming and very laborious in comparison to, for instance, watching YouTubers. As we know, the less we read, the worse our reading is: constant practice not only increases speed but also attention span. The fastest readers can read for the longest periods because they're extremely practised in reading. Ask yourself, teacher or student: How many pages of a fiction book can you read in one hour? How many hours can you read for, non-stop? I know you'll tell me that, no matter how experienced you are, sometimes reading a sonnet exhausts your attention span... Yes, I know. Let's take Dickens's *Oliver Twist*, which I am to start teaching next week: how much time do you need to read it? Did Dickens, incidentally, introduce serialization because he noticed that the diminishing attention span of Victorian readers required selling them stories in little bits? (Remember that in fast-paced 19th century USA readers preferred short stories to novels; *Moby Dick* was some freak phenomenon...). If 8 seconds is the average attention span, how do I keep students interacting with me for the 4500 seconds that a 75-minute session has? We, teachers, are told that we need to change tack every 10 minutes or so, but even 10 minutes are 600 seconds...

I have recently learned from the children in my family something else about attention span that connects with repetition and with the difficulties that many students have to summarize plots, highlight main points and establish connections. I was watching *Despicable Me 2* with my youngest niece (aged 7), and she started reciting all the dialogue for each scene before it was uttered by the characters. This was my third time seeing the film, but she claims to have seen it... fourteen times. No wonder she knew the dialogue. However, when I asked her to summarize the plot (she might like to tell a friend why the film is so cool) she had no idea where to begin and simply did not manage to produce any coherent summary (which frustrated her enormously!). Typical among the kids her age, she's good at retaining detail, even at memorizing many favourite bits, but not so good at understanding and building logical sequence. Repetition is, for that reason, always a pleasure, for whereas it irks us, adults who can recall plot, it offers children every time a renewed pleasure which is not spoiled by the anticipation of the known bits, quite the opposite.

In this sense, films are necessarily far more pleasurable than reading since they are narrated to a quite passive spectator. This is similar to the typical situation in which children unable to read on their own ask their parents to read them the same story again and again and again. Trouble begins when we tell children to start reading alone and take an active role. Some love it (fewer and fewer...) and most hate it (their numbers are increasing). The Setmana del Llibre en Català recently announced that sales for children's books in Catalonia have diminished by 3% in the last year, which means that we, adults, are buying fewer books for children because they reject them. Nobody knows what makes some children connect with reading; you may raise two

kids in exactly the same way and one will turn out to be a reader and the other won't. Surely, it must be some kind of neurobiological predisposition attached to the pleasure centres of the brain which happens to be activated by consuming printed type. If the other children lack this predisposition, then there is nothing any reading programme can do for them—unless we start considering genetic engineering. I worry, not only as a Literature teacher but also as a plain citizen concerned about the future, for no culture can survive without passing on its knowledge in writing. If you don't love Literature, fancy loving mechanical handbooks...

Finally, allow me to use a few lines to consider retentive memory, for perhaps in the end this matters even more than attention span. I mean here specifically the ability to remember what you read, which in turn helps you both to offer coherent plot summaries and to recall books read long ago. You may have a considerable attention span and read for hours but this does not mean that your retentive memory is guaranteed. I can read Dickens for hours but I always have tremendous problems to retain his convoluted plots, which is why I need to plot summaries, either borrowed or my own. I can offer a nice plot summary of *Oliver Twist* because I have read it many times but I can't do that with any of the other Dickens books I have only read once. If you're studying or teaching Literature, then, there's no way around this: we need to summarize the plots of the fiction and drama we read, or the main arguments for essays, non-fiction and so on. Working on your retentive memory does increase attention span for it trains you to identify the highlights in the text.

What fails when you give a book many tries but you do not manage to read is your attention span, which is absolutely flexible, never rigid, and connected with your preferences. I'm happily reading the twenty Patrick O'Brian novels but no way I could go past page fifty of Thomas Pynchon's *Bleeding Edge*. This is, in any case, much more than 8 seconds.

20 September 2016 / WHAT FOR?: ON GIVING OURSELVES TOO MUCH (ACADEMIC) TROUBLE

I have just announced the third one-day workshop TELLC (Teaching English Language, Literature and Culture), which is a very modest Departmental event aimed at gathering together my colleagues to discuss what we do in class. Last year I invited the English Studies specialists at the Universitat de Barcelona to join in and this year I have extended the same invitation to the other English Departments in Catalonia (Lleida and Tarragona). A friend emailed me back asking me whether I really wanted to set this in motion, as neither the workshop itself not the corresponding publication (see <http://ddd.uab.cat/record/132688>) could count for our official CVs. His is the kind of remark that makes me pause and think with dismay, sure, what is all this for? So here I am trying to explain myself.

I first thought of TELLC because, as happens in other Departments, possibly around the world, we are constantly discussing bureaucracy but not pedagogy. When the time

comes to revise the Syllabus, around April, we exchange a flurry of emails about whether we need to alter any matter and that only if we share the course with other teachers. If we don't, then basically we do as we please, with little real feedback from colleagues (or students). If we share a course, we discuss possible innovations by email because since so many teachers are part-time associates with two jobs it is simply impossible to have team meetings, as we should (also more than once a year). The most we have managed is introducing the novelty of publishing in the Department's website a joint reading list for everyone to see what everyone else is teaching, yet a list gives you by no means an impression of what we do in class. And here I am not even mentioning the Language teachers who teach mysterious matters such as CLIL.

So, I just thought that it would be healthy and a nice investment in team building to spare one Friday a year to tell each other about what happens in our classes. Now, to appease concerns that this was worth nothing for our CVs I convinced UAB to certify the workshop as a teacher-training event of the kind we are supposed to attend regularly, hoping that this will also be helpful for our teaching assessment every few years by the Catalan Government. I also made a very pretty diploma, a kind of document we academics fondly collect in Spain, where authorities seem to suspect university teachers of being inveterate liars and where you need to present certificates for every single activity. The first two TELLC meetings (2015 and 2016), I believe, have been enjoyable and productive and I'm happy enough. We'll see how TELLC progresses in the future. If the workshop fades away into oblivion at least I will have done my best.

Organizing this workshop, like writing this blog, is something I could very well not do: it is a self-imposed task which takes time away from my research. You know what it is like: answering lots of e-mail messages, booking a room (no easy job in my overcrowded university), producing a programme, chasing colleagues for them to hand in the text for publication, editing the booklet... you name it. These days I have some extra time to spare for pursuits like this because I am one of the privileged researchers granted the benefit of doing less teaching thanks to Minister Wert, now gone from the Government. My not teaching two classes explains my apparent hyperactivity, also expressed in the translation of Pedroló's *Mecanoscrit del segon origen* and in my current editing of two monographic issues for *Science Fiction Studies* (on Spanish SF) and for *Alambique* (on *Mecanoscrit*). I don't know how to explain this better but after wasting my time in endless bureaucracy for three years as Degree Coordinator, I suddenly feel very, very happy to be investing my time in matters more closely related to my teaching and research. Here is another one, the booklet I have produced with my BA students and aimed at guiding readers to navigate their way into SF short fiction: <http://ddd.uab.cat/record/163528>

I am very well aware that those of us who have our fingers in many pies are a pest for those who want to be left alone. Sorry about this but, well, an invitation can always be rejected. I acknowledge that I am active on many fronts but, among other motivations, I always bear in mind the double daily routines of my associate colleagues (and friends) in the Department; I owe it up to them to make the most of my time as a privileged tenured teacher. I don't support, however, and will never support the obsessive

research type who thinks that we should not enjoy any spare time and, although I am certainly guilty of using at least part of my weekends for work, I make a point of limiting my daily work.

I think this is a lesson we still need to learn in Spain: 8 hours a day can be extremely productive, much more than 12 hours, if you do not procrastinate. I love the sound of my computer closing down by 17:00 at the latest, earlier if my day before the screen begins by 8:00. Otherwise, what is the point? There is always, of course, the tricky matter of whether reading (or seeing films and TV series) post 17:00 counts as work but, believe me, I'm the first one to subscribe to the idea that daily leisure is an unalienable right. I recently employed one afternoon in making a pair of shoes for a doll and I had a whale of a time... A second pair is soon coming. So, not at all, it's not always work, work, work...

Now that I have established that one can run a reasonable academic career by avoiding the pitfalls of procrastination and by setting limits to your daily routine to always enjoy leisure (I don't have kids, that would make a difference...), I'll address the matter of how these 8 daily hours can be used. And I will acknowledge that I suffer from the main Spanish academic malady: I do lots of activities because I find no way to focus on the one activity I really want to carry out—writing books. You must be thinking well, just stop doing everything else and you will have time to write the books. But here we go back to the 'no cuenta' mantra and the power of the CV in our lives.

If you can, imagine a CV with nothing else but, say, 6 books, produced in 25 years (this is how long I have been active as a teacher/researcher). No conferences (either attended or organized), no articles in journals or collective volumes, no extras such as giving seminars or taking part in tribunals. Just pure book-writing besides the exact amount of teaching you need to do (this is how I imagined my career when I was 18). I might be wrong but even if the books were first rank, would prospective employers and tribunals be impressed? I doubt it. We live in the age of the bulky CV and of the fisherman's strategy—by which I mean that we need to be constantly active because we never know whether the fish will bite. I have just been told, for instance, that a book chapter I handed in one year ago might be published in 2018. If I had counted on that work for urgent assessment, then I'd be lost, hence the need to multiply myself and my work for we never know when work will be published and what really counts for the Ministry.

Take, and with this I'll finish, my being part of the Eurocon team (again, something I am doing because I have less teaching to do). This is an SF and fantasy literary festival addressed to fandom, of no academic import. Technically, a waste of time. Yet, Eurocon has brought to me very many new contacts, some of which have led to wonderful academic activities (like the ones around *Mecanoscrit*) which I would have never embarked on. I'm struggling to find a label for the kind of activity that brings in unexpected academic perks... The case is also that I am learning very, very much because, after all, I am constantly surrounded by very keen readers, most of them really erudite in the SF and fantasy film. And, well, I'm airing my brain beyond the university walls, which is always healthy. I gave a talk about *Harry Potter* before an

audience of 200 enthusiastic readers a couple of Sundays ago at PotterCon and although I could have spent that Sunday morning on the beach, I knew where I would more fun. And it did not count for my CV.

To sum up: I'm trying to downplay the impact of the 'no cuenta' mantra and just enjoy myself. I enjoy organizing TELLC because it is about bringing colleagues together as I enjoy being part of this little mad world which is Eurocon. If I didn't enjoy myself, then I would not do it, for one thing is clear to me: engaging in academic activities for the sake of an ultimate goal like fattening up your CV feels to me like duty, and that is not enjoyable. I think that enjoyment is essential for creativity and duty a total dampener, even though I am a most dutiful person (I teach Victorian Literature, how could I not believe in duty?).

So, odd as this may sound, I'm all for fun to increase creativity, which increases productivity. Never ever forgetting that our CV should not take the place of our life.

27 September 2016 / GOOD BUT NOT GREAT: ROBERTO CALASSO'S DIAGNOSIS OF CURRENT LITERATURE

Italian writer and editor Roberto Calasso has been recently news in Spain for winning the quite new Premio Formentor de las Letras, also awarded so far to a few Spanish-language writers that he names among his favourite: Carlos Fuentes, Juan Goytisolo, Javier Marías, Enrique Vila-Matas and Ricardo Piglia (no women...). In at least two interviews, in *El País* and *La Vanguardia*, Calasso states that although many good books are published today, few are truly great. He attributes this to a revolution started in the mid 19th century which by expanding the territory of Literature ended up problematizing the very definition of this term. Confusingly, he names, in the *Vanguardia* interview, Borges as a main contributor to this new trend, which I myself would connect with someone far more popular, like Charles Dickens or Stephen King (a Recipient of the National Book Foundation's Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters, 2003). In this interview, plagued by an amazing series of typos..., Calasso explains that the overambitious aims of writers as different as Musil and Joyce appear to be no longer relevant today.

I haven't had yet the pleasure of reading Calasso, a gap in my education that I will solve as soon as I can (it turns out that my local public library is better equipped than my university library when it comes to titles by this Italian author). Calasso has been on my list of books to read since he published in 1990 *Las Bodas de Cadmo y Harmonía* (*Le nozze di Cadmo e Armonia*, 1988) back when I was about to start my doctoral studies... Suddenly, I lost track of the European intellectuals that, according to *El País*, then a very cultured newspaper, any educated Spanish reader should be interested in. I needed to focus on my thesis and, as we know, the anglophone world is not exactly conversant with the European intellectuality, despite the academic fashions built around Derrida and company. Perhaps I should have read Calasso then, after all, for my dissertation was hell-bent on showing, precisely, that Literature extends beyond

high-culture and into the best of so-called popular fiction. This is why I chose a multi-level, cross-cultural subject as my topic: monstrosity.

In preparation for this post I have read “Roberto Calasso, The Art of Fiction No. 217”, a not very exciting interview of 2012 by Lila Azam Zanganeh which you may find in the *Paris Review* website (<http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/6168/the-art-of-fiction-no-217-roberto-calasso>). This text begins with the claim that “Roberto Calasso is a literary institution of one”, as editor of Adelphi, “Italy’s most prestigious publishing house, for forty years” and writer of more than a dozen books. Calasso, Zanganeh assures us, “has come to stand for a lost ideal”, which I will label ‘the person of letters’, the sum total of the reader, writer, critic, editor and intellectual. The word ‘erudite’, now so quaint, also comes to mind to define him. He wrote his PhD dissertation on the theory of hieroglyphs in Sir Thomas Browne; his supervisor was Mario Praz. He speaks Italian, French, English, Spanish, German, add to this Latin and Greek, learned in school, and Sanskrit which he studied “on my own”.

I fully agree with Calasso’s view that, in our days, many books and writers are good but lacking in ambition to be truly great. I am sure that his impressions are far more accurate than mine, as he is a superlative reader both professionally, as an editor, as personally, as a writer, and in many languages to boot. My subjective, impressionistic, far less erudite opinion, however, is similar and, I would add, applicable to all kinds of fiction I read, in all genres. The number of solid novelists seems to be increasing in all fronts (though this does not mean that the best writers are the most hyped ones), yet I personally feel constantly dissatisfied as a reader. I am not impressed, as I was when I read Thomas Mann as a young girl, or later, to name a living author, when I read Salman Rushdie’s prodigious *Midnight Children*. I’m not awed by any living author. Yes, of course, I have been expressing here my total devotion to Terry Pratchett, Iain M. Banks, and now Patrick O’Brian, but this is not the same. Wonderful as they were, they have not changed the face of Literature. They are singular worlds each one of them but not world-changers, which is what I miss.

My friend Laura Gimeno and I had a shortish conversation about Calasso’s opinion (for in our hectic university, there is not even time for one hour spent over coffee). She believes that originality is the problem, for it seems impossible to narrate something new or to innovate narrative technique as thoroughly as, she says, the Modernists did. I am more sceptical about the importance of innovation since taking it too far leads to Joyce’s *Finnegans’ Wake*, and, really, this is a dead end. Also about originality in the choice of subject matter, for although this is not lacking today at all, chancing upon a new tale does not guarantee greatness. Laura argues, very convincingly, that greatness is not compatible with the current shape which literary careers have taken, with a notable first book written away from the limelight and then a series of mediocre works produced under pressure from publishers and critics to consolidate commercial success, even in the case of writers with unwavering literary ambition. No doubt. We, academics, have a similar problem, caused by the pressure to work for the career rather than have the career develop out of work that should be creative but that feels mechanical.

A hurried pace of writing, then, can result in good but not outstanding literary work (unless you are a genius, that is, a concept I will leave aside for the time being). Now let me go back to erudition. And the mid-19th century.

I don't think you can be truly ambitious as a writer without being an erudite. By erudite I understand here a careful student of the field of Literature, in any of its many sub-genres. One thing is being well-read and another being an erudite, which means that you can command a vast list of resources that will fill your pages with this something else that awes readers. Let me use an image. Suppose that Literature is a mountain and that you, as a writer, want to reach the top, as other writers have done. It makes sense then to study their methods by reading their books and so, once you know all the paths they took, attempt your own. All the way up to the top with ambition and determination. My impression is that today's writers are in a hurry to reach the top of a lower peak, say Annapurna instead of Everest, and that they'd rather take shortcuts—an award, for instance, of the many given today, from the Nobel to the Nebula (for best SF and fantasy...).

Now, if you are a writer you probably want to strangle me at this point. Here I am complaining that all of you lack ambition and the mettle to reach true greatness. Navigating your way into today's ferocious literary market is enough to dampen the most ferocious ambition, I am sure about that, yes if you do not raise the bar, who else is going to do it? You must also be thinking that this idiotic idea about erudition can only come from someone who gets a regular monthly salary and who is, basically, paid to read and teach a few hours a week. Fair enough. But, then, what do we make of a Literature in which writers are not erudite? Or less erudite than their prospective audience expects. This is a recurring conversation I am having these days, about many different writers: I find him/her clever but not overwhelmingly intelligent, and when I feel I know more than the writer, I disconnect. Replace intelligent with erudite and here we are.

Having offered the argument that erudition is the source of literary ambition (or should be), I must consider of course whether Calasso's kind of erudition is still possible today. The answer is no. I think that the only ones defending erudition are the much maligned nerds ('frikis' in Spain), for they are the only readers with a passion for increasing their knowledge of the genre they love, both in breadth and depth. In science-fiction, in particular, a double erudition is required: literary (connected with the genre) and scientific (connected with its topic of interest). In contrast, the literary novel (at least the anglophone variety) is being flattened down by writers who mistake detail for depth and by readers who, as a student told my friend Laura, believe that Henry James is a bad writer (too dense). Trapped between writers with little time and interest in being erudite in their own field and by readers for whom a man like Calasso is a strange freak, Literature cannot soar. Perhaps Calasso is being generous by calling 'good' what others might call 'mediocre'.

I am not forgetting the mid-19th century. Erudition is connected with leisure, meaning here time at your disposal for study. When the Industrial Revolution rebuilt our time around the merciless ticking of the clock, it destroyed leisure—that of the aristocracy,

of the gentleman but also of the peasant. Leisure was regained little by little by the urban working classes as a new concept: time for fun after work, not for cultivation. Some of us still use leisure for both, fun and cultivation, but in such short stretches that erudition can hardly become an earnest pursuit. The very rich, by the way, have abandoned erudition altogether, consuming their everlasting leisure in fun. A figure like Lord Byron, who had as much capacity for fun as for erudition (and literary ambition) is now unthinkable.

And I'll stop here, see if I can use the little leisure left in this Sunday afternoon for some reading. To increase my erudition... And hopefully have some fun.

4 October 2016 / MEDIA EXPOSURE AND THE OSBCURE PROFESSOR IN THE AGE OF THE YOUTUBER

I am mystified by the expression 'an obscure professor'. Since 'obscure' is so close to Spanish 'oscuro' (meaning, of course, 'dark') I tend to think of people like Professor Snape, who teaches 'Defence against the Dark Arts' at Harry Potter's school Hogwarts as an 'obscure professor'. 'Obscure' has diverse meanings, according to the Oxford Dictionary, such as 'not discovered or known about', 'uncertain', 'not clearly expressed', 'vague'; other dictionaries add 'unclear', 'abstruse'. Yet in the phrase 'an obscure professor' the accent falls on 'not important or well known', 'inconspicuous', 'unimportant'. Not Snape-like.

I am not sure what the opposite of 'obscure' is in this context, I hesitate between 'distinguished' and 'famous', as they seem to be such different concepts. What seems clear to me is that 'obscure' appears to be a reproach and an insult against those university teachers who never manage to leave their dark corner and make it into the spotlight. Indeed, spurred by being labelled 'an obscure professor' by an unkind journalist, Prof. Paul Boller called his successful autobiographical volume *Memoirs of an Obscure Professor* (1992).

Last week I stopped being an obscure professor for a few days—and it was fun. The Spanish translation of John Thorne's play *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*, a text supervised by JK Rowling but not written by her, was published on Monday 26. The internet helped journalists to decide that I am a *Harry Potter* expert because they found information about my elective course of two years ago and the related publications. And, so, I got invitations to express my (critical) opinion in *El Periódico* and on *Catalunya Ràdio*. That was on Tuesday 27. On Wednesday 28 I joined the translator and one of my students for a talk at bookshop Gigamesh with fans. As I waited for the act to begin, a young woman approached me mike in hand, placed me before a camera and started asking me questions. The Gigamesh talk is now online and what the young woman filmed appeared in the national news, TVE's Telediario, that evening—five seconds, no more.

I informed my Department colleagues about the radio talk (with the PotterCon organizers) and sent the podcast. Not the Telediario link as I was horrified to have been caught looking exhausted at the end of a long day, nursing a headache and talking so fast that it seemed someone was threatening me with a gun. Yet, some colleagues did see me, also my mum, and, as I found out today, even some neighbours. Here's a constant in everyone's reactions: all have congratulated me. So, really the theme of this post is why I was congratulated and on what.

I asked one of my colleagues, we had a good laugh about it and she speculated that, somehow, 'congratulations' means in this case 'you have managed to become visible beyond the Department walls'. I don't know whether any of my colleagues participates in the media regularly and I can only recall a TV appearance by one of them: Josep Cuní, then heading Catalan TV3's evening news, called Prof. Aránzazu Usandizaga to comment on the death of Graham Greene. This was 1991, 25 years ago. I recall her complaining that she knew nothing about Greene, annoyed that journalists believe that experts are always at their beck and call to fill in news time. Well, that's another matter. My point is that being on the media is so exceptional among my colleagues that I have found myself celebrated not quite for my particular intervention but, somehow, for making all of us visible. To my amusement, my 5-minutes of glory (not even 15!) is something we can use for the Department's report on our collective transfer of knowledge to society.

If you think about it, there are many levels of obscurity. Some teachers manage to be invisible not only beyond the Department walls but even within them (which colleague are you thinking of now?). Other teachers are popular among students and staff but perfectly unknown outside the Department, or the university in question. For those of us operating within the campus territory the life of the media-savvy teacher is a mystery. We read their newspaper columns, see them in the many talk-shows Spanish style (I mean 'tertulias'), follow them on Twitter or YouTube... I am really curious to know how one becomes that kind of non-obscure professor, not at all because I want to break out of my dark corner (very cosy here...) but simply because I want to satisfy a natural curiosity. I wonder, above all, whether this media exposure is satisfactory personally and professionally. And no, this blog is not at all part of that for I write it as if it were a private diary with a few onlookers rather than to make a splash of any kind.

I would not mind, of course, being paid to write a newspaper column—but then when I read the readers' comments I only feel dismay... And I write this blog, yes. Yet, other forms of public exposure are beyond me. I have quite a hard time every day in class, like any other (female) teacher ageing in front of students who look younger and younger. They might think that I don't care what they think of me but, to be honest, facing students requires overcoming a number of personal insecurities that never really disappear. I have been a teacher now for 25 years and I certainly feel more secure about what I say but less and less secure about what I look like. The idea, then, of seeing myself on TV is not gratifying but, rather, a source of anxiety. I marvel at the myriad YouTubers who have no problem filming themselves. I can't even look at my own photos, much less see a few minutes of me on the screen. How embarrassing...

This is, however, the way we are all going. My university emailed all of us this week a booklet with many pages of instructions covering all possible cases of media exposure, particularly in social networks (also YouTube). The traditional media matter less and less and my university has realized that what each of us contributes to the new media reflects on the whole institution. Hence the minute instructions. I only missed some words about personal appearance but I believe this was implicit... Our traditional 'tree professors' (male teachers wearing brown corduroy trousers and green jumpers, both baggy) might damage our public image...

My university's interest in the new media has, ironically, brought back fond memories of a TV programme I used to enjoy as a young girl: José Luis Balbín's *La Clave*. This show consisted of a most civilized debate with the participation of absolutely first-rank figures, preceded by an art-house film. The opening credits, with the intriguing musical theme by Carmelo Bernaola are part of my generation's awakening to intellectual curiosity. As usual, it is complicated for me to fix the dates but *La Clave* was on between 1976 and 1985 (on TVE's second channel, then called UHF, now La2), and later between 1990 and 1993 (on Antena 3). It transpires that Felipe González's socialist Government dismissed Balbín, fearing *La Clave* might negatively affect political decisions such as Spain's entrance into NATO. By the time Antena 3 brought Balbín's show back, private TV was beginning to erode the monopoly of national TVE and relying on banality as the main crowd-pleaser. Also, the internet was looming on the horizon. And, so, intellectuals disappeared from TV.

You can watch endless TED talks on YouTube but this has nothing to do with what Balbín and *La Clave* did: bring to many Spanish homes a taste of the best in current ideas. The film ploy was very clever for many viewers who would not have seen the intellectual debate stayed on—of course, channel hopping was no temptation as TV1 was the only other option. This kind of TV is gone for ever, replaced by endless triviality, despite the efforts of LaSexta to provide us with more or less solid political debate.

Waxing really, really nostalgic what I am trying to say is that I would have love breaking out of my obscurity to be a guest at Balbín's *La Clave*. *That* would have been a matter for congratulations...

11 October 2016 / REPRESENTING MEN'S FRIENDSHIP IN FICTION: DAMNED IF YOU DO, DAMNED IF YOU DON'T

My colleagues David Owen and Cristina Pividori invited me some time ago to contribute an essay to a volume on World War I, an event that fascinates me in its brutality, terrible as this may sound. They chose for me the two novels I should analyze in my article: Wilfrid Ewart's *The Way of Revelation* (1921) and Ernest Raymond's *Tell England* (1922). These two books are middlebrow fiction and were extremely popular in their time, but are now more or less forgotten. Raymond's novel is too sentimental for our tastes and is probably rightly neglected but I found Ewart's *Way of Revelation*

an excellent novel. David and Cris chose these books knowing that I appreciate less-than-literary fiction but also because they wanted me to explore the male friendships that occupy each author in each book. I learned many, many valuable lessons.

Male friendship is a classic trope of WWI fiction but what I found in Raymond and Ewart was a less inhibited display of affection than I had seen thus far, after reading quite a long list of literary Great War fiction. In Raymond's novel Rupert Ray and his soul mate Edgar Doe are boys who enlist out of public school to fight in the fated Dardanelles campaign. Ewart's Adrian Knoyle and his best friend Eric Sinclair, already in their twenties, abandon a comfortable life for the trenches in France. I was truly surprised by the vocabulary of affection and the choices in behaviour in both books. Rupert frequently calls Edgar 'beautiful' and Adrian chooses Eric's company in war rather than stay with his girlfriend Rosemary. At the same time both books make a clear distinction between male friendship and homosexuality: in Raymond's novel there is a young gay man and he certainly is seen with aversion (yes, quite homophobic). Something else that puzzled me, by the way, was precisely the use of 'gay', often applied to Adrian and Eric meaning that they are happy men about town. Eric's girlfriend Faith even finds him 'too gay', meaning too fond of having sex with chorus girls...

Ernest Raymond only realized in the 1960s that *Tell England* had a high homoerotic content and he claimed then that when he wrote his novel the word 'homosexual' was simply not on the horizon. This puzzled me very much, as 'homosexuality' was a concept first introduced in the Victorian Age, in 1869, to withdraw 'sodomy' from the catalogue of sins and present it in clinical terms as a perversion. This humiliation, paradoxically, was supposed to be a step forward. The men ostracized for their sodomitic practices suddenly saw themselves liable to legal punishment (think Oscar Wilde) but also in possession of a new label that defined a particular identity. This was, in the long run, positive.

Sexologist Havelock Ellis, a man of much higher impact in Britain than Sigmund Freud around WWI, concluded in the third edition (1927) of his renowned *Sexual Inversion* (1897) that "However shameful, disgusting, personally immoral, and indirectly antisocial it may be for two adult persons of the same sex, men or women, to consent together to perform an act of sexual intimacy in private, there is no sound or adequate ground for constituting such act a penal offense by law". Ellis and other pioneers like Edward Carpenter or John Symonds, together with world-leading sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld in Germany and certainly Freud himself, insisted on proving that homosexuality was neither a crime nor a vice. They still labelled it an 'anomaly' and a 'perversion', presenting 'inverts' as abnormal, though not diseased. However, despite their efforts and although the language of masculine desire already existed in poetry (thanks to Walt Whitman) the aftershock of the Oscar Wilde trials of 1895 still persisted, so that homosexuality still remained stigmatized (punishable by law until 1967 in the UK, considered a mental disease until 1970). Back to Raymond's claim that he did not know the word homosexual in 1922, when gay still meant happy-go-lucky, he was being honest: 'homosexual' was only used in scientific circles, other colloquial words ('pansy', 'fairy') were used by homophobes in the social context. It seems that

'gay' only started meaning 'homosexual' when homosexuals themselves chose it as their preferred codeword in the 1950s.

Some authors such as Sarah Cole and Joanna Bourke have claimed that the extraordinary circumstances of WWI provided men with a situation in which the constant mortal danger allowed for displays of affection between heterosexual men that would have been frowned upon in ordinary society. They claim that indeed male friendship of this intensity died in WWI. When the soldiers returned they were meekly led into marriage and told that real intimacy could only happen in heterosexual coupledness (aided by handbooks such as Marie Stopes' revolutionary manual *Married Love: A New Contribution to the Solution of Sex Difficulties* (1919)). Where am I going with this? Well, I'm arguing here as I argued in my essay that the advances in Gay and Queer Studies (particularly Eve Sedgwick's seminal volume *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, 1985), have paradoxically caused great damage to the affection between heterosexual men and its fictional representation. Apparently, women feel no anxiety about whether friendly affection has a covert lesbian undercurrent and, so, the portrayal in fiction of female friendship hardly ever focuses on this issue. In contrast, since Sedgwick outed most male friendships in fiction as secretly gay (to be fair, she used 'homoerotic' rather than 'homosexual'), the representation of this kind of relationship has become extremely complicated. I loved reading Raymond and Ewart precisely because their men were free from the problem of the homoerotic (although I do see that Cole and Bourke are quite right).

I'm then convinced that the representation of male friendship in fiction must be carefully separated from the representation of gay love, and both need to be encouraged in all genres and levels of fiction. I read just yesterday an article about the growing presence of 'bromosexual' friendship (between gay and heterosexual men) in American fiction—and I was totally non-plussed for I see that type of friendship around me with notable frequency. Anyway, I have already narrated here the immense pleasure that I feel when reading the Aubrey-Maturin series by Patrick O'Brian (I'm in volume 10 of 20, had to stop for a while or I would read nothing else...). I enjoy the series very much because I admire the gentle, natural way in which O'Brian represents the friendship and intimacy between these two heterosexual men. But, and here is the real reason for my post today, reading the play *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child* by John Thorne (supervised by J.K. Rowling) I came to the conclusion that representing male friendship is now a case of 'damned if you do, damned if you don't'.

I was asked for my opinion about the play for an article in *El Periódico* and I wrote that a nice opportunity to represent gay love is missed in the relationship between teenager Albus Potter and his best friend Scorpio Malfoy. Actually, charming Scorpio is the best element in this mediocre play which is bound to disappoint most *Harry Potter* fans. The case is that I got a quite furious email from a male ex-student, chastising me for outing the two boys. Just the day before another student had emailed me a *Guardian* article in which the (male) author defended the thesis that it is very, very important for Albus and Scorpio not to be seen as gay since this will help little Potterhead heterosexual boys to express their affection for other boys more openly. My answer to my ex-student's email message was this: of course I see the need to

open up the representation of male heterosexual friendship to more fulfilling, less homophobic ways of expressing affection but I just happen to believe that in *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child* this friendship is actually gay love.

Why? Because I see that in other cases, like the Aubrey/Maturin series or the pair Captain Kirk/Spock it is not. Sedgwick's many followers tend to insist that most male friendship is secretly gay, which I totally dispute. And, yes, I'm well aware that Kirk and Spock have been the object of plenty of slash fan fiction. Yet, for me, the key lies in whether the presence of women in the life of the men in question feels forced or not: heteronormative or plain heterosexual. **[Spoilers!!!]** In the case of Albus and Scorpio the last minute introduction of a girlfriend is a dreadful, mismanaged heteronormative intrusion, whereas in the Aubrey/Maturin series the presence of the women beloved by these men makes perfect sense. Now somebody will accuse me of being homophobic, biphobic, or queerphobic... I don't know.

Last but not least, have a look at this wonderful photo and tell me whether the men seen kissing in it are friends or lovers. Also, once you know the correct answer, consider how it is circulating what and who exactly benefits from its publication: <http://www.elperiodico.cat/ca/noticias/extra/peto-castellers-merce-barcelona-5458028>

My article:

"The Loving Soldier: Vindicating Men's Friendship in Ernest Raymond's *Tell England: A Study in a Generation* (1922) and Wilfrid Ewart's *The Way of Revelation* (1921)". In *Writings of Persuasion and Dissonance in the Great War: That Better Whiles May Follow Worse*. David Owen and Cristina Pividori (eds.), Leiden and Boston: Brill Rodopi, 2016. Pp. 205-219. ISBN: 978-90-04-31491-7. <http://www.brill.com/products/book/writings-persuasion-and-dissonance-great-war>

Available online my other articles about male friendship:

"Aging in F(r)riendship: 'Big Ger' Cafferty and John Rebus". *Clues: A Journal of Detection* 29:2, 2011. 73-82. ISSN 0724-4248. <http://ddd.uab.cat/record/116052>

"Antonio cuestionado: *El mercader de Venecia* de Michael Radford y el problema del heterosexismo". *Dossiers feministes*, nº 20, 2015, 261-283. <http://www.e-revistas.uji.es/index.php/dossiers/article/view/1772/1811>

18 October 2016 / TRIGGER WARNING: FEAR OF TRAUMA AS A MAJOR OBSTACLE TO AN EDUCATION IN CITIZENSHIP

I'm flabbergasted by the article which Prof. Frank Furedi, emeritus professor of Sociology at the University of Kent and author of the forthcoming *What's Happened to the University?: A Sociological Exploration of its Infantilisation*, published recently in *The Guardian*. "Too many academics are now censoring themselves" (<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2016/oct/11/censor-lecturers-trigger-warnings-students-distressed>) does not deal, as the title hints, with the pressure from

conservative academic authorities to avoid certain issues in university classrooms. It deals, rather, with the students' pressure to silence Literature teachers touching on topics and events that might upset them. The concept is so alien to me that I had to read the piece twice to understand what Furedi means.

It appears that American college students started requesting 'trigger warnings' a couple of years ago to avoid the potential distress of certain scenes in Literature. An article also in *The Guardian* by Alison Flood (May 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/may/19/us-students-request-trigger-warnings-in-literature>) claimed that some US students were refusing to analyse rape and war scenes in the fiction they had to read. Among the books outed as likely to trigger trauma by these reluctant students are *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe, *The Great Gatsby* by Francis Scott Fitzgerald, *Mrs Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf, and Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*.

The students requested, if I understand correctly, that teachers added a trigger warning to the books in the syllabus. Thus, for instance, students who had gone through a traumatic episode connected with suicide would be warned in advance that Woolf's novel might be painful to read. The same applies to rape victims asked to read *Titus Andronicus*. This demand and its reasoning, logically, elicited a huge controversy. However, a later article by Jessica Valenti (of December 2015), reported that "a new study shows that the actual use and influence of trigger warnings are so low as to be almost nonexistent". The issue, she says, was misrepresented and hugely exaggerated.

If this is the case, and I certainly hope that it is, then we need to take Furedi's article with a pinch of salt. To begin with, he presents a situation in which British, not only American students, are increasingly demanding trigger warnings. He, however, refers just to some anecdotes, no matter how worrying they can be (students refusing to be taught about the Holocaust...), as a prelude to warning that "Shielding students from topics deemed sensitive is fast gaining influence in academic life".

I have, nevertheless, seen for myself that, as Furedi points out, the 2015-16 undergraduate handbook of the University of Newcastle contains a "School Statement on Use of Sensitive Material in Undergraduate Lectures, Seminars, Reading Lists" (<http://www.ncl.ac.uk/media/wwwnclacuk/englishliteraturelanguagesandlinguistics/files/ug-handbook-2015.pdf>). Sensitive topics covered by teachers include, they warn, "the depiction/discussion of rape, suicide, graphic violence" and other themes. In the Humanities, they add, "it is inevitable that distressing life events and situations can and will be encountered in texts and assignments". After guaranteeing students that there is sufficient information warning them in advance about the modules content, the Newcastle academic authorities "warmly" encourage concerned students "to use this information to consider how best they can prepare themselves to study challenging material in a way that is appropriate for them". Next, they offer the "support and guidance" of the module/seminar leaders, personal tutors, and the Student Wellbeing Service. I am truly speechless.

Furedi wonders, as I'm doing now, what exactly is meant by "challenging material". He is also puzzled by how the meaning of the adjective 'challenging' has changed from 'hard to tackle intellectually' to 'potentially unsettling'. He concludes, as any Literature teacher would do, that "It is difficult to think of any powerful literary text that does not disturb a reader's sensibility"—most are meant to do exactly that. In the last line of the article he bemoans that "Sadly, far too many academics have responded to the pressure to protect students from disturbing ideas by censoring themselves". Perhaps this is the main problem here: that teachers in Anglo-American universities have started censoring themselves before asking students how they were actually reacting to certain 'challenging' issues.

I cannot say whether the handbook of the University of Newcastle is typical or atypical. It seems to me that the notice I have quoted is, rather, a misguided attempt at protecting themselves from trouble not yet arising. A case of 'forewarned is forearmed'. My own experience of teaching these last weeks the at points truly violent *Oliver Twist* is that I was the one pointing out the potentially shocking scenes, as students struggled with Dickens' old-fashioned prose. When I started a discussion about Dickens's racist representation of the Jewish criminal Fagin, the students were the ones to defend the argument that his racism needs to be contextualized in the Victorian Age. I have read Chinua Achebe's outing of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* as a racist text in class, in front of a black student and she reacted by offering a well-articulated response to the racism in the text and to Achebe's reaction rather than by asking me to stop. Or dashing out of the classroom in tears.

I'm so surprised by all this controversy that I find it really hard to offer a minimally coherent argumentation. It might well be that Anglo-American society and its college students are so totally alien that I just don't know what to make of the articles I am commenting on here. I find the Spanish/Catalan students sitting in my classes open-minded, interested in discussing absolutely everything, eager to break boundaries when I step into risky territory (which is quite often) and not at all hostile. I do not feel that I have to censor myself at all, perhaps because I work in an institution known for its liberal, left-wing ideological positioning and students know what to expect from us, teachers.

Having said that, I acknowledge that we, teachers, do not know our students well and, so, there is certainly always a risk that a student may be negatively affected by something we teach because s/he has endured a terrible personal trauma. I believe that in this specific case, teacher and student can come to an agreement and solve the problem through alternative assessment. This situation, which seems to be the basis for the demand of the inclusion of trigger warnings in the syllabus of US universities—exaggerated as the concern may be—has nothing to do with, as Furedi reports, a student adamantly rejecting to see photos of Holocaust victims because she feared being traumatised by them. One thing is dealing with a student who has endured a traumatic situation in his/her life, and a very different matter dealing with overprotected children unable to stomach the appalling truth of human behaviour.

That overprotection is understood very differently on both shores of the Atlantic, and not only regarding young persons, was recently demonstrated by Facebook's decision to censor the famous photo taken by Nick Ut of Phan Thị Kim Phúc, the little Vietnamese girl running away terrified from the horrors of war. Since she is naked in that photo, Facebook censored it on the grounds that it was a form of child pornography. An indignant Norwegian newspaper editor shamed Facebook into correcting this gross error by pointing out that rather than protect children they were censoring historical truth. Now, suppose I show the photo in class and a student complains that it is distressing. I can see the rest of my class guffawing and/or open-mouthed. They would rush to explain to this person that we need to care about the trauma which the victims of history have suffered and not about the trauma we, privileged persons, might suffer. For without empathy we fail to be educated as citizens.

My concern, rather, is that a generation used to the ultra-realistic representation of carnage and sadism in current fiction, from videogames to Literature, may be too desensitized to understand personal trauma, both that of the Holocaust victims and that of Lavinia in *Titus Andronicus*. Since the products that my students (and myself) consume come mainly from the United States I am wondering how and why US college students can claim to be so afraid of trauma. How does the same nation produce the brutal *Django Unchained* (no trigger warnings here) and also college students who will not discuss racism in Literature? It baffles me.

There is something else that these students and teachers are missing. Here go two personal experiences with traumatised students. A girl asked me specifically to work for her BA dissertation on a novel that narrated female self-abuse, leading to anorexia and which included suicidal tendencies. Why? She had issues to overcome and to outgrow. I initially panicked that her demand would entangle us in an impossible situation but in the end she used her BA dissertation in a way which can only be described as beautifully therapeutic. I have immense respect for this young woman. In the other case, I asked students to write about their experience of reading *Harry Potter* for an online volume and a young man ended publishing an account of how he was abused and neglected as a child—much like Harry Potter. I was dreadfully nervous about publishing this but he reassured me: he felt happy and liberated by the chance to deal with his trauma.

So, here's the lesson: reading Literature is an exercise in empathy which helps you to face your personal traumas and, above all, to understand the life of the traumatised fictional characters. This prepares you for the education in citizenship that you need to feel empathy for the victims of History and of life around you. May you never be one of them.

25 October 2016 / AWARDS AND PRIZES: NO GOOD FOR LITERATURE

I am writing this post as songwriter Bob Dylan keeps the whole world in tenterhooks about whether he'll finally accept the Nobel Prize for Literature, awarded to him days ago amidst much controversy. His silence is so loud that an irritated member of the Swedish committee has publicly called him "impolite and arrogant" (I agree). Dylan has not even bothered to pick up the phone to acknowledge the receipt of the Swedes' insistent messages. I do not wish, however, to discuss the merits and demerits of Dylan as a Nobel prize recipient, nor whether song lyrics are Literature (of course they are, particularly in the best cases). I don't particularly relish Dylan's atonal nasal whine, which disqualifies me to consider his songwriting. I'd rather discuss the increasingly harmful effect that awards and prizes are having on Literature.

I have just learned that an award is a distinction granted without competition whereas a prize is given to the winner of a competition, despite the interesting exceptions to this rule presented by the Nobel Prize and the Oscar Award. No matter, my argument is the same. Actually, I was groping in the dark to understand what exactly my objection is when my niece came to my rescue without knowing it. Her school has organized a competition to find a slogan which helps fruit and vegetable sellers to sell product past its prime but still perfectly edible. Kids had been told that the winner will see his or her slogan actually used in local shops and markets—also, that the other reward will be a tablet. My niece was absolutely indignant that rather than care about the possible impact of their slogans in actual consumers' behaviour, her classmates started asking what brand the tablet was as soon as the contest was announced. That's my point: writers are also too focused on the prize, not on their impact on society through Literature. If my niece wins the school competition she's very likely to reject the tablet and even complain about its pernicious effect. My guess is that Dylan has the same feelings about the Nobel... tablet.

I know that I'm being flippant but what exactly is the point of awards and prizes? Shakespeare never got one, nor did Dickens or Cervantes and this is no obstacle to their being still admired today. The opposite also holds: receiving an award or prize is, I'm sure, a great occasion in the life of the lucky writer but it is no guarantee whatsoever of lasting fame. Nobody in Spain ever recalls, much less reads, playwright José Echegaray, Nobel prize winner in 1904. It seems, in contrast, a bit superfluous that colossal figures like Thomas Mann, W.B. Yeats or Gabriel García Márquez have a Nobel Prize—they're much bigger than that. I don't want, however, to castigate in particular the Nobel Prize, which is, despite its good intentions, a constant source of disagreements (much like the Oscars). My point is, rather, that literary awards and prizes in general are of very dubious interest. Beyond publicizing some authors. Beyond boosting their egos.

I often read résumés of some authors' careers and they are peppered with awards I have never heard of. So-and-so, often a relatively unknown author, is the winner of so-and-so and this-and-that; then you read their quite average work and wonder: how did

this person win so many awards? This seems even to be counterproductive. It is very often the case that a novel hyped after winning a major award disappoints many readers, whether this is a Man Booker Prize, or a Dagger Award, it's the same case. This generates ill-will against the corresponding jury and the corresponding distinction, which, little by little loses importance.

In my Department we often comment on how the Booker Prize used to be an extremely reliable indicator of where to find new, exciting writing whereas now it offers the same kind of blind lottery as reading whatever you wish to pick up. I acknowledge that, contradicting my own argument here, I have used prizes to navigate my way into some genres (or aspects thereof): I certainly relied on the Hugo and the Nebula to help me choose the science-fiction short stories which my students read last year. This does not mean, however, that the results of my choice were more solid than if I had acted on each author's reputation. How reputation is measured, however, seems to be today conditioned by the awards received, which quite complicates my argumentation. Fish bites tail. Or Moebius strip.

Let me now mention the case of another recent prize, the Planeta, won by Dolores Redondo, a well-known crime fiction writer. The Premio Planeta, Wikipedia informs, awarded yearly since 1952 and founded by José Manuel Lara Hernández, is today the highest rewarded literary prize on Earth, only second to the Nobel for Literature, and the highest in the world for a single book. The winner gets an astonishing €601,000 (actually, an advance for the expected massive sales). No wonder, then, that a grateful Redondo was in tears when she gave her acceptance speech. What surprised me was her declaration that she had always dreamed of winning the Planeta, for this is not really a prestige award like the Nadal, the Nacional or the Cervantes. The Planeta Prize is always tainted by a suspicion that it is a well-orchestrated publicity stunt, with the winner and the finalist pre-selected in advance of the jury's meeting. If this is a blatant lie, then at least it must be stressed that the Planeta has this knack of always rewarding writers who are already selling well.

For me, the 2016 Planeta is a far more interesting affair than the Dylan debacle because it marks the entrance of genre fiction in the general literary competitions devoted to mainstream fiction. If I am correct, the main award for detective fiction in Spain is the RBA, recently won by Scottish writer Ian Rankin. Redondo doesn't seem to have received any previous awards which, in the current context, is beginning to be unusual but her fame depends on the very popular detective fiction trilogy of Baztán (*El guardián invisible*, *Legado en los huesos* and *Ofrenda a la tormenta*). It is, then, very good news for detective fiction in general to have broken into the mainstream with the Planeta, an achievement which might signal the end of the crisis of legitimation for this genre in Spain. In this sense, I grant, prizes and awards do matter. My problem, however, is that I could not even finish the first, bungling novel in her trilogy, and I wonder to what extent many mainstream readers who approach the genre through Redondo will have the same problem, and be alienated rather than won for the cause of detective fiction.

This brings me back to Dylan and the Nobel Prize. I'm here arguing (very confusingly!!) that awards and prizes are no indicator of a writer's quality, and that they are generally harmful for the ambition to impact society that should characterize great Literature. At the same time I'm arguing that literary distinctions may be useful to solve the crisis of legitimation still affecting so-called minor genres, such as detective fiction. Um—they're compatible positions, I believe. What I felt when the Nobel committee announced that Dylan had won the prize was that, well, if we are finally accepting that Literature happens beyond the printed page of highbrow books, then the Nobel should be open to all literary genres, including not only so-called genre fiction but even other genres such as journalism or screen writing. Let's reward multimedia writers like Aaron Sorkin, or writers who have won all one can win in a specific category, like fantasy and SF icon Ursula K. Le Guin.

Or nobody. If Literature were truly valued, awards and prizes would be redundant. What is failing in our system of valuing Literature, then, is that it requires all the external props that non-profit institutions like the Nobel committee or rabidly commercial companies like Grupo Planeta are offering. If writers were sufficiently, and honestly, publicized in the media, if they had more visibility, then the literary distinctions would be unnecessary. We would never agree on who is best, and why certain works are valuable (you only needs to see how fiercely readers disagree on GoodReads and Amazon). At least, we would be free of clutter. Perhaps Bob Dylan is mortally afraid, after all, that if he accepts the Nobel Prize he will be just a badly remembered name in a list of half-known literary authors, rather the unique figure he is.

Of course, I have never won a literary award... and all this ranting may just be a case of very sour grapes and of wanting very much to be Dolores Redondo to see how it feels to be on the spotlight for those fifteen minutes of glory. And get the €601,000.

Dylan: reject the tablet, please!!!

PS: Dylan finally accepted the Nobel Prize two weeks after it was awarded to him with no explanation about the delay, except that he was left 'speechless'. Oh....!!!

1 November 2016 / PROFESSIONAL ANNIVERSARIES: MISSING RITUAL

I started working for the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona on 15 September 1991, which means that I have just celebrated my 25th anniversary as a university teacher (not just as a teacher, as I had been already employed teaching English by diverse language schools for a few years). 'Celebrate', however, is perhaps the wrong word in this context, as, in the end, I have not had any celebration.

I told myself that I would do something, anything, but then I started asking around and it turned out that none of my colleagues at UAB, past the 25th year mark, had celebrated this kind of professional anniversary. I have not yet discarded my original

idea—giving my students some candy as little kids do in schools!!, silly as it may sound—but somehow I lack the motivation. I also realized that if I did something in the Department (colleagues offer cookies or chocolates on birthdays or other relevant personal occasions) I would be forcing everyone else to do the same. So I let it be... I am actually writing this post to encourage myself to finally do something before it is too late and I reach my 26th anniversary.

Why's 25 such an important figure? After all, I didn't write anything here when I hit the 20th year mark, 5 years ago. Well, 25 is more critical because although, if all goes well, I will retire having reached the nice figure of 40 years as a teacher (20 multiplied by 2), I know at this point that I don't have other 25 years ahead of me professionally speaking (I certainly don't want to retire at 75 after 50 years as a teacher, my gosh!!!). Also, this year I've celebrated my 50th birthday, which means that I have been a university teacher for exactly half my life, which impresses me very much. Where does time go, we ageing teachers wonder?

I explained to a friend whom I met in one of my earliest years as a teacher (he was my student 24 years ago!) that the strangest thing is looking back and thinking that I knew nothing when I started as a teacher. In these 25 years, I have never stopped studying—for this is what research is all about in the Humanities—which means that, logically, I should be much wiser than I was at the beginning. Funnily, I have the simultaneous impression that I'm both wiser and more stupid, as I notice now much more than I noticed 25 years ago how little I know but also how much I'm beginning to forget. I think that no matter how hard you study in your own area and no matter how convinced you are that you know at least something, many specific points still escape you. Otherwise, I would not need to update my class notes every year.

In part, one of the reasons why I have not celebrated my anniversary with my students is the embarrassing feeling that they might think I should be a much better teacher after a 25-year-long experience in the job. Ageing in public is not easy and some days students are, as every teacher will say, very difficult to face, with their demands and expectations, and their youthful faces. I was myself a very demanding student and I often wonder how I would have reacted to my own classes: would I find that I digress too much? (I think I do), would I find that I'm not systematic enough? (always something to work on). Writers often say that they never have the feeling that they improve as they write, as each novel is a different challenge and I'm beginning to feel the same as a teacher. I'm not a better teacher than I was 25 years ago, I just know a few tricks of the trade. Certainly, each course is a new challenge, if only because students are never the same ones.

As a teacher, one important barrier is crossed when you first double your students' age (they're 18, you're 36) because this is when you start seeing yourself as part of a very different age group, no longer an elder sibling or young aunt/uncle. The second barrier is crossed when you realize that you're their parents' age, which puts you definitively in a different generation. As a Coordinator, I was often surprised to see that students were accompanied in their registration day at UAB by fathers and mothers already younger than me. Since I don't have children myself, I cannot have the perception that

students are my (hypothetical) children's age, but I'm sure that they often make the connection between teachers and parents as obnoxious authorities... I wonder what this is like for colleagues with children in the university.

Back to the idea of the anniversary, I'm not sure what should be done. UAB used to offer in the good old days a sabbatical (thus ignoring in quite a cavalier fashion the actual meaning of 'sabbatical', which is 'every seven years'). Now the much yearned-after sabbatical is gone, swept away by the economic crisis, to be replaced by nothing in particular. I joked with a friend who narrowly missed her anniversary sabbatical that perhaps we should be given a pin, or medal, soviet-style I would add. Of course, celebrating the 25th anniversary of teachers would open a Pandora's box, with teachers demanding to celebrate next 30, 35, 40... years in the profession. There is somewhere a nice absurdist short story to be written about a university where teachers are colour-coded in their dress according to seniority ("Wow! You're finally allowed to wear green! Congratulations!").

Generally speaking, we're abandoning ritual in our lives. On the personal front, many people no longer marry, christen their babies or celebrate their children's first communion. This, of course, has to do with the waning interest in religion in what used to be a deeply Catholic country (I had a crazy, hilarious conversation yesterday with a colleague about what exactly we commemorate on 8th December, the day of the 'Inmaculada Concepción'). On the professional front, as I'm reporting here, nothing much is happening, at least in my work circle. We will soon celebrate the yearly graduation ceremony, but this is for students, not for us teachers, just as birthdays are for children but not for parents (they should be). Yet, to my surprise, I see that many teachers reject the only ritual we maintain: their retirement ceremony. That should be a good reason for a party...

So, this is it, time passes—with mixed feelings. On sunny days I think 'My! So many years to retirement, so many interesting things to do. 50 is nothing, 25 years even less so'. On cloudy days, like today, I think, rather, 'Gosh, I'm tired, I can't go on like this, being my own tyrant for 15 more years at least. I'm getting old, I want to rest!'. But then I shut up, thinking that a) many chronically unemployed (or underemployed) people surely wish they were so lucky, b) it's up to me whether I go on at this manic pace or call it a day and start braking down for deceleration and a soft landing.

There's a candy store on campus—perhaps I should visit it next week, see what my students might like.

8 November 2016 / AFTER EUROCON 2016 BARCELONA: AUTHORS, READERS, ACADEMICS

For the past year, much of my professional time has been occupied with work connected with the organization of Eurocon 2016 here in Barcelona (hence, also known as BCon). For those of you who don't know what a 'con' is, this is a convention

in which fans of a particular genre meet; surely you've heard of San Diego's gigantic Comic-con. Locally, I mean in Barcelona, even though they don't call themselves a 'con', the Salón del Cómic and the Salón del Manga play a similar role for comic-book culture. Regarding science-fiction, fantasy and horror, the Asociación Española de Fantasía, Ciencia Ficción y Terror (<http://www.aefcft.com/>) runs the yearly Hispacon, actually founded in 1968 but held annually only since 1991. The Societat Catalana de Ciència-Ficció i Fantasia (<http://www.sccff.cat/>) has now plans to consolidate CatCon (provisional name). And, of course, the biggest planetary event of the kind involving science-fiction and fantasy is WorldCon, to be celebrated next in Helsinki, where it'll reach its 75 edition (<http://www.worldcon.fi/>).

I have never really been part of fandom, for no specific reason except perhaps shyness, and I'm just a recent member of both AEFCFT and SCCFF (where I serve as board member for contacts with academia). This means that Eurocon is my first 'con' ever. When I first learned about it back in April 2015, I wasn't even sure that I would attend. However, I had just interviewed by e-mail British sf and fantasy writer Richard Morgan, and when I learned that he'd be a guest of honour, I volunteered (begged on my knees...) to be his Eurocon interviewer. You can now see the interview, which went, I think, very well, at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LYL_Ls3uhJo.

I soon understood back in 2015 that, leaving Morgan aside, BCon might be a good chance to get a number of my academic colleagues together and to meet others specialised in the same field. Once my proposal to interview Morgan was accepted, I burrowed my way into the organizing committee. I have been the token academic member in a team of 25 enthusiasts (Professor Pep Burillo of UPC was also part of the team, but he's a mathematician not an sf specialist like me). The other task I have carried out, and which I have narrated here, has been the edition of a trilingual volume of Manuel de Pedrolo's moving novel *Mecanoscrit del segon origen*, kindly published by the Diputació de Lleida. I was on the brink of tears throughout my speech in the Eurocon presentation, that's how deep this book has gone into me. The handsome volume has been given to the about 750 delegates that finally attended BCon as a souvenir gift, to be disseminated in this way all over Europe.

I eventually managed to put together two vibrant round tables with international contributors, which were truly enriching: one on post-humanism and gender, another on teaching SF in the university. I think I have certainly managed to plant the seed of many future academic collaborations with these friends' help. Besides, I found volunteers to interview two other guests of honour. Bright Meritxell Donyate interviewed top-rank Finnish author Joanna Sinisalo (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MleXTJynWw4>). And my infinitely patient doctoral student, Pau Huergo, who wants to write his dissertation on Andrezej Sapkowski, got to interview the famously unmanageable Polish author; judge the hilarious result for yourself here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XuU5Z-Cn25s>. Pau tells me he has not changed his mind about his thesis topic... There were other major authors invited to Eurocon, such as Rosa Montero, Albert Sánchez Piñol, Brandon Sanderson, Aliette de Bodard, Rihanna Pratchett, and you may see their

interviews on YouTube, as I will have to do, for having so many interesting activities means that overlapping is inevitable...

A 'con' is very, very different from a conference in one aspect that has led me to face quite a deep crisis these Eurocon days: the contact between readers and authors. I have seen our guests of honour chased by many autograph hunters, which is why I have not hesitated to chase myself my admired Charlie Stross (a guest but oddly not a guest of honour). We had a tiny green room at Eurocon and you could see our authors there patiently and politely answering questions from anyone who runs a magazine, fanzine, web, blog, etc. It is very hard to be noticed by an author in this constant stream of adoring, uncritical readers, which is why I found myself compressing all I wanted to say to Stross and to Morgan in just a few minutes (discounting in Morgan's case the interview). Stross turned out to be very proficient at doing this, for the moment I mentioned that I was a lecturer and specialised in sf, he gave me a condensed list of works by him I would like to read. Necessarily condensed because, as I joked with him, he publishes so many books than I can't keep up (see <http://www.antipope.org/charlie/blog-static/fiction/faq.html>).

Morgan's case was, I found, more complicated. To begin with, I found myself sort of competing for attention with, shall we say? 'plain' readers, when this would never have been the case in an academic conference. Although he knows I have been doing academic work on his novels, he was quite surprised, perhaps even shocked, when I told him that other academics also appreciate his work. He had simply not considered this aspect of writing and what we do. Poor thing, I put Morgan through a very intense fifteen minutes of why I care, why others care and why he should care and, puzzled as he must have been, he still thanked me for making all this apparent to him. Then we went to the interview room and he himself told the audience, jokingly I hope, that there would be time for questions once I finished 'grilling' him. Grilled him I did, to a certain extent, in my email interview (see <https://ddd.uab.cat/record/132013>) and I certainly do in my forthcoming article (April 2017) for *Science Fiction Studies* on his novel *Black Man* (which I simply love), but I would never really do it in public...

What is worrying me these days, after meeting Morgan, is that, obviously, contact with 'plain' readers and more specialized fans (the ones who run the media I've mentioned) may help increase sales, about which writers certainly worry much. This is what 'cons' are about: fandom. But what can we, academics, do for writers... except guarantee that they make it into the history of the genre they practice, I should say? I know that many academics have good working relationships with authors of whom they're even friends, but beyond the personal circumstances, I ask myself now, a bit disheartened, what exactly are we doing collectively? Why are we, academics, putting so much effort into promoting the work of those for whom we are so invisible? If they know we exist, do they see us as parasitical in ways which other readers are not? An academic friend told me that he's intimate with a writer whose work he often discusses academically; this author, it seems, claims to be totally astonished by what my friend sees in his work... which he himself does not see.

So, there we are: I've enjoyed myself enormously throughout Eurocon and got the (brilliant!!) interview, the autographs, the *Mecanoscrit* volume and the academic contacts. Mission accomplished and with flying colours!! Yet, and this is the downside, I cannot shake the feeling that as academics specialising in Literature—of any kind—we walk on very thin ice. Being an avid SF reader, perhaps I should use a more proper metaphor: the (academic) virtual reality we live in is extremely delicate and fragile and may collapse at any point. As I told to the friends who patiently heard me rant and rave about all this through Eurocon, as long as top models and football players exist, I know that Literature researchers have a place in the universe. What bothers me is that writers can do without us, academics, and the universe would not even notice.

Now, please, enjoy the Eurocon videos, there is much, much to learn from all the speakers: https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLqA7nRotzVcios3Q5-7_UUYegttwDEs.

15 November 2016 / APOCALYPSE SOON: BETRAYED BY THE WOMEN WHO VOTED FOR TRUMP

So much has been written by so many persons these days about Donald Trump's shocking triumph over Hillary Clinton that I'm tempted to skip the topic altogether. However, this would be similar to King George III's writing in his diary 'Nothing important happened today' on 4th July 1776, the day when the United States became an independent nation. I would have written a post had I been running this blog on 9/11 2001 and, faced with another terrifying historic event, I feel that I must write a little something here.

Robert de Niro is certainly not alone in connecting the fear of chaos caused by the Twin Towers attacks with the dreadfulness caused by Trump's winning the election: both are disconcerting, disturbing, tragic events that make the world a much darker place. As I told my students in my SF class, Cormac McCarthy never explains in his superbly well-crafted post-apocalyptic tale *The Road* what exactly destroys the United States in the near future. Now an explanation is looming on the Washington horizon. Hopefully, as *The Simpsons* narrate, Lisa Simpson—or someone as sensible and rational as her, woman or man—will win the American minds and hearts and replace Trump, sooner rather than later.

As you may imagine, being a woman I feel absolutely betrayed by the 42% women who voted for Donald Trump, despite his being, as British journalist Matthew Norman wrote in *The Independent* a "pussy-grabbing, race-baiting, tangerine-hued pantomime ogre with the attention span of a Labrador puppy, the moral sensibilities of a slum landlord, the verbal dexterity of a stroke victim, and the default vindictiveness of a mafia capo" (<http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/donald-trump-hillary-clinton-america-presidential-election-sick-to-my-stomach-victory-odds-chance-a7400896.html>).

Famously, Susan Sarandon announced before the election that she would not be voting with her vagina. Sarandon endorsed Green Party candidate Jill Stein, and announced that she would not vote for either Clinton or Trump, on the grounds that she wanted to support a woman she trusted and not just any woman. Fair enough, although the problem she has ignored is that any vote taken away from Hillary was a vote given to one of the clearest embodiments of patriarchy in the 21st century (together with his friend Vladimir Putin). There are times, then, when the vagina—the female organ the new President is so fond of demeaning and grabbing—is as necessary as the brain to vote. Not just to elect a first woman President of the USA but, above all, to put an end to patriarchy which, unlike what many proclaim today, is not at all on its dying throes.

In the end, 54% of women voters and 41% of men voters supported Hillary Clinton, whereas Trump received the votes of 53% men and 42% women. Beyond race, ethnicity, social class, party lines... the figures indicate, as I explained to my students, that the number of American female voters complicit with patriarchal power outnumbers the number of American male voters who have expressed an anti-patriarchal opinion. This is very, very bad news. It means that while the slow process of reclaiming men away from patriarchy is progressing quite well, we women are stalled regarding the spread of feminism among women.

If all women and that 41% men had voted for Hillary Clinton, she would have taken possession of the Oval Office with the biggest number of votes ever. Instead, although Trump has received fewer votes than her and than the two previous Republican candidates, voters have stayed away from Hillary and she has lost many votes in comparison to the numbers that voted for Barack Obama. For, of course, women will vote for a handsome black man sooner than for a woman. Much has been said about Michelle Obama, or even Oprah Winfrey, running for President in 2020 but 2016 is happening now, and why wait for four years to elect the first woman President when her rival is the unspeakable Donald Trump? Really?

I'd like to turn now to Tina Brown's article in *The Guardian*, "My beef over Hillary Clinton's loss is with liberal feminists, young and old" (https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/nov/12/hillary-clinton-liberal-feminists?CMP=share_btn_link). Brown offers the argument that Hillary didn't fail but that the Democratic Party supporters and sympathisers, particularly the liberal feminists, failed her. This is a classic of all elections, as we know in Spain very well: right-wing voters are faithful and steady and will vote for their candidate, no matter how appalling, whereas left-wing voters are volatile and prone to stay at home unless mobilized by the hope that things will really change ('Yes, we can!'). And, so, many American liberal women never went near the polling stations, nor did the millennials, who now, as happened with Brexit, are complaining that Trump is not their choice. The FBI ill-timed (or well-timed...), ugly hint that they would prosecute Clinton has much to blame for her defeat, but in the end it was up to the young and the old women of the Democratic Party who didn't budge for her. Also and mostly to the 42% in the Republican Party who made a shameful public display of their slave mentality.

Tina Brown writes that Trump won because “There are more tired wives who want to be Melania sitting by the pool in designer sunglasses than there are women who want to pursue a PhD in earnest self-improvement. And there are more young women who see the smartness and modernity of Ivanka as the ultimate polished specimen of blonde branded content they want to buy.” Perhaps, though I very much doubt that this urban mentality was a crucial factor; after all, Trump has lost in all major cities bigger than 1,000,000 inhabitants and although I can very well imagine the women Brown describes here, I don’t think they make that chilling 42%. The betrayers are the women who just will do nothing for themselves. Many are enslaved to their own domestic tyrants (did you see Trump keep an eye on Melania as she voted?), which means that liberal feminism has failed to do successful grassroots work among the conservative women. Others can vote freely but, obeying this slave mentality I have mentioned, they believe that the men know better and it’s their job to run politics. Some, no doubt, wish they were Melania—and I have no words to comment on the replacement of Michelle Obama by that woman. Many of the 42%, and here’s my deep worry, are totally impervious to any feminist argument for they genuinely believe in patriarchy. And not all are white. A friend of mine was aghast after hearing on TV a Latino working-class woman declare that she had voted for Trump because he was honest. What kind of blindness is this? If no AfricanAmerican would vote for KKK, why do women endorse patriarchy?

I don’t particularly like Hillary Clinton, for I believe she lost a great deal of her feminist and feminine dignity when she learned about Bill’s womanizing and still stayed married to him. I understand that a divorced woman stood little chance of being elected for the highest office in the conservative United States but, even so, Bill is a blot on Hillary’s feminist credentials. Having said that, I have no doubt whatsoever that she would have been a good, perhaps even a great, President and much more so in comparison to Donald Trump. The Republicans are, by definition, defenders of patriarchy but if she had faced a rival who could call himself (or herself) elegant, rational and well-spoken I would not be writing this post. What bewilders me and any thinking person, male or female, is that half the American voters—including that 42%—chose the worst possible kind of man to be their President. Some are optimistic that Trump won’t be able to implement his racist, homophobic, misogynistic ideals any more than Obama could alter the structures of inequality, as he promised he would do. But, please, even Ronald Reagan and both Bush Presidents seemed more apt for the Presidency than this frightening patriarch.

I had classes to teach on the Wednesday when the election results were announced and, so, I could not do as one of my female students did: curl up in bed and try to calm down, bracing myself for the horrors to come. I felt, as I did on 9/11, dazed and confused. The difference is that on that day some comfort came from the realization that disempowered patriarchal men were lashing out against the power centres of American patriarchy. On 11/9, however, I lost all trust in women, and that is even more dispiriting than any form of male terrorism, whether from the ranks of Daesh or from the White House.

22 November 2016 / RISING FEES, FALLING JOBS, COLLAPSING STANDARDS: THE UNIVERSITY HEADING FOR DISASTER

I could reduce today's post down to a tweet: 'University fees climb as teaching contracts dwindle' and be done, for I tire of feeling perpetually pessimistic. Next post, I'm here promising myself, must be on a sunny subject, though I wonder what this can be. After marking between Friday and Sunday a pretty poor set of students' exercises, I find myself wanting very much to take the lost weekend days off and go wandering in the city (argh, heavy rains today, no chance!).

Actually, the exercises have much to do with the bleak mood. Let me rewind. I want to discuss here why the university has embarked on a relentless destruction of tenured positions. This is connected with the rising fees demanded by English universities, up to £9000, in the *Guardian* article that I wish to comment on ("Universities accused of 'importing Sports Direct model' for lecturers' pay" by Aditya Chakraborty and Sally Weale, https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/nov/16/universities-accused-of-importing-sports-direct-model-for-lecturers-pay?CMP=share_btn_link). The authors consider the outrageous decisions by which the surplus income made by exploiting teachers is being invested on superfluous new facilities and on the scandalous salaries of the top administrators, as lecturers suffer the indignity of "zero-hours contracts, temp agencies and other forms of precarious work". We have not yet hit that low mark in Spain (it'll come...) but I am surrounded by increasingly overworked associate teachers, who need to juggle two or three jobs at the same time, as they endlessly wait for something to happen. And for students to react.

A point which the *Guardian* article does not consider is how these teachers' burnout is also caused by falling standards among students. Being tenured, I can quickly overcome the disappointment caused by an irregular batch of students' exercises, as I have the rest of my working day for my research. For an associate, however, the time students do not invest in doing their homework properly, is time added to painful correction and, thus, needlessly deducted from their already scant time for research. This generates terrible frustration which, in addition, goes unnoticed in the classroom (or just attributed to the teacher's bad temper), for students ignore the sacrifices that teaching them entails. Technically, you might say that by accepting low salaries and precarious contracts, associate teachers are actually paying for the 'privilege' of teaching students who totally misread the situation, assuming we are all tenured (and well paid).

Chakraborty and Weale's piece is part of a series on "increasingly precarious jobs" in the UK, a label one would associate with occupations destroyed mostly in factories during the transition to a post-industrial economy but not with higher education and university classrooms. Both in Britain and in Spain, and surely all over the world, young researchers with strong vocations are being ruthlessly exploited by being underpaid, overworked and offered only part-time positions. Tenure, in the meantime, is slowly becoming a myth.

I became a tenured teacher myself 14 years ago, aged 36, which was back in 2002 the exact average age for new tenured teachers (nonetheless, I had to wait for 11 years since my first contract and for 6 after submitting my PhD dissertation). Since 2002 each year one extra year has been added, so that, as a friend told me recently, he expects to get tenure by the time he's 48. And he's one of the lucky university teachers, as he has a full-time job. Another dear friend with an absolutely brilliant CV has been finally offered a full-time contract (though for a temporary position) after 15 years as an associate combining two hectic jobs.

In England, the *Guardian* article claims, the National Union of Students has complained that "low-paid and overstressed tutors may not be providing quality education", implicitly stressing that this is what students getting into heavy debt to afford a university degree want. Here in Spain fees are not that high but they're very high considering the average income of families (and I mean BA degrees, MA degrees are simply impossible to afford for most). I don't see, however, that students are doing their best to maximize the investment made in their education. Taking into account what I see in class, about 20% are doing their best, 20% do not care at all and the rest, 60%, just get by. Every day I teach Victorian Literature I have to put up with the expression of absolute boredom, even disgust, of one of my girl students, sitting very visibly in the middle of the classroom. Does she know, I wonder, what I've gone through in my life to be there teaching her? Does she know, I wonder, what my less privileged colleagues put up with? Why is she in my classroom at all?

I have been carefully avoiding this kind of complaint here in this blog because, as I say, I tire of feeling bitter and pessimistic. However, the truth is that my conversations with the Department colleagues always revolve around these twin topics: how little students do and how much we need to do. If we are active researchers, then we're continually monitored and basically told we don't do enough no matter how hard we struggle. If we're not active in research, then our workload goes up dramatically (it used to be 24 ECTS for everyone, now it's up to 32 ECTS for non-researchers). Associate teachers tend to teach 18 ECTS but they're employed mostly teaching compulsory courses, always more crowded than electives and always more demanding in terms of marking and grading exercises. They rarely complain in public because one thing the university teaches you from day one is that you can be very easily replaced—associate positions can be reorganized on a yearly basis.

How often we discuss student motivation without taking into account that those needing motivation are the precarious teachers!! "When academic staff are demoralised and forced to cope with low pay and insecurity," declares Sorana Vieru, a vice-president at the English students' union, "the knock-on effect on students is significant". Obviously! What she is not adding, but I am, is that this demoralization is deepened by most students' nonchalant approach to their own education. An associate rising up at 6:30 am to get her classes ready can be indeed frustrated, and even angry, seeing that students have not bothered to read the five-page text assigned for class discussion that day. This is what is going on, right now, right here, every day.

We, teachers, are, then in a Scylla and Charybdis situation, trapped between the devious plans of the administration to gradually undermine our profession and the students' indifference. Please, don't tell me that their indifference is in its turn caused by the lack of prospects for one way of fighting a bleak future is to throw yourself with all your might into improving your chances to do well. I cannot explain well why the authorities are destroying the university, for the obvious explanation that our budget needs simply to be reduced does not make sense. Less investment in higher education means less investment in the nation's future, whether this is Spain or England, and logic dictates that part-time teacher/researchers can only produce a very limited amount of good research. If the destruction of the public university system has been designed to boost the private universities and to push the working-classes out of the system, then, let me clarify that at least here in Spain private universities are not at all a haven for teachers/researchers and that, from what I gather, most students in my Department are middle-class rather than working-class.

I don't know any associate teacher who has given up yet. I knew once a girl, hired by my Department at the same time as I was, 25 years ago, who very soon saw that the road was too steep, the rewards too little and abandoned the university after only one course. These were the good times, when my second-year, pre-LOGSE students were producing work that could now be acceptable in MA degrees. Yes, I know, every generation complains about falling standards and that the young do very little, or nothing at all, in comparison to what they did. The difference, I believe, is that it's never been so hard to work as a university teacher for those aged 25-45 and they do need more than ever the students' collaboration in what we do. All of us need it.

Otherwise, nothing makes sense in our teaching lives.

29 November 2016 / CINEMA NEEDS WRITING!: WHY IS IT SO HARD TO SEE?

Here is a simple question: why is it so hard to understand that film directors are not responsible for the plot of their works? Unless, that is, they have also written the script. Actually, there is a second question: why is so easy to ignore the source when a film adaptation is reviewed?

My irritation is prompted in particular by the reviews of *Arrival*, a film recently released, directed by Denis Villeneuve. I have not seen *Arrival* yet and I can't judge its quality (IMDB spectators seem divided into those who call it superb and those who call it superbly boring). What really baffles me is that among the flurry of enthusiastic reviews, coming from film festivals and preceding *Arrival's* release, nobody had paid attention to the fact that this is a film adaptation of Ted Chiang's short fiction piece 'Story of Your Life'. I only found out when checking the IMDB information.

Why's this important? Very simple: Villeneuve has been hailed as the great renewer of science-fiction cinema when, actually, the merit corresponds mostly to Chiang, the author of the story which the film narrates. As any SF reader knows, Ted Chiang is the

best short story writer operating today—most likely in any genre. Is he getting the credit he deserves for having imagined the inventive plot in *Arrival*? Not at all... all merit is attributed to Villeneuve. Eric Heisserer, the actual screenplay writer, and, thus, Chiang's adapter for better or for worse, is never even mentioned in the reviews.

The ignorance of how important writing is for cinema is simply appalling. If screenwriters disappeared from Earth, film directors would have no stories to tell and the industry that employs them would grind to a halt (see the film *Trumbo*, please). The boisterous, haphazard blockbusters which Hollywood is currently perpetrating often appear to lack a screenplay but if you pay attention to the credits (as you must!), the problem is that they often employ four or five screenwriters whose authority is again and again denied, resulting in the onscreen mess. The finest films are, needless to say, the product of fine writing, whether original or adapted from other sources. Obviously, not all writers are the exquisite Ted Chiang and, yes, there are countless examples of scripts that improve the original source. This happens, however, because a screenwriter has produced an excellent script, and not at all the (sole) merit of the director.

For the reader to understand how pathetic the way we neglect screenwriting is, just consider the following: would you attribute to a stage director the merit that the playwright deserves? You might praise a stage director for making the best of a play, or chastise him/her for spoiling it. In the end, however, the one who is applauded or booed is the playwright. It is often said that if he were alive today, Shakespeare would be a screenwriter, which is an apt way of highlighting that he worked for a commercial theatre system not too different from the Hollywood film industry. What the comparison often overlooks is that whereas we venerate Shakespeare, not even those who love films can name their favourite screenwriter (I know I can't). There is very little sense in this, for both playwrights and screenwriters write texts based on dialogue to be performed by actors (Martin Esslin has made the point that all is drama). So, why do we persist in neglecting screenwriting as one of the arts of writing?

Another film released recently may change all this misperception—or not, we'll see. I'm talking about *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*, which, borrowing the term from Andrzej Sapkowski, can be called a 'sidequel' of the *Harry Potter* saga. As you may know, the film's title is also that of the magizoology textbook which Harry and friends are required to read at Hogwarts. Rowling did write the volume (penned by one Newt Scamander intradiagetically in the series) in 2001 to aid the Comic Relief charity. She eventually decided to turn Newt, who is active in the 1920s—that is to say, 70 years before Harry's ordeal begins—into the protagonist of a new five-film series, which she is herself scripting. Since Potterheads will buy anything she touches, her published screenplay has already become a best-selling volume. This is mystifying many, who see no need to buy a screenplay when you can see the actual film.

Rowling already pulled this year the trick of turning a play she hadn't even written (it was the brainchild of John Thorne, basic plot included) into a best-selling book: *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*. Surely, many who bought the play had already seen it or expected to see it; after all, we're all used to reading plays and they are perfectly

accepted as literary texts. Screenplays are much harder to sell but they are indeed in particular cases published as books. I wrote my MA dissertation on Harold Pinter's adaptation of John Fowles's novel *The French Lieutenant Woman* (the film was directed in 1981 by Karel Reisz) and I still keep the complete collection of all his screenplays. These include the ones made into films and the ones that were never filmed, just as plays need not be staged to be published. Back to Rowling, the colossal sales of her screenplay (in comparison to any other similar text) may hopefully teach the younger generations that films require someone to write them. I doubt very much that reviewers will bypass Rowling's script, or attribute the film's merits to director David Yates rather than to her.

Rowling, by the way, did not adapt the *Harry Potter* series for the film screen. I'm sure many fans can name the directors that contributed to the series' overwhelming worldwide success (Chris Columbus, David Yates, Mike Newell, even Alfonso Cuarón). Who, however, can name the adapters, the persons who actually wrote the films? There were two: Steve Kloves (all films except *Order of the Phoenix*) and Michael Goldenberg (*Order...*). Rowling collaborated with Kloves and Goldenberg in what appears to have been a fruitful relationship, which is not always the case (most writers prefer not to interfere with the adaptation process). Apparently, this is how she learned the tools of the trade now enabling her to present herself as a screenwriter.

Returning to my initial question, there is more or less a general consensus that the reason why film reviewers and, generally speaking, audiences fail to understand the task of the screenwriter (and what adaptation entails) is the faulty pedagogy spread by *Cahiers du Cinema*. This prestige French magazine, founded in 1951 by André Bazin, Jacques Doniol-Valcroze and Joseph-Marie Lo Duca, is still active. Its impressive list of writers includes Jean-Luc Godard, Claude Chabrol and François Truffaut, all major contributors to film criticism and theory. As you may imagine, being themselves film directors, these gentlemen were very much interested in attributing authorship to this figure. In this way they disseminated the very wrong view that a) films are a personal work, rather than the product of team collaboration; b) the director is sole responsible for film content, as if films did not originate in many cases in producers' ideas and as if they did not depend on a script. This flawed view seeped down to all prestige film magazines all over the world and to academic teaching and research on film, with the results I'm complaining about.

What is surprising is that we have been reviewing films already for 50 years following these basic lines with no resistance whatsoever. I don't see screenwriters complaining, perhaps because they have been taught that their reward is a) having their work filmed, b) being paid for it. I used to read the magazine *Creative Screenwriting* and be always amazed at how many unfilmed scripts there are and how deep is the abuse screenwriters suffer, to the point that they totally undervalue what they do. Published authors do now and then bemoan the poor treatment their beloved texts receive in the hands of unscrupulous screenwriters, directors and producers, yet many seem to have learned the lesson to just cash the cheque and keep silent. Nevertheless, please remember that writers of adapted works are not honoured by any film awards, which I find somehow odd. We would not have, say, Scarlett O'Hara and Rhett Butler without

Margaret Mitchell–Sydney Howard may have written an excellent script and Victor Fleming done his best as film director, but Mitchell wrote the engaging, wilful pair into existence. If they matter so much for film history, this is because she wrote a novel.

Now read Ted Chiang, please, please, please...

6 December 2016 / CYBORG VS POSTHUMAN: OBVIOUS DISTINCTIONS

I'm celebrating this week the success of my doctoral student Jaume Llorens, who has been awarded the highest grade for his brilliant dissertation on the icon of the posthuman in science fiction. It is my aim to publicise here a little bit the main point he makes, which might seem obvious to many but, believe me, is not.

You may perhaps be familiar with Donna Haraway's famous "Manifesto for Cyborgs" (1985, 1991), an essay which is possibly the second most frequently quoted academic text in the Humanities after Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema". I met Haraway once, already ten years ago, when the research group I belonged to ('Body and Textuality') invited her to offer a lecture at MACBA (May 2006). The lecture had the ambiguous title of "An Encounter among Species: Feminism after Cyborgs", which seemed to point in two radically different directions... The group chose me to present Haraway simply because I speak English and I found myself in quite a bizarre situation: I had a long list of questions to ask Haraway, on behalf of my colleagues, about cyborgs but she only wanted to discuss... her relationship with her dog. That was the core of her lecture, namely, that we should approach humanity as just one animal species among others on Earth. An approach some are beginning to call 'posthuman'.

This is not, however, the kind of 'posthuman' which Jaume Llorens means. He means the new humanoid species that might replace us as the dominant species on Earth. You might think that this is a prolongation of Haraway's cyborg but it is actually a radically different concept, so let me explain.

Haraway's manifesto is a declaration in favour of using technoscience for subversive, feminist, socialist ends, in ways very different from those habitually connected with the masculinist, militarist figure of the cyborg. Back in 1985, the word cyborg was mainly connected with James Cameron's 1984 film hit, *The Terminator*, although it turns out that the robot covered in synthetic human flesh played by Arnold Schwarzenegger in this movie is not a cyborg at all. You need to think, rather, of the popular 1970s TV series *The Six Million Dollar Man* (1974-78), based on Martin Caidin's novel *Cyborg* (1972) to get the right idea. In this series, actor Lee Majors plays former astronaut Colonel Steve Austin who, after a terrifying crash, develops superhuman abilities thanks to a series of cutting-edge implants inserted in his shattered body. Austin, partly human and partly mechanical, is a cyborg that celebrates the achievements of 1970s utopian technoscience. In contrast, *Robocop*, which appeared only one year after Haraway's manifesto, in 1986, presents the cyborg as the human victim of rampant capitalism. Here the victimised body is that of a police officer

viciously attacked by criminals, who is resurrected to become the cyborgian replacement of the police force in Detroit. Omni Consumer Products, the corporation that turns Alex Murphy into a dehumanized cyborg, believes there is big business in this.

I am not too keen on Haraway's manifesto, which seems to stubbornly deny the dystopian direction which the cyborg was taking in the 1980s both in real-life research and in science fiction. I believe, besides, that many readers tend to overlook the opening paragraph in which she warns us that she is being ironic and playful. My student Jaume shares this mistrust with me and, so, he formulated a basic research question: taking into account 1990s and early 21st century science fiction, can we argue that the idea of the cyborg is obsolete? His answer is that, certainly, the cyborg needs to be reconsidered, for the merger of the human and the non-human is no longer central either to science fiction or to real-life research. The dominating model is the transcendence of the human, which is, incidentally, the title of his dissertation. His inspiration, by the way, is another woman: N. Katherine Hayles, author of the indispensable *How We Became Posthuman* (1999).

The central idea is very, very simple but not that obvious, I insist: whether modified mechanically, digitally or organically, the cyborg is an exception, an individual that, supposing s/he has children, cannot alter the whole human species. In contrast, the posthuman tends to carry genetic modifications or to be part of a digital environment that will substantially alter humankind itself. In short, Robocop is a cyborg, the X-men are posthuman (and so is Frankenstein's monster, incidentally). Of course, things are never that easy and, so, for instance, in Richard Morgan's *Altered Carbon*, there is a mixture of cyborgian and posthuman elements. Takeshi Kovacs, Morgan's protagonist, has been 'enhanced' (as the current by-word is for humans no longer purely homo sapiens) by genetic and bio-chemical manipulation. He's also part of a digital environment that allows for personalities to be transferred to different bodies by means of inserting a cortical stack (a sort of black box, the author explains) in new 'sleeves'.

Most stories about cyborgs, then, deal with our fears that our individuality may be radically and tragically disrupted by the insertion of non-organic materials and devices in our bodies (despite Haraway's optimistic take on this iconic figure). In contrast, stories about posthumans deal with the fears that the whole human species may be altered by the genetic legacy of individuals whose genome is no longer ours. This is mostly associated with the dangerous transhumanist dream of interfering in the course of natural evolution by forcing humanity to move towards a certain posthuman model (read Hayles, please). However, in Greg Bear's novel *Darwin's Children* it simply happens that a virus alters all unborn babies at the foetal stage. Suddenly, no more homo sapiens are born and, since the new species has abilities quite superior to ours, we risk becoming obsolete. Of course, transhumanist leader Nick Bostrom argues that conventional humans and posthumans could live in harmony, in the same way we, potato-coach non-athletes, accept even with admiration individuals like super-athlete Usain Bolt. This, naturally, is disingenuous, for if Bolt turned out to be a mutant and

likely to have posthuman children against whom no human athlete could compete things would be very, very different.

Jaume Llorens, and myself, declare ourselves moderate posthumanists. We both abhor the transhumanist dream of a eugenically modified posthumanity, complete with digital uploadings into supercomputers that will guarantee our immortality (perhaps online, perhaps using synthetic bodies for temporary downloads). We both believe, however, that technoscience will relentlessly advance to eliminate the main human bodily flaws and to free humans who suffer unnecessarily from their pain. The ethical problems posed by eugenics are already looming in the horizon but, let's be frank, while using genetic selection to breed only blond, blue-eyed babies is monstrous, who would say no to getting rid of unwanted genetic defects? It is already happening on a daily basis.

Jaume claims that science-fiction writers are mainly producing a fantastic version of the posthuman, quite beyond the current state of technoscience. A sort of 'worst-case scenario', playing with deep-seated fears. I keep on telling him that by telling stories about posthumans we are actually indirectly facing our secret guilt that we're responsible for eliminating all other human species from Earth. Yes, think of the Neanderthals but also many others that used to share Earth with us. We fear very much becoming the Neanderthals to a posthuman species because we know what we did to our others. This means that I'm not personally afraid or concerned that homo sapiens might disappear for, in my humble view, we're nothing but vermin to our beautiful planet. What worries me sick is that we're replaced by even worse vermin rather than by the superior humans every SF writer imagines. Or by the fascist regime that the transhumanists preach, based on the very selfish idea that we, homo sapiens, are so wonderful that we deserve to become a better version of ourselves, immortality included. Here's my point: there is no better version, for we are fundamentally flawed. I'd rather support Bear's mutant children, or the X-men (um, not the Magneto faction...).

Now, read science fiction for, really, this is the only kind of fiction that understands not so much our future but what is going on today, right now, beneath our very noses.

And congratulations, Jaume Llorens!!! May we soon see your PhD dissertation online and in print.

13 December 2016 / WHATEVER HAPPENED TO DESCRIPTION? (WITH A STORY ABOUT COGNITIVE POETICS)

I keep on telling my students that I very much want to supervise research on the diminishing use of description in contemporary fiction but nobody is taking the hint—or they do, but then they panic thinking of the technical difficulties a dissertation would entail. So here is more bait, see if anyone bites...

I don't seem to have addressed here before directly the matter of description, although it is one of my favourite bugbears as a reader. I have mentioned often, I believe, my habit of casting actors as the characters of the fiction I read, as I am increasingly desperate that authors are abandoning description. I always have, besides, serious problems to imagine space at a reasonable scale, which is why reading stage directions is always a nightmare for me (happily Shakespeare didn't use them...); also, why reading space opera is such a challenge...

So, now and then, I test the waters and ask my students whether they pay attention to how they visualize as they read, hoping perhaps that someone will show me a trick I don't know. I see that they're keen to discuss this issue but I have never found a proper way to address it in class. I don't see myself teaching an elective course on description, either; it sounds a bit weird even to me.

So, as I often do in class whenever the bugbear overpowers me, I'll cite Dickens. Here's a favourite Dickensian description, that of 11-year-old Artful Dodger in *Oliver Twist*, in this scene asking Oliver himself, then wandering lonely and forlorn on the London road, what is the matter with him:

"The boy who addressed this inquiry to the young wayfarer, was about his own age: but one of the queerest looking boys that Oliver had even seen. He was a snub-nosed, flat-browed, common-faced boy enough; and as dirty a juvenile as one would wish to see; but he had about him all the airs and manners of a man. He was short of his age: with rather bow-legs, and little, sharp, ugly eyes. His hat was stuck on the top of his head so lightly, that it threatened to fall off every moment—and would have done so, very often, if the wearer had not had a knack of every now and then giving his head a sudden twitch, which brought it back to its old place again. He wore a man's coat, which reached nearly to his heels. He had turned the cuffs back, half-way up his arm, to get his hands out of the sleeves: apparently with the ultimate view of thrusting them into the pockets of his corduroy trousers; for there he kept them. He was, altogether, as roistering and swaggering a young gentleman as ever stood four feet six, or something less, in the bluchers.

'Hullo, my covey! What's the row?' said this strange young gentleman to Oliver."

The 'strange young gentleman' is rendered in a most vivid fashion, and as a reader I thank Dickens for helping me to activate my mental theatre in that efficient way. I do see and hear the Dodger, as I see and hear the rest of his characters.

Funnily, Dickens always published his fiction accompanied by illustrations (George Cruikshank produced 24 for *Oliver Twist*), which might even seem redundant in view of his florid descriptions. Illustration is today mostly confined to children's literature though I see no reason why an adult should not enjoy it; at least I very much enjoyed recently the version of Neil Gaiman's *Neverwhere* (is this YA?) illustrated by the wonderful Chris Riddell. I am, however, sadly ignorant of when and why illustration was abandoned in books for adults. Christopher Howse suggests that after peaking with Sidney Paget's work for the Sherlock Holmes stories (in 1891 for *Strand*

Magazine), “illustrations for adult books (until the quite separate development of graphic novels) sank into the weedy shallows of the pulp fiction market” (http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/children_sbookreviews/10465326/Why-dont-books-for-grown-ups-have-illustrations-any-more.html). In Norman Spinrad’s wickedly funny *The Iron Dream* (1972) budding artist Adolf Hitler never becomes the tyrant that terrorized the world but a second-rate pulp fiction illustrator getting a meagre living in California...

But I digress. I once heard Kazuo Ishiguro say that description has been diminishing in contemporary fiction because of the impact of cinema, as writers trust readers to supply their own images with just minimalist hints. I’m not sure, however, whether writers realize how annoying the job we have been entrusted with is. I am currently reading the sixteenth novel in the Aubrey/Maturin series by Patrick O’Brian and I am still struggling to imagine his two protagonists with the clarity which Dickens provided for even his most minor characters. I know that Jack Aubrey has long blond hair and blue eyes, that he’s tall (but not how tall) and I learned yesterday that he’s verging on the obese as he weighs almost 17 stones (that’s 108 kilos). I know that his once handsome face and well-shaped body are now criss-crossed by a variety of scars after decades fighting the French and other assorted enemies. Yet I’m awfully frustrated that I don’t ‘see’ him as I ‘see’ the Artful Dodger. I checked Deviant Art and I found what I suspected: most illustrations are contaminated by the image of actor Russell Crowe in the film adaptation, *Master and Commander*. I tried to resist this by casting, following another reader’s suggestion, Chris Hemsworth as Jack (and Daniel Brühl rather than Paul Bettany as Stephen Maturin). By the sixteenth volume, however, Jack is past forty and a very bulky man and, so, his face constantly shifts from Hemsworth’s to Crowe’s as I read, while I miserably fail to control my mental theatre. Ironically, if you know the lingo, O’Brian offers a brutal amount of information about any object that can be seen on Jack’s ships...

A student told me yesterday that she had tried the experiment of reading the same character description with a friend (in a contemporary novel). The results were completely different and she was wondering why this was so and whether, in the end, description really helps. She’s got a point, of course. Still, it does help to know that Harry Potter’s eyes are bright green (even though they’re blue in the films) and Voldemort’s red (green in the films...). Perhaps, in view of how much the adaptations have pleased readers, we might claim that Rowling and certainly J.R.R. Tolkien are powerful describers of place and character, no matter how different their post-Dickensian styles are (succinct in Rowling’s case, prolix in Tolkien’s). This is, I insist, a PhD dissertation waiting to be written.

The last time I found extremely detailed character descriptions in a novel this was in Bret Easton Ellis’ *American Psycho* (1991). The protagonist and narrator Patrick Bateman obsesses about what everyone is wearing, seeing people through the lenses of the brands they sport. This, of course, is Ellis’ ironic comment on 1980s avid consumerist society but I wonder to what extent this is also a critique of character description *per se* as old-fashioned and even in bad taste. Yes, I’m arguing that description has been progressively abandoned because writers find it a) distasteful, b)

a drag to write, c) manipulative of readers' reactions, d) to sum up, bad writing. You should check now whether poorly written fiction carries more description than the more ambitious variety—and here I have just recalled how prejudiced I am against the fiction produced by writers with MAs in Creative Writing precisely because it overdoes description. I mean, however, superfluous description of detail such as the colours of every single flower in a vase, rather than the (for me) necessary details that present the features of a character's face and body.

As serendipity will have it, I read yesterday a delicious short story by Colombian writer Juan Alberto Conde, "Parra en la Holocubierta" (in *Visiones 2015*, <https://lektu.com/l/aefcft/visiones-2015/5443>). He narrates the efforts of a team of specialists in 'cognitive poetics' to develop a device that allows readers to record what they imagine as they read. After audiobooks, here come holobooks... Conde very wittily suggests that if we could find a very proficient 'imager' of what writers describe, like his protagonist Parra, a whole new field of business would bloom around literature. If audiobooks allow adults to indulge in the childlike pleasure of having stories narrated to them, then holobooks appeal to our nostalgia for illustration.

Or, rather, they reveal the hidden truth about contemporary fiction: its reluctance to describe is leaving readers in need of visual interpreters, whether they are film adapters or... holobook readers. And then they say that science-fiction is mere escapism...

20 December 2016 / BREAKING POINT: THINKING OF THOSE STILL WAITING FOR TENURE

The last tenured position came up in my Department about 8 years ago, though tenure is here a relative term, as the two colleagues in question were offered permanent contracts rather than the civil servant's position that I myself enjoy. I just learned this morning that Universidad Juan Carlos I, whose credibility is now in total jeopardy because of the plagiarism the Rector has been accused of, abruptly dismissed last summer, with no previous warning, a dozen teachers with permanent contracts (they were reinstated).

The total security that you will be employed for life is a dream for most people, something which the head of the Spanish national employers' association considers 'very 19th century'. However, tenure is, or has been until recently, a foundation of university life, justified by the idea that we, scholars, should be free from the care of finding a job in order to produce our best work. Yes, we all know of teachers who have found tenure so mentally relaxing that they have managed to produce nothing in 40 odd years before retirement. Here, however, I'm thinking of deserving academics, who make the most of the chance to be employed for life.

When I got tenure back in 2002, after 11 gruelling years, I vowed to myself that I would never forget what those 11 years were like—perhaps the many times I visited doctors'

surgeries and emergency rooms would give a clear idea of the anxiety. Also, I swore that I would never ever gamble, as I felt that I could not be luckier than that. Since I haven't forgotten those days, I have a very clear picture of what some dear colleagues in my Department are going through this morning, when they have received news that not even the chance to fight for a four-year full-time contract will materialize in the immediate future, much less tenure. I'm talking about four persons with an accreditation to be (finally) hired full-time, apart from other associates with hopes that they can eventually be rewarded with tenure. Absurdly, the position we have been expecting to be granted for years has gone elsewhere, where it is was never expected, nor much needed.

I'm going to sound quite incoherent because I'll argue here that the Spanish university fails to see both each personal case and the impact on a whole generation of researchers of its hiring policies. I know it is the same in Britain, as I have recently written, and in many other countries, but this offers no comfort.

There is much talk of endogamy connected with how people are selected to occupy university positions instead of what really matters: how individual hopes and expectations of an academic career—serious individual vocations—are exploited by a ruthless institution which adamantly refuses to consider personal cases. When I was myself waiting for tenure, I always felt that the vice-rector in charge of signing the petition was a mythical creature, for I never had access to him (or what it her?). I don't know how business concerns operate and I'm sure that many workers are hired and dismissed without ever knowing who signed their papers. Yet, unlike what it may seem after hearing so much talk of endogamy, I find the whole university employment system oddly depersonalized. Logically, this works in favour of the institution, which needs not justify why it suddenly has no room for a person who has given her best for a dozen years or more.

I know very well that in many other sectors, people are also nonchalantly dismissed or offered low-paid jobs for which they are woefully overqualified. However, the singularity of an academic career is that, as everyone knows, it qualifies you for nothing else, for no other job. This is the situation on which everything else hinges, for, despite all our complains about students who don't study and so many other little miseries, if you're a vocational teacher/researcher, once you set your foot inside a university classroom it is very hard to let go. I had a job offer before I was hired by my university, aged 25, and I would have been happy enough, I know, being a secondary school teacher of English, and reading non-stop in my spare time. However, when, aged 36, I considered what I could do if I failed to secure tenure, the prospect was bleak... A secondary school classroom seemed a letdown after so many years of sophisticated academic work. And I took it as a very bad omen that an application I sent to a very different kind of job (connected with communication) was returned by the post, for mysterious reasons.

I understand, then, why vocational teachers/researchers allow themselves to be abused by the system because I would have done the same. This is what the university counted on in Spain, when some anonymous villain made the decision of stopping all

pre-doctoral full-time contracts and offering just a handful of post-doctoral positions, with a very vague promise of perhaps, who knows, might happen or not, tenure. This is the equivalent of being hired as an intern with the promise of quick promotion to be told, year in, year out, that you need to wait a bit more... until you're just told the promotion will never happen. The additional problem, obviously, is that in the university you're never told that tenure will never materialize for you, only that it won't do so in the short term. This means that associates are always thinking of a nebulous long term, as, well, life moves on and time passes. This is being done, I insist, not to a handful of unlucky individuals but to a whole generation trapped by liberal economic policies which are not the product of the 2008 crisis but of the mid-1990s mentality declaring all public services a burden rather than a collective benefit.

In the darkest moments, I wonder whether what's happening in the Spanish university and in other nations is a sinister social experiment to test for how long un-tenured academics are willing to be exploited until they reach a breaking point. Does this happen when you turn 35? 40? 45? 50 perhaps? Or will the life of many academics born from the 1970s onwards consist exclusively of this kind of underpaid, temporary employment? Does it really make sense, in terms of finance, to keep many individuals employed part time rather than grant tenure to fewer? What's the point of raising expectations only to dash them? Is it merely cruelty, indifference, ignorance, a mixture of all? Could it be a basic lack of human empathy?

I recall a family dinner back at the time when I was waiting for tenure when a well-intentioned relative told me I should consider that the Spanish university could not accommodate all the aspiring academics. It seems to me that as long as we find money to rescue useless, expensive highways from bankruptcy—as we're about to do—we can find money to employ deserving academics. They're not asking for football player salaries, just for a dignified, full-time job, and, believe, they're cheap workers. Also good ones, as we know because despite having the chance to dismiss them as we can do with associates, we have kept them.

I have no words of comfort, really, this is just terrible. I simply don't know what to tell my friends: cling or, for eventually all valuable people are rewarded; or, stop hurting yourself and find another job. The optimistic message has no foundation, whereas telling someone to seek employment outside the university feels oddly callous, even when you're thinking of the wellbeing of persons you care for. The worst thing is the survivor's guilt (why me and not them?) and the impotence for, yes, we complain as loudly as we can to the authorities that be, you can be sure about this, but nothing seems to change.

I'm SO sorry...

4 January 2017 / SEEKING NEW READING PROJECTS: A NEW YEAR'S ANTI-RESOLUTION

Both public media and private persons engage these days in the twin exercises of celebrating the best books published last year and of announcing novelties, wishes and resolutions for the new reading year. Both exercises are quite tedious.

Each year, when December comes and I read the endless lists of all I have missed in the previous twelve months, I despair. I will never ever catch up. I feel condemned to always staying behind (with the only comfort of thus saving myself many overhyped books). Perhaps I should attribute this to my wilfully ignoring the lists of novelties, already abundant for 2017, as they make me feel somehow manipulated by interested parties that want me to read this but not that.

As for the wishes and resolutions, it's always the same: when I go through the list of all I have read in the just defunct year, I always promise myself to read a) books from a bigger variety of languages (German novels, anyone??), b) books from a bigger variety of genres (where's the poetry??!! why so many novels??!!). I have indeed started 2017 with a French novel, *Submission* by Michel Houellebecq. I'm sorry to say, though, that I have already abandoned it half-way through, sick and tired of the main character's monstrous selfishness and chauvinism... My new year's resolution, then, is to avoid forming any resolution as to my reading. I'm thinking, rather, of finding reading experiences that might enrich my life.

My brother-in-law has suggested a definitely enticing reading experience which he himself has gone through in the last 18 months: reading the 46 volumes of the *Episodios nacionales* by Benito Pérez Galdós. I certainly look forward to doing that after using a great deal of my time this past 2016 to the wonderful reading experience of devouring the 20 volumes of Patrick O'Brian's Aubrey-Maturin series (a bit spoiled by the disappointing last two volumes). My other project, by the way, was reading more books by Manuel de Pedrolo: I finally managed 9, and I don't think this is over. Pedrolo has an 11-volume-series, *Temps obert*, a beacon sending distress calls for new readers to find it, if I have seen one.

A 'reading experience', then, is not at all like a new year's resolution but, rather, a project to enhance and brighten your reading life. It is not about filling in gaps (I should have read many more Russian novels by now), or about unfulfilled obligations (I should read all those other plays by Shakespeare). Above all, a 'reading project' (or experience) is about freeing oneself from the weight of novelty, which is flooding us with a stream of books without teaching us how to navigate our way into the books of the past. And I don't mean by this the classics, which are always available, but the books I'll label 'how-come-I-have-never-heard-of-this-beauty?'

Also, contradicting myself, a reading project/experience is not something one may recommend to another person but something a reader chooses. If I end up reading the

Episodios nacionales, as I think I will, this is because I am already interested and not because my brother-in-law has brought Galdós to my attention. Actually, I had already downloaded the first 10 books... Now is the time.

Most likely, if you're serious about your reading, your whole life constitutes a reading project. I am not distinguishing here between readers who prefer the classics and the most literary genres and varieties of fiction but, rather, between self-aware and casual readers.

The self-aware reader is, like the god Janus, two-faced for s/he looks forward to a future of constant novelty but also backwards in case s/he's missed something of (personal) interest. This is the kind that, if they enjoy a particular genre, will learn all about it, whether this is science fiction or 19th century romance. Self-aware readers keep reading lists, sheepishly notice glaring gaps in them, and see their whole life in terms of what they have already read and what they might read until the day they die. I know, I'm one of these obsessive weirdos. Casual readers, in contrast, are just pleased to read whatever is fashionable. They make little effort to remember titles and authors' names, or to give their reading any kind of coherence, even when they really like particular authors and/or genres. They do not obsess and would not put themselves through the trouble of devising reading projects.

By coherence I don't mean that a reader should contemplate reading as a study course for life. No. You might want to do that, naturally, but I will insist that there is a marked difference between setting yourself the task of reading the most representative Restoration comedies of the late 17th century and engaging in the project of reading them just because you fancy the experience: study is one thing, reading for pleasure is another (though, needless to say, studying can be a pleasure). The whole idea behind the 'reading project' is basic reading pleasure, if, that is, pleasure can be said to be an idea.

I don't know what happens to students as readers once they leave our university classrooms but I would like to think that they become self-aware readers perpetually involved in attractive reading projects and experiences. Of any kind, from the single-volume (so, finally I have time to read *Ulysses*...) to the multi-volume adventure (and now I'll read all the James Bond novels). For, and here is the question, a reading project/experience needs not be a gigantic undertaking but one of those long-delayed wishes that finally finds gratification. What I found when finally reading *War and Peace* or, if you want a much shorter text, S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders*.

I am gradually realising that a reading project is possibly connected with something you have already heard of. At least, many of my reading projects seem to have been around for decades, some from the time I was an undergrad student, 30 years ago. Very naïvely, I started at 18 a reading 'wish list' which, very wisely, I eventually abandoned. Even though I am the kind of person who is constantly making lists of things to see and do (and shop), reading lists are no use—ironically, they seem to inspire in me an urge to read totally at random and be as anarchic as a punk. What I do

in these cases, is visit a library or bookshop and see what falls into my hands, often with amazingly serendipitous results.

I am beginning to think, as I write, whether an academic career is nothing but a massive reading project. Thinking back to when I was an undergrad, my reading project was all of English Literature, beginning with the canon. As a postgrad student, genre fiction because my dominant reading project, first gothic, then (still) science fiction. I confess that while reading the Aubrey-Maturin series, I felt a bit uneasy about whether I was somehow stepping out of my chosen project to read as much SF as possible until a) I decided to write something on the series, b) I found out that many other SF readers love O'Brian (what's a spaceship, after all, but a ship in space?). Funnily, the series is the result of O'Brian's own reading project, focused on the English Navy during the Napoleonic Wars.

Obsessive readers seemingly go well with obsessive writers... And what are academics if not readers that have made an obsession into a professional career? The obnoxious protagonist of the novel by Houellebecq that I have abandoned, a French Literature lecturer, claims that the teaching of Literature at university level has no use whatsoever except train other teachers at a failure rate of 95%. He's wrong. Teaching Literature is what we, compulsive readers, have invented to vent our obsession with our personal reading projects. Elective subjects are the clearest expression of this, an alibi to obsess before an audience.

And, so, what reading experience are you looking forward for the immediate future? (No, it's not a new year's resolution. It's an anti-resolution).

11 January 2017 / HEARING VOICES (IN *ROGUE ONE*): WHY DUBBING SHOULD BE ABANDONED

The debate on the need to maintain dubbing for audiovisual media in Spain is old and tiresome. I'm probably preaching to the converted here but I'd like to contribute (or stress) arguments which are not often considered. Funnily, the inspiration for both lines of thought comes from recent articles on *Rogue One*, the exciting prequel to *Stars Wars, Episode IV: A New Hope* (or plain *Star Wars*, as it was once called).

One of the film's stars, Danish actor Mads Mikkelsen, declared in a recent interview that he doesn't much relish hearing himself dubbed. After joking that perhaps the diverse dubbing actors may have improved his performance, he stated that he'd rather films were not dubbed (see in Spanish, <http://metropoli.elmundo.es/cine/2016/12/15/58526f8ae5fdeab0528b458c.html>).

As far as I can recall, whenever Spanish journalists asks foreign actors how they feel about dubbing, they expect said actors to answer politely that they respect very much the work of dubbing actors. Mikkelsen's discordant answer, though still polite, suggests that it is about time we hear actors express an opinion. Although Mikkelsen

did not expand on his, it follows that actors, who use their voices as much as their bodies to act, must profoundly dislike having that crucial part of their performance erased. Try to imagine for a second what it would be like to keep the original voice and replace the bodily appearance and you'll get an idea of how gross what we do using dubbing is.

Another *Rogue One* star, Mexican Diego Luna, recently declared in his Twitter account that he felt "emotional" when reading a certain Tumblr post (which quickly went viral). In this post an American girl using the nick 'riveralwaysknew' narrated her experience of taking her Mexican immigrant father to see *Rogue One* (see the complete post at, for instance, <http://nextshark.com/star-wars-fan-riveralwaysknew-expresses-how-diego-lunas-character-in-rogue-one-impacted-her-mexican-father/>).

"I wanted", she wrote "my Mexican father, with his thick Mexican accent, to experience what it was like to see a hero in a blockbuster film, speak the way he does." The father was, like many other spectators including myself, much surprised by Luna's "heavy accent". The daughter explained to her puzzled dad that indeed, *Rogue One* is extremely popular, and that Luna refuses to alter his accent because he's proud of it. After mulling this over, the father declared himself very happy: "As we drove home he started telling me about other Mexican actors that he thinks should be in movies in America. Representation matters." Now, in the version dubbed into Spanish for release in Spain, Luna has no Mexican accent—just the standard Castilian accent generally used in dubbing, with few exceptions. So much for representation.

Here, then, are my two main points against dubbing: 1) it is disrespectful of the actors' work, 2) it erases accent, which is essential in performance.

Before I continue let me present briefly the situation in Spain (you might like to take a peak at my article "'Major Films and Minor Languages: Catalan Speakers and the War over Dubbing Hollywood Films", available also in Spanish from <http://ddd.uab.cat/record/136984>). Dubbing was originally introduced by Hollywood studios (specifically Paramount) in 1929 as a strategy to end the cumbersome use of subtitles (useless for illiterate audiences) and the expensive practice of shooting different versions of the same film, one for each language. In Spain dubbing was introduced in Republican times (1931-6), precisely because most Spaniards were illiterate; also to ease the censor's role.

A legal order of 1945 made dubbing into Spanish Castilian compulsory for all foreign films, forbidding in addition subtitling and dubbing into any other Spanish language (Catalan, Basque, Galician). Subtitling would only return in the 1950s for art-house films. Spanish TV, inaugurated in 1956, simply copied the practice habitual in cinemas, extending it to TV series. The 1945 decree, issued by Dictator Francisco Franco, went, then, much further than the Republic's timid application of censorship to foreign films, turning dubbing into an instrument of nationalist linguistic cohesion (in imitation of the fascist regimes in Italy and Germany).

Ironically, in the same period the Portuguese Dictator António de Oliveira Salazar (1932-68, though his regime lasted until 1974), decided to do the opposite: forbid dubbing, hoping thus that the illiterate Portuguese spectators would shun foreign films, then only accessible through subtitles. Dubbing is still limited today in Portugal to films for children as, logically, they have difficulties to follow subtitles. In Finland, where they follow the same practice, they assume that by the age of 7 children are already literate enough to read subtitles.

For here's the question: in Spain we are very reluctant to abandoning dubbing simply because most people are very poor readers and have serious difficulties to keep up with the pace of subtitles. Incidentally, if the demand for subtitles were bigger, I assume the quality of translation (often questionable) would also improve.

Whenever dubbing is discussed in Spain, however, the problem of literacy is set aside. Instead, we usually the issue of how little English we command, as if dubbing only affects films originally in that language. Thus, many who prefer dubbing claim that a) you don't learn languages by seeing films in original version (see how much Japanese you can learn this way...), b) our dubbing actors are wonderful and so is our dubbing technique (I agree), c) cinemas' revenue would fall even further if dubbing was suppressed, d) technology already allows most consumers to choose the version they prefer (which is true for TV or DVD but not for cinema).

I find dubbing simply barbaric, akin to smearing another layer of colour on another person's paintings or chipping off bits of sculpture that one doesn't like. Translation of print texts is bad enough but a sort of inevitable evil. In audiovisual products, however, translation can be easily pushed to the margins with the use of subtitles, respecting in this way the integrity of the actors' work. I see all films and series in their original version, regardless of the language, and putting all my trust into the persons who translate subtitles. I may not understand a single word of Japanese beyond 'arigato' and 'hai' but I'd much rather hear the original voices.

These foreign voices come enshrouded in linguistic fog which, of course, fades away the better you know the language. A film in German, French or Italian is less opaque than one in Japanese, whereas a film in English is far more accessible. Not always, of course—we all have the experience of using subtitles to follow English-language products. The accent of Baltimore gangsters in *The Wire* is hard even for persons with PhDs in English Literature, and so is the working-class Leith brogue used in *Trainspotting*. We tend to forget about Spanish itself: I needed subtitles to follow the Argentinean film *Nueve reinas*, and I have abandoned recently a couple of films from Venezuela which I simply could not follow (they had no subtitles).

To sum up: the point of suppressing dubbing is not learning other languages (this is an extra bonus) but respecting the actors' work. To get a glimpse of how hard they struggle with accent, see the video in which dialogue coach Erik Singer generously reviews an impressive collection of accented film performances: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NvDvESEXcgE>

Whenever one mentions accent in films outside a university Department, eyebrows are quickly raised. Just picture your average Spaniard and you'll see him/her struggling with the concept of accent in foreign films. You cannot give an approximate rendition of accent in dubbed versions, as this sounds ridiculous and, so, accent simply does not exist for the average Spanish film goer (even film lover). There is also the matter of voices: as everyone knows, often the same Spanish actor dubs several foreign actors – Ramón Langa lends his voice to both Bruce Willis and Kevin Costner, among many, many others (see <http://www.eldoblaje.com/datos/Fichaactordoblaje.asp?Id=127>). This means that dubbing also results in a ridiculously homogeneous panorama, with a few voices replacing the multiplicity that makes international cinema so rich.

Let me get back to Mikkelsen and Luna (and *Rogue One*). You can hear Mikkelsen express himself in his native Danish language in the disturbing *Jagten* (*The Hunt*, 2012) or play an American character in *Hannibal* (2013-15). In this second case, although we here in Spain missed the issue completely, he was criticized by American audiences for playing Lecter with a thick non-American accent (some spectators claimed that this was fine, as Lecter is originally a Lithuanian). This is an interesting conflict which even extends to English native speakers (was the American accent of British actor Hugh Laurie in *House* good enough?).

I'd say that Mikkelsen's Galen Erso in *Rogue One* also speaks English with a Danish accent. Actually, very few American voices are heard in that English-language film, though I have not come across any negative comments from American audiences—rather, praise for the film's international casting choices. I'm sure that in Denmark they feel happy to see Mikkelsen play in such a big film (and such a heroic role!) but his presence is not as heavily loaded with representation issues as Luna's. Mexican actress Selma Hayek was seemingly told that she could not play the main role in Mexican director's Alfonso Cuarón's *Gravity* because nobody in the audience would believe in a Mexican astronaut. Instead, producers chose bland all-American star Sandra Bullock (yes, I know that Hayek is also from America—the continent). *Rogue One's* multi-accented cast may have been selected to please a wide-ranging international audience but the case is that Luna's heavy Mexican accent is a breath of fresh air... in the galaxy.

Except in Spain, where dubbing sounds a bit like the echo of Darth Vader's Empire... or just Franco's regime. Now, come join the rebellion...

18 January 2017 / THE BOOMERANG EFFECT: WHY MARKING IS SO EXHAUSTING

I'm writing this after a serious bout of marking post-grad essays today, lasting for about seven hours (with email messages in between). This means that I'm going probably to sound quite incoherent, as I'm exhausted. At the same time, I feel like letting off some steam by writing and, besides, this post is a bit overdue. So here we go.

April is not the cruellest month, as the poet claimed. The cruellest months are January and June, the time when piles of exercises to mark and grade replace classroom teaching. My workload is relatively small but even so it takes up long stretches of these two months because I'm the kind of teacher that corrects everything that can be possibly wrong, down to the last comma. I blame this on some kind of uncontrolled compulsion or TOC. Also, on my habit of marking all I can on the computer, as I hate carrying home printed work. Handwritten exams are also a complete nightmare to me, with all that undecipherable text and my increasing inability to write a legible hand myself...

Computer marking, as I was saying, is preferable to me but, then, I tend to pepper students' exercises not only with corrections and revisions but also with lots of notes. I can't help it... I've never been the kind of teacher that takes a quick look and emits a verdict for, among other things, I believe that notes and corrections help me very much when students request a review. Nothing more embarrassing than not knowing at first sight why you have failed someone... Oops!

Although it might seem that marking exercises is a repetitive exercise with no great novelties from one semester to the next one, I find that each semester is coloured by a particular note. Or notes. So let me share with you what's on my mind, and see if we're perceiving the same peculiarities and problems. I'm marking work by undergrad and postgrad students and this will help me to cover a lot of ground at once.

First my undergrad class, Victorian Literature, a second-year course. This semester the pattern for the final marks is as follows: a very small number of both A and D students, and a large number of C and C+ students. Hardly any Bs, much less B+. This is the same in our three groups.

Now let me add that the main task in this course is the writing of a basic academic paper, the first ever produced by our students. This amounts to 50% of the final mark (10% the proposal, 40% the paper itself). Since students are performing better in the exams, many more than we wished for have managed to pass the subject despite failing the paper. In my class, 30% of students have failed the paper, which means that they have not acquired fundamental skills despite passing. Raising the value of the paper to 60% seems extreme, but perhaps we should consider this...

Both in the case of the exams and of the paper, most students could have earned a B or B+ grade, if only they had planned their semester better and had paid attention to exercise instructions. And here's the keynote for this semester: although I am convinced that all my/our students are bright enough they often trip themselves up by failing to check and/or understand what is required of them.

In the case of the first exam (which they were allowed to take home and prepare in advance) 25% failed to see that the questions referred to an article they were supposed to take into account. They failed simply because they didn't even mention the article – I wonder why, as this was the whole point of allowing them to prepare the exam with plenty of time.

The case of the paper is even more severe... We have developed so far the following documentation:

- a) a guide to writing abstracts
- b) a guide to writing basic academic papers
- c) a template to submit the paper proposal
- d) a template to submit the paper itself
- e) a sample paper

I'm possibly forgetting some item. To my horror and consternation, the student delegate for the second year complained in our last Department meeting that students do not receive enough information about what they need to do. I'm really baffled...

Among the errors due to this constant lack of attention to instructions, we found that even though we provide templates for the paper proposal and for the paper to ease edition, students systematically alter the templates or neglect the instructions. I have no idea how and why page numbers have disappeared, Times New Roman has become Calibri, nor why abstracts are missing the narrower lateral margins.

Even worse: my students claim to know, of course, that book and journal titles should be in italics – why then do I waste so much time correcting this? Worse even: we had to grade with a 0 paper proposals which neglected to include passages from the primary and the secondary sources, although that was clearly indicated in the template. The instruction to use at least quotations from three secondary sources in the paper is also a source of constant wrangling with my students: for mysterious reasons, many use only two. Or forget altogether to include any, even though this is one of the major skills the exercise teaches.

There are moments when I feel that there is some kind of secret tug-of-war going on: you say tomato, I say potato... something of that sort. Believe me: after adding italics to 45 papers, any teacher would be out of sorts. Hence my *Harry Potter*-style howlers, as I call the notes I write in capital letters (BOOK TITLES MUST BE IN ITALICS –THIS IS BASIC!!!)

Postgrad exercises present their own challenges and can be even more frustrating. After all, poor things, my second-year students are new to argumentative academic papers. Yet, what is the excuse of the postgrad students to make very similar mistakes? This year, I have started using templates with them, to no avail – the italics are missing, the abstract awry, the bibliography incorrectly edited... And a classic: the quotations are thrown into the text with no connective tissue linking them to the main text, whether this is a colon or a phrase ('As Smith claims...').

What is exhausting in the case of the MA is not so much marking the papers but getting them under way. I never allow students to hand in a paper without a previous proposal, consisting of provisional title, abstract and bibliography, and this is where many postgrad students still face many difficulties. If they come from our Department, at least we can argue that, for shame, they know how to write an abstract since... Victorian Literature. But if they come from other Departments or even schools, that

might not always be the case. This means that I find myself teaching in the MA academic techniques I'm also teaching to undergrads...

The main problem in all cases, whether under- or postgrad, which conditions in its turn the success of the paper is the student's difficulties to formulate a thesis statement. In the Spanish tradition, the argumentative essay is a rarity and academic works tends to be rather descriptive, often covering all possible ground in relation to a text, rather than focus on a central idea. This means that my students are often perplexed by my insistence that they must have a thesis.

Here's an interesting example: a student who wishes to write her paper about Walter White, the villain in *Breaking Bad*, submitted recently an abstract beset by the typical problem: it announced her intention to study this TV series but not her thesis. She came for a tutorial and, as it often happens, the moment she answered my question (why are you interested in White?), the complete abstract, thesis included, materialized. Much to her surprise. In contrast, the papers I have failed today suffered from this central problem: they lacked a thesis, and without a main argument you cannot write an argumentative essay.

So, why is marking so exhausting and grading so frustrating? Easy: this is when you realize that students are not paying enough attention to your instructions. If this because they don't understand them, then the question that comes to my mind is 'why didn't you check with me?'. If this because they don't care, then the question is 'why are you wasting my precious time?' Sharp and sour.

When you throw a boomerang with the right skill, it comes back to you. I feel that teaching is like throwing a boomerang. In the best cases, it returns to you loaded with wonderful gifts (I awarded a girl student a 10 because I found myself in dialogue with her paper, not just marking it). In the worst cases, the returned boomerang hits you smack in the face—yes, it feels like an insult, like being shouted "I don't care and you won't make me care!"

In the end the message to students who will not follow instructions because they do not care is that they only hurt themselves. I will never understand why, given the chance to do well for your own benefit, people choose to underperform willingly. A complete mystery to me...

24 January 2017 / READING DRAMA (AND CONSIDERING DIALOGUE IN FICTION)

Today I begin from ignorance so profound that I have started by learning a concept I didn't know: the 'dialogue novel'. This should be familiar to me, as I read as a young girl in secondary school its main Spanish incarnation: Fernando de Rojas's *La Celestina* (1499), a tragic story entirely told through dialogue. I never heard my marvellous teacher at the time, droll Ana Oltra, call it a 'dialogue novel', just a very odd novel. I do

recall, however, brainy critical discussions later in university about whether *La Celestina* was, despite its extension, some kind of closet play, that is, drama never intended to be performed—like John Milton’s unmanageable (for me) *Samson Agonistes* or Goethe’s *Faustus* (though this was later performed). The ‘dialogue novel’, by the way, is alive and kicking, judging from the article you may find here (<http://therumpus.net/2014/08/the-dialogue-novel/>), with examples such as Dave Eggers’s *Your Fathers, Where Are They? And The Prophets, Do They Live For Ever?*. It takes all kinds!

‘Dialogue novel’ is a label I have come across for the first time while doing a basic MLA search about novels and dialogue, hoping to find academic work examining the dramatic foundation of novels. I have found 65 items with recent titles such as “The Evolution of Dialogues: A Quantitative Study of Russian Novels (1830–1900)” or “Metaphors and Marriage Plots: *Jane Eyre*, *The Egoist*, and Metaphoric Dialogue in the Victorian Novel”. I have had to go much further back in time, however, to find the kind of analysis I was looking for. This is the focus of a 1995 PhD dissertation, *Speaking Volumes: The Scene of Dialogue in the Novel*, and even much further back, a 1971 article called “Some Considerations on Authorial Intrusion and Dialogue in Fielding’s Plays and Novels”. Also, a totally ancient piece of academic work, the 1962 monograph, *Jane Austen’s Novels: The Fabric of Dialogue*.

What am I looking for? Evidence of the links between dialogue in plays and in fiction. I recall reading as an undergrad student that whereas Samuel Richardson’s epistolary novel *Pamela* (1740) set the foundations for the psychological exploration of character in fiction, Henry Fielding’s novels are responsible for the later habitual use of dialogue as a narrative tool which is also fundamental in characterization. I assume that this is what “Some Considerations on Authorial Intrusion and Dialogue in Fielding’s Plays and Novels” deals with. Fielding, a judge by profession, was a playwright in his youth, before the 1737 censorship act made it too hard for his satirical stage work to continue. He took then to practicing law and writing novels, precisely because he was mightily annoyed by Richardson’s pious *Pamela* (he responded with something very naughty and witty called *Shamela* in 1741). Today, Fielding is mainly recalled for having published *Tom Jones* (1749) and for being a major influence on Jane Austen—she of the vivid dialogue.

I’m not doing any research on this topic but I’ve been mulling about the links between dramatic action in plays and novels since the very successful bilingual Catalan novelist Care Santos (now a Premio Nadal winner) told me over lunch that she had recently taken a course on play writing to improve her novels. This intrigues me. Also, I’m tutoring an MA dissertation on English playwright Martin Crimp and I’ve read this weekend a volume with half a dozen of his plays, including the one my student has chosen, the excellent *In the Republic of Happiness*. And, so, I’m going back to a question I asked myself as an undergrad and for which I seem to find no answers: how do we hear the voices when we read dialogue (both in drama and in fiction)?

The abstract of Susan Ferguson’s *Speaking Volumes: The Scene of Dialogue in the Novel* claims that her kind of research was not popular then, the mid-1990s, even though she

makes a point of calling it necessary. Her third chapter “considers the issue of reception—most often hearing in the scene of dialogue—and looks at how representations of reception within the fictional world and within the narrative scene suggest different acts of reading”. Sadly, I have no time to read now about all this for I am pursuing very different lines of research. There are moments, however, when I miss all the empiricist research that was done before post-structuralist theory swept us off our feet as literary critics, perhaps off our better sense.

I hope to meet Care soon and will certainly take the chance to interrogate her about how a novelist approaches the writing of scenes, for we tend to forget that novels are very often structured around scenes and dramatic action. In the meantime I am still processing the impact of Crimp’s plays and trying to understand the force with which he makes dialogue clearly audible in my head. Although I love drama and try to teach contemporary British theatre now and then, I am by no means a specialist. Not even a frequent reader of plays, for which I’m really sorry as I always have a great time activating my mental theatre.

In the Republic of Happiness has three acts. The first one is, shall we say?, more conventional, since it presents a middle-class family on the brink of impending dissolution. Crimp’s dialogue is tense and terse, as befits an heir of the late Harold Pinter, the playwright who turned the claim that language is useless for communication into an amazingly productive stage and screen career (he was a Nobel Prize winner). Pinteresque is the adjective that defines his personal dramatic brand, just as Beckettian defines Samuel Beckett’s no less personal absurdist brand, another major influence on Crimp. He does not have yet his own adjective (Crimpian?) but he could very well soon generate it, seeing how he remains a major name of English stage since his successful *Attempts on her Life* (1997).

Anyway, the point I am trying to reach is the second act of *Republic*, which is articulated as post-dramatic theatre. In this act, eight voices, which are most emphatically not characters and that can be embodied by any of the actors in the play, present Crimp’s collection of very negative judgements on the harsh individualism of present-day life. As any one interested in contemporary theatre knows, post-dramatic theatre authors leave in the hands of directors many necessary decisions about how to stage their texts. This is a huge challenge, which grows even larger for readers as hearing disembodied voices is very, very difficult. My student tried to find on YouTube images to help him understand how Crimp’s play had been staged but found nothing. Theatre companies appear to be so jealous of their work that they live in practice in a pre-21st century neverland, set apart from social networks and, indeed, YouTube.

Crimp’s post-dramatic voices sounded loud and clear in my head but, to be completely honest, I have no idea why. I am also puzzled about what exactly my student has heard in his own reading, considering that he has a high command of English but is not an English Studies specialist. Believe me, I am really puzzled by the whole experience, even though in the two elective courses on British drama I have taught we already did go through the perplexing process of reading post-drama (Tim Crouch’s *The Author* was very hard to tackle, also great fun).

What is bothering me most this time with Crimp is that it is the first time I feel a gap between fictional and stage dialogue. Silly me, since the first crack in this gap was most likely opened with Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* sixty-odd years ago. Still, there you have recognizable characters in the quirky Vladimir and Estragon, whereas in Crimp and the rest of post-dramatic authors you only have, I insist, disembodied voices. This is quite an oxymoron when you think that plays are texts written for performance by a necessarily embodied actor. Perhaps my complaint about the progressive disappearance of description from characterization in fiction is announcing also a post-dramatic turn in novels. Or perhaps I'm simply not familiar with the novels by Beckett which, most likely, are all like that... But, then, just as I tend to supply the missing descriptions in fiction with the bodies and faces of actors, I'm beginning to think that readers of post-dramatic theatre possibly supply the lack of bodies, and of directions about casting, with voices recalled from other plays, films, TV and even novels. We cannot simply read dialogue as a mute assembly of signs on paper, can we?

So, here's the question: if I say that I enjoy Crimp's plays, do I really mean that I love not his own voices but the voices I perform in my own head, prompted by his dialogue? Some question... In comparison, dialogue in novels seems quite functional and uncomplicated...

31 January 2017 / GOODBYE, PALOMA CHAMORRO AND THANK YOU SO MUCH: GRIEVING FOR A LOST TV MODEL

Last Sunday Paloma Chamorro died, aged only 68, after a long silence. I read in the many obituaries that she will be remembered as the public image of the 1980s Movida Madrileña, the musical and artistic movement which sought to sweep away the cobwebs of the dusty Spanish life inherited from Franco's regime (1939-75). I think, however, that this limits Paloma's influence to a specific geographic territory, whereas she managed to be a symbol far beyond that—for the whole generation born in Spain in the 1960s.

I'll summarize the biographical details which anyone can read in her Wikipedia entry. Born in Madrid, she earned a BA degree in Philosophy and was subsequently employed by public Spanish TV in the early 1970s. She was always involved in programmes that dealt with the arts: *Galería* (1973-1974), *Cultura 2* (1975), *Encuentros con las artes y las letras* (1976-1977), *Trazos* (1977) or *Imágenes* (1978-1981), first as presenter and later as director.

Her fame among us, those who were young in the 1980s, is due to her unique series, *La edad de oro* (1983-1985), a weekly show to which she invited an impressive selection of national and international indie music stars, some rookies others fully established, to perform live. Everyone recalls the interviews with Alaska y Dinarama, Kaka de Luxe, Los Rebeldes, Loquillo, Danza Invisible or Almodóvar & McNamara, and the performances by Lou Reed or The Smiths. I recall, rather, the smaller international

acts, artists like Aztec Camera or John Foxx (see the almost complete list here [https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/La_edad_de_oro_\(programa_de_televisi%C3%B3n\)](https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/La_edad_de_oro_(programa_de_televisi%C3%B3n))).

Very cowardly, Televisión Española gave yesterday the news of her death without mentioning what caused *La edad de oro* to be cancelled and Chamorro to abandon public television eventually. An image in a video by the British band Moon Child seen in one of its episodes (October 1984), showed a crucifix impaled in a pig's head. Even though Chamorro's superiors in TVE saw no objection to broadcasting the video, she was later processed for blasphemy, following a major scandal and accusations from an offended spectator which the State's prosecutor accepted. Paloma had to wait until 1990 to be exonerated; the case was finally closed by the Tribunal Supremo in 1993. In the meantime, she directed and presented the far less known arts programmes *La Estación de Perpiñán* (1987, 1988) and *La realidad invertida* (1988-89). From 1990 onwards she only worked sporadically on television, mainly in arts documentaries, keeping a low profile for the last fifteen years. You'll find very little about Paloma Chamorro on the internet.

Chamorro's *La edad de oro* was broadcast on TVE's second channel (now La2) in reaction against music programmes such as *Aplauso* (1978-1983), devoted to the blatantly commercial music then flooding Spain's post-*Saturday Night Fever* new discos. *Aplauso*'s most popular segment was 'La juventud baila' ('Youth dances'), a spectacle that could not be farther from *La edad de oro*. There were other music programmes on TV that tried to steer away from crass commercialism, like *Popgrama* (1977-83), Chamorro's main predecessor. Yet, the novelty in her case was that *La edad de oro* wanted very much to be avant-garde television, placing pop and rock against the much wider background of the arts. As a spectator I was always amazed to hear in her singular interviews musicians commenting on books, films, comics, etc. Chamorro had a distinctive didactic vocation, which is why she could never be called a simple presenter. She was a popularizer, a teacher, a mentor.

Chamorro was always an inconformist. It is difficult today to realize how hard life under Franco's censorship must have been for persons like her and how long his oppressing regime lasted beyond his death (her 1990 trial is proof of that). If she could launch *La edad de oro* this was only because the new Socialist Government headed by Felipe González, elected in 1982, appointed José María Calviño as TVE's director (until 1986). Calviño's mandate was extremely controversial (he was responsible for the cancellation of José Luis Balbín's intellectual debate programme *La Clave*) but he gave unusual freedom to a number of young personalities, including Chamorro. They used national public TV to bring audiences all over Spain closer to the energies that were renewing the Spanish artistic panorama in all fronts. Spanish society was possibly not ready yet, but we, its young people were more than ready, almost desperate.

All generations are cursed by the impossibility of narrating their youth without sounding ridiculously nostalgic. There is also the implicit claim that only the time when one is young is really memorable. I need, however, to pay homage to Chamorro from a much more personal angle than the obituaries and in reference to my own memories. I don't know whether I watched all the shows in *La edad de oro* and, funnily, I haven't

even seen the DVD collection in my possession, issued in 2006, with the best moments of the Spanish artists' performances. Nostalgia has never led me either to the section in TVE's Videos a la Carta, offering highlights from Chamorro's programme (<http://www.rtve.es/alacarta/videos/la-edad-de-oro/>). Watching years later what impressed you as a young person can even be embarrassing, which is why I avoid it. I don't want, either, to invite younger people to see *La edad de oro*. Rather, I'd like to explain what we had then as a society back in the 1980s and what we have lost.

The irony is that while Paloma fought with all her might to widen our mental horizons with her programmes, risking much personal comfort, today she would not have a place in contemporary television. When *La edad de oro* was broadcast there were only two TV channels, both state-owned. This limited offer may seem a disadvantage but has turned out to be an advantage because at the time, before the entry in 1990 of private TV in Spain, national TV did have a clear public service vocation. Of which she is undeniable proof.

At the time Chamorro launched her show, 17 May de 1983, I was 16, almost 17. Although I was in the hands of excellent teachers in my secondary school, there are whole areas of culture one must learn by herself—popular music is one. My working-class family knew nothing about the arts, whether these were painting or comics, again territories outside my formal education. Paloma Chamorro became my teacher, and because I watched her show alone at home and did not comment on it with my schoolmates, I believed she was my *personal* mentor. It is hard to imagine something like this in our times, marked by the massive use of social networks but, yes, there was a period when individuals sharing the same deep experiences did not communicate with each other. We are only discovering now as a generation what happened to us collectively then.

I have read recently an excellent article about how the newly released *Trainspotting 2* can never have the effect that the original 1996 *Trainspotting* had. Precisely—this is why I am anti-nostalgic. What the article also argued, and I would subscribe here, is that each generation must have its iconic texts, whether they are a book, a film, or in the case that occupies me, a TV show. Now, for this to happen there must also exist someone with a full understanding of what is needed, someone who can act as a catalyst of the aspirations and/or grievances which others feel. Irvine Welsh and Danny Boyle did that for Scottish youth in the 1990s. And because we were about to forget her, I need to proclaim that Paloma Chamorro was our collective catalyst in the 1980s. With her spidery, bushy hairdo, her thickly lipsticked mouth, her very personal dress code, she taught us in addition that a person could be truly interested in culture and still be very cool.

Two last thoughts: I'm sure that only a minority of those born in the 1960s in Spain are now mourning Paloma Chamorro, as she was by no means to everyone's taste—yet, those of us mourning her are doing so with true emotion. It is an irony of our celebrity-addled times that the most important persons are not necessarily those best known. Second: I may be blind to what is going on in the life of the younger generations but I wish they are as lucky as we were and have cause to celebrate many decades later the

life of someone in their time who changed their lives for good. Someone who expanded their mind, as Chamorro expanded mine—not for money, or fame, just because she believed it was her mission, her task as a public figure.

Thank you, Paloma Chamorro. May you be long remembered.

7 February 2017 / RESISTING GENDER BINARISM: JACK HALBERSTAM (IN BARCELONA)

Last week I attended two extremely interesting sessions with Jack Halberstam at Barcelona's CCCB: a lecture on 1 February (the 400 seats in the room were taken!) and a seminar the next day (by invitation, attended by about 45 persons). I cannot give an exact idea of all that was discussed but here are some highlights. In any case, CCCB intends to make soon available online both the lecture and the seminar, which was actually a three-hour long conversation.

Jack Halberstam (b. 1961) is an American academic, author and transgender activist, currently at Columbia University, New York. As any person minimally interested in Gender Studies knows, Jack used to be known as Judith (a name he still accepts from family and friends), the name under which he published an early volume, *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (1995) and his most famous book, *Female Masculinity* (1998). Later work appeared signed by Jack: *In A Queer Time and Place* (2005), *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011) and *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender, and the End of Normal* (2012). His forthcoming volume is *Trans**.

I must recommend *Skin Shows*, which I believe was Judith's doctoral dissertation. There is no doubt, however, that Halberstam's *Female Masculinity* made a major contribution to post-Judith Butler Gender Studies. The point Judith Halberstam made then was and is still challenging: masculinity can also be performed by female-bodied persons, not just male-bodied persons. I found her argument convincing and liberating until a gay academic colleague, David Alderson from Manchester University, pointed out to me that far from breaking away from the gender binary Halberstam was endorsing it and, what was even worse for him, giving quite a monolithic image of masculinity. Later, Halberstam chose to transition and present herself as Jack, which I'm sure was a fine personal choice for her but left many of us, women who were coming to terms with our masculinity, somewhat stranded. I abandoned long ago this nonsensical idea that man have a feminine side and women a masculine one and now I put my efforts into de-gendering personal features such as assertiveness (why should that be coded masculine?) or a capacity for empathy (why should that be coded feminine?).

Jack stressed several times during his visit that *Female Masculinity* had been written 20 years ago and that he felt much better represented by *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011). I have not read this volume yet but following Halberstam's own comments, the main argument is that transgenderism has made an art of failure because it has resulted in

bodies that fail to be normatively male or female, which, for him, is positive. He sent a call to embrace this failure productively and helped me very much to understand this point when he said that “If we become men and we don’t change the meaning of manhood then we have been swallowed by manhood”. The other trans men in the room agreed. So now I understand that what bothers me as a feminist woman about trans women is, precisely, how little many do, generally speaking, to challenge conservative femininity—think Caitlyn Jenner.

A main bone of contention, of course, is whether just because you’re LGTB you are automatically subversive of heteronormativity. Halberstam believes this is not the case: 40% of LGTB people voted for Trump, he explained. The position he has been maintaining is perhaps a bit extreme, as he believes that whenever LGTB minorities are granted a civil right they should reject it as an attempt to expand normativity. Hence, he rejects gay marriage as part of a new homonormativity that parallels heteronormativity. In the same way transnormativity threatens to undermine the work of trans activists to undo gender.

And here comes the most remarkable argument presented in the sessions: Halberstam opposes the current extension of transgenderism to children. This, as he explains, is a new phenomenon based on the children’s access to YouTube standard narratives presented by transgender people outside activism. Their narratives focus on the enormous personal distress that gender dysphoria brings to the individual, the risk of suicide and the successful implementation of medical and surgical procedures, leading to a happy ending. The children absorb this story, which they then transmit to their helicopter parents and the distressed adults rush to doctors’ surgeries in order to place these very young persons on the path to early transitioning.

It’s not clear to be how these children acquire so early such a complex gender discourse (surely, more than YouTube is involved, perhaps the parents themselves). Halberstam, however, made a number of very valid points: a) no person knows until adulthood, if ever, what his gender identity should be, b) the lack of contact between the trans children and their parents with adult trans persons is creating a generational split among trans individuals and activism (the trans adults could act as mentors), c) most convincingly: if the current trend is to respect intersex children and not manipulate their bodies, why are we manipulating the bodies of trans children as early as 3 years of age? A father in the audience gave us his personal answer: he wants his trans daughter to be happy... But, then, there might be wiser ways of ensuring her happiness...

The other major issue which Halberstam raised in relation to trans children is that it is contributing to upholding the gender binary system. He agreed that “the categories male and female remain remarkably stable” despite Butler’s introduction of the idea of gender performativity back in 1990, and the current proliferation of new gender identity labels. The kind of transgenderism that helicopter parents embrace is based on the urge to make their children normatively male or female as soon as possible, thus erasing the adult transgender person from society. This is why Halberstam thinks that the phenomenon is not positive. An adult may make better informed choices

about gender and, what is more important, may choose to perform its trans identity in challenging ways, which a child can hardly do. Thus, in contrast to his rejection of trans children, Halberstam answered my question about trans fathers and mothers by stressing the positive contribution that these trans adults are making to transforming the family. He stressed that trans/parenting is part of a wider re-organization of traditional kinship beyond heteronormativity but also a particularly beneficial part of it.

Regarding the representation of trans lives, Halberstam, who is perfectly comfortable with using popular texts in his academic work, recommended the film *By Hook or by Crook* (2001) and the TV series *Transparent* (2014-). He stressed that positive representations of trans individuals should be complex, eschew the suicide narrative or trauma, and, ideally, be transinclusive in relation to the persons involved in their production. They should also present transitioning as a life-long process, avoiding the temptation of easy or neat closure (as happens in the film *Transamerica*).

He praised Neil Jordan's *The Crying Game* (1992) as a significant turning point but was somehow inconclusive about Kim Pierce's biopic about Brandon Teena's tragedy *Boys don't Cry* (1999). Halberstam did not clarify whether the terrible violence presented in this film works well to erase transphobia but he used the trans protests against Pierce during a screening of the film to criticize identity politics. When asked to clarify this point, he stressed that identity politics cannot deny the right of persons outside a particular label to offer representations of the individuals under that label. He also warned that the famous case of Caitlyn Jenner (formerly Bruce Jenner), a Trump voter, shows how identity politics are not necessarily subversive as it is too often assumed.

About the gender binary, it took me a while to catch up with Halberstam's frequent use of the word 'cisgender', "denoting or relating to a person whose sense of personal identity and gender corresponds with their birth sex" (or the opposite of transgender). I always have this feeling that the LGTB community is conveniently using labels that only serve to maintain separation alive. As a heterosexual woman who does not support at all patriarchal heteronormativity, I constantly vindicate the right to call myself 'heteroqueer' but I have been told that if I am heterosexual then I cannot be queer—I was under the impression, however, that being queer was about denying normativity. Now, it turns out I'm also cisgender. Well. Halberstam, to his credit, did stress that the LGTB community and activism are covertly enforcing the gender binary: "you also have to be male or female in a queer context"; he insisted that these are binary categories imposed by queers themselves, not by cisgender pressure. Thus, he explained, feminine gay culture is completely marginalized as is masculine lesbian culture.

I have used here the expression 'female-bodied person', which I'm borrowing from Halberstam's talk. I find it tremendously liberating as it lays the stress on person, rather than woman. I increasingly dislike the words man and woman for their patriarchal connotations and although I'm well aware that 'male-bodied person' and 'female-bodied person' are a mouthful, they are as labels an appealing alternative. They say that you know how you see yourself when you look at the mirror and

consider what comes first to your mind to describe yourself. I, definitely, see a person primarily, not a woman. It is very important that beyond all the identity politics defending particular gender labels, we make an effort to make gender far less important. I always say that as Gender Studies specialist my goal is to eliminate gender, by which I mean not only the pernicious gender binary but also any need to define ourselves primarily through our sex and our gender. This should be in the future as preposterous as defining yourself according to the size of your feet or the shape of your hands.

Until then, however, here we are: stuck with the same old labels and, yes, with the same clichéd, tired narratives (why, Halberstam asked, do heterosexual narratives always focus on size – tall men, big penises, big breasts?). I'll finish by confessing that I was initially confused by Jack Halberstam's female voice, as I had stupidly assumed that he had chosen a fully masculine style of self-presentation. I ended up loving this willing refusal to be a normative man, and his willing decision to be playful, to be queer. This is what we, heterosexual people, need: more queerness, less normativity.

Food for anti gender-binary thought...

14 February 2017 / HELLO, HANDSOME!: ON DESCRIBING MALE BEAUTY IN FICTION

The illustration by Nick Hardcastle showing “the first historically accurate illustration of Mr Darcy (...) based on research commissioned by channel Drama to celebrate Jane Austen Season” has run like burning powder through my Department colleagues' email. “Key findings”, we are told, “include Mr Darcy's sloping shoulders, powdered white hair, a long nose, pointy chin and pale complexion” (<https://vimeo.com/203141362/45c36ba575>). Once you consider Darcy's new fancy mug shot, you may next read the article on which this is based, by Professors John Sutherland and Amanda Vickery (<http://drama.uktv.co.uk/pride-and-prejudice/article/real-mr-darcy-dramatic-re-appraisal/>). It is called “The Real Mr Darcy: A Dramatic Re-Appraisal”, and it offers a quite amusing description of what a most desirable man must have looked like... either in 1790s when Austen wrote her novel or in 1813 when it was published, a mere 20 years apart, with Romanticism in the middle. Very accurate.

As you can see, I find the idea of portraying the ‘real’ Darcy absolute nonsense, as, to begin with, Darcy is a fictional character. As I have recently complained, authors offer too little description (except Dickens), which makes our task as readers often quite annoying. In the case of men presented as sex symbols, like Darcy, this vagueness may be an advantage to writers, for Austen only needs to say that Darcy is “handsome” for each woman reader to supply an ideal image. Here's how Darcy is actually presented (in Chapter III of *Pride and Prejudice*), in direct contrast, by the way, with his best friend: “Mr. Bingley was good looking and gentlemanlike; he had a pleasant countenance, and easy, unaffected manners. (...) his friend Mr. Darcy soon drew the

attention of the room by his fine, tall person, handsome features, noble mien; and the report which was in general circulation within five minutes after his entrance, of his having ten thousand a year." Two observations: not the man himself but his features are described as handsome, and Austen makes sure we get the point that Darcy's handsomeness is much enhanced by his annual rent, in today's currency, of 500,000£. The passage, however, continues, by noting that Darcy was much admired until "his manners gave a disgust which turned the tide of his popularity; for he was discovered to be proud (...)". Indisputably, *Pride and Prejudice* is the story of how Darcy's physical handsomeness is only proven by his handsome rescue of brainless Lydia from her entanglement with Wickham.

Colin Firth, who played a very manly Darcy in the 1995 BBC adaptation, obviously embodied for a whole generation of Austen readers a fantasy of handsomeness, as, of course, did Laurence Olivier for the 1940s. In contrast, Matthew McFadyen did nothing for the role. You will see that the many press articles generated by Hardcastle's illustration tend to compare it with a photo of Firth as Austen's heartthrob. Now we know that Firth had to die his gingerish hair in a darker hue to comply with the 'dark' part of the standard 'tall, dark, handsome' description. He's naturally tall, at 1.87 m. Having recently heard Jack Halberstam wonder why in heterosexual romance men must be very tall, I now find this matter of height quite droll. Are the 10 cms separating Tom Cruise (170) from Brad Pitt (180) so crucial? Going back to Austen, just let me point out what should be obvious: an illustration of one possible way in which Darcy could be represented in the mental theatre of the female readers of the 1810s is not an illustration of the 'real' Darcy but only one element in the ongoing history of how Darcy has been imagined throughout the years. Also, of the history of the representation of male beauty in fiction.

I keep on telling my students—I'm sure I have already mentioned this here—that I want to supervise a PhD dissertation on the use of the word 'handsome' in fiction, particularly by women but not only so. My moment of enlightenment came when reading Iain M. Banks' science-fiction novel *The Hydrogen Sonata*. As I'm sure I have already narrated here, the female protagonist Vyr finds herself gradually falling in love with Beardle, the avatar of the powerful artificial intelligence, or Mind, that runs one of the colossal spaceships which comprise the executive arm of the utopian Culture. Guess how Beardle is described? He's handsome. Vyr is absolutely chagrined when Beardle basically tells her she's an idiot for feeling anything towards him, as he is not even human. I was also chagrined, for as a heterosexual female reader used to responding in this silly Pavlovian way to the word 'handsome', I had also fallen for Beardle. For Vyr the problem is that Beardle is not a real man. I happen to share her problem for, precisely, Beardle is a fictional construct. Not a real man. Much like Darcy.

There is a wonderful conversation about whether the use of 'handsome' is archaic in relation to women here: <http://english.stackexchange.com/questions/17108/can-you-still-call-a-woman-handsome>. I will not go into this but let me just note that Sigourney Weaver is mentioned as a handsome woman, and Scarlett Johanson as a pretty one, though in my view she's more handsome than pretty—attractive perhaps. Anyway, if we consider the difference between a 'handsome man' and a 'pretty man' (Douglas

Booth, Elijah Wood), you begin to see that 'handsome' actually means 'attractive in a manly way'. Therefore, what makes us, heterosexual female readers, respond to the adjective 'handsome' is the manliness embedded in it. Whether it is Darcy's or Beardle's.

A recent study indicated that woman's favourite male physical feature is not, as it is often said, the eyes, or, as some have been insisting lately, a shapely butt, but, rather, a good pair of muscled arms. Why? Because when we think 'manly' we think 'protective' and little girls that we all are, we want to be embraced by manly men with bulky arms—tall ones, as daddy always is for little girls (there's Electra for you, Jack Halberstam).

This is the main irritant in the new image created for Darcy: he's lost the manly arms, the square shoulders we associate with him since Firth. Profs. Sutherland and Vickery explain that in Austen's time "It was all about the legs. The six pack was unknown and square shouldered bulk was the mark of the navy not the gentlemen. Chests were modest and shoulders sloping. Arm holes cut high and to the back rather pinioning the man within. The general effect was one of languid, graceful length not breadth. More ballet dancer than beef-cake". What they're missing is that not even ballet dancers, whether gay or not, look languid today. Also that contemporary heterosexual women do not care at all what was considered ideal for men back in the 1810s.

Reading recently my good friend Isabel Clúa's new book *Cuerpos de escándalo: Celebridad femenina en el fin-de-siècle*, which deals with the Spanish female stars of the popular theatre, I was surprised by the photos. There was no way I could see beauty in Carolina Otero, internationally known as 'la bella Otero'. Tórtola Valencia, on the other hand, seemed quite handsome to me—meaning that her beauty must have looked very odd in her time. I'm thus making again the well-known point that the appreciation of human beauty has a history. The problem, of course, is that it has usually focused on the representation of women, not of men. When I wrote the short essay "Entre Clooney y Pitt: El problema del deseo femenino heterosexual y lo sexy masculino"

([http://gent.uab.cat/saramartinallegre/sites/gent.uab.cat.saramartinallegre/files/Entre Cloone y Pitt Sara Martin.pdf](http://gent.uab.cat/saramartinallegre/sites/gent.uab.cat.saramartinallegre/files/Entre_Cloone_y_Pitt_Sara_Martin.pdf)) I had a very hard time finding sources that discuss male beauty as seen from women's point of view. Even today, I'm not sure why the six-pack is an essential part of our ideal, though it's been suggested that it connects manliness with discipline.

This lack of a history of male handsomeness, I am arguing, and of its representation in print and audiovisual fiction means that we lack the codes to read Hardcastle's rendering of his 'real' Darcy but also to understand what is happening under our very noses. And this is quite interesting: let's see who can convincingly explain why Brad Pitt, aged 53, is universally acknowledged as the most handsome man on Earth, a title he is keeping since 1991, when he seduced Thelma (Geena Davis) and the rest of the planet in *Thelma & Louise*. Recently, I went through as many lists I could find in IMDB of the hottest male actors active today, lists that ranged from men in their 70s to men in their teens, and, believe me, nobody could compare to Pitt. Chris Hemsworth came

second but, like the rest, he lacked this something else that makes Pitt charismatic. Interestingly, Pitt's status as male icon of beauty seems to have been unaffected by his ex-wife Angelina Jolie's demolition of his image as ideal family man, whereas a similar icon of a similar age, Johnny Depp, is now facing decadence after a highly problematic divorce.

If I go into why Pitt is so handsome, despite the acne scarring of his face, I will never finish. For the sake of my argumentation, just let's agree that nobody personifies better than him ideal masculinity today. Now think of two learned professors claiming in two hundred years time that in the fiction of 2010s Pitt is what handsome men looked like. Don't even say the words Christian Grey and Jamie Dornan, please. Next, take any contemporary novel with a handsome man, thus described, and tell me what you see. Is it Pitt, our consensual ideal, or your own personal fantasy—perhaps based on someone you know?

What I'm saying is that not even in Austen's time was handsomeness dominated by a single image. Today, when Pitt might be the equivalent of Hardcastle's handsome man for our times, as in the past, the adjective 'handsome' is used by authors to trigger a certain psychological reaction in readers, not as a descriptor. A description would clarify that "Mr. Darcy was, at six feet, a very tall man. His impressive blue eyes were the best feature in a suitably pale countenance, dominated by an exquisite long nose, small mouth and gracefully pointed chin. His hair, naturally blonde, was hidden beneath an elegantly powdered wig." There you are.

I can't wait to write the following post about, shall we say, secondary handsomeness? Think Paul Bettany...

21 February 2017 / THE CHARISMA OF SUPPORTING ACTORS: PAUL BETTANY (AND THE 'THAT GUYS')

My doctoral student Josie Swarbrick contributed a paper on the film *Transcendence* (2014) to our recent yearly post-graduate seminar. The film is just average but Jack Paglen's screenplay is one of the very few attuned to the treatment of the posthuman in current sf. The role of Will Caster, the man who transcends his humanity, is here played by Johnny Depp. I started a discussion about whether Will's loss of control over his life parallels the current decadence of Depp as a star (see how Hadley Freeman bemoans her loss of an idol: <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2017/feb/11/how-i-loved-you-johnny-depp-purple-tinted-truth>). Josie mentioned instead Paul Bettany, who plays Depp's rival in love, as an example of an actor with quite a steady career. To my surprise, this unleashed a flow of comments from the women students in the room, each mentioning a favourite role played by Bettany...

Bettany has appeared so far in 43 films; chances are you've come across him. IMDB and Wikipedia help me here to offer a quick overview of his career. Bettany (b. 1971) is an English theatre and film actor. His debut was on the stage (*An Inspector Calls*) and

he even appeared on a BBC *Oliver Twist* (as Sikes), before getting a small role in *Bent* (1997). British film audiences discovered Bettany thanks to *Gangster No. 1* (2000). His career became international when director Brian Helgeland insisted that he was cast as Chaucer in his silly medieval adventure film *A Knight's Tale* (2001). Bettany next secured a breakthrough supporting role in the Oscar-award winner *A Beautiful Mind* (2001, Ron Howard), with Russell Crowe. Bettany and Crowe soon played best friends Jack Aubrey and Stephen Maturin in Peter Weir's acclaimed *Master and Commander* (2003). Bettany has occasionally played leading roles in, among others, the romantic comedy *Wimbledon* (2004) and the medieval mystery *The Reckoning* (2002—or was he co-protagonist with Willem Dafoe?). You may have also spotted him in *Dogville* (2003) and *The Da Vinci Code* (2006). Curiously, after voicing Tony Stark's artificial intelligence J.A.R.V.I.S. in four films in which Iron Man appears, Bettany has been cast as the literally red-skinned Vision in *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015) and *Captain America: Civil War* (2016). Incidentally, he's been married since 2003 to actress Jennifer Connelly (they met when shooting *A Beautiful Mind*).

A 2004 interview with Sam Ingleby offers interesting clues about Bettany (<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/features/paul-bettany-lets-get-physical-547410.html>) Asked why he chose to make *Wimbledon* after the vastly different *Dogville*, Bettany “immediately drops into self-deprecating mode” and explains that “My plan—well, it isn't much of a plan, but it's mine and I like it—is to try to do lots of different things”. He cites two of his heroes, Peter Weir and Ang Lee, as examples of versatile film directors that work in many genres. He adds that “I just get bored if I don't do different things”. No wonder, then, that Ingleby sees Bettany's “malleability on screen” as a product of his “ability to change genre and to avoid being typecast”.

Here's some irony, however, that Ingleby fails to explore: Bettany is slim, blond, blue-eyed, very tall and quite good-looking (perhaps not 100% handsome in a manly way). Yet, despite having “the lineaments of a film star” he is not one. He's an actor, not a star. Russell Crowe, to name someone connected with Bettany, is a star. Because Bettany is very pale, he has often been cast as a cold-blooded character, none paler and colder than the monk Silas in *The Da Vinci Code*. Physical appeal, then, is not as easy to pin down in an actor as we assume.

Usually, the value of a film star is measured by the fees s/he commands. Currently these are the ten male names with the highest influence and appeal on planet Earth: Dwayne Johnson, Jackie Chan, Matt Damon, Tom Cruise, Johnny Depp, Ben Affleck, Vin Diesel, Shah Rukh Khan, Robert Downey jr., Akshay Khumar and Brad Pitt. By the way, the best paid female actor in 2016 was Jennifer Lawrence; she made 46\$ million; Dwayne Johnson, in contrast, earned 64.5\$ million. Earnings, thus, turn out to be only indirectly related to box-office appeal; sexism also plays a part.

An obvious, yet important, point to make is that whereas spectators pay good money to see these stars on the screen, hence their earnings, generally speaking we do not go to the cinema to enjoy the work of particular secondary actors. Character or supporting actors certainly add value to films and may be a strong selling point,

predominantly those in villain roles (like Javier Bardem in *No Land for Old Men*). I have no idea on what basis is their salary established but, surely, there must be a ranking which value in money what they add to films. My Google search for 'highest-paid supporting actor', however, throws nothing.

Supporting, or character, actors, appear to be of two kinds: the ones that eventually slip into stardom, and those who never do. All actors have volatile careers but supporting actors appear to fare better, since they can avoid the stressful demands of stardom. Nothing worse than pouring high expectations and hype on an actor who might have reached success by chance rather than merit—arguably, this might explain why so many Oscar-award winners for leading roles suddenly see their careers sink. Fickle fashions also play a role: an actor like Meryl Streep is not in danger of incurring in what is now called 'brand exhaustion' or 'brand fatigue'. Scarlett Johansson, who seems to be six persons instead of just one, certainly is.

Returning to the supporting actors, Paul Bettany might be perhaps representative of a third category. Some actors hover forever on the brink of stardom; they are the kind whose fans are always asking themselves 'how come s/he is not better known?'. Tom Hardy used to be in this category, but now he's on the way to stardom aided by us, his fans from the early stages of his career. Other character actors, however, reach fame even without an enthusiastic fan base—simply because they're very good: think of Paul Giamatti or the late Phillip Seymour Hoffman. Then we have what an IMDB user calls 'that guy actors': actors "you see in every movie and say to yourself 'Hey its that guy!' but you never know their names". This person offers a great list of 100 male names here: <http://www.imdb.com/list/ls050426470/>. No, Paul Bettany is not included, but, then, no list is ever exhaustive. See also, for instance, <http://www.tasteofcinema.com/2014/the-30-greatest-character-actors-in-hollywood-history/>.

Although not all male stars are handsome—some are not even close—clearly physical attractive pays a major role in the lists of best-paid actors. Character actors, in contrast, bring physical variety to the screen. Their presence is what reassures us that the world is not peopled only with beautiful individuals. Charisma, of course, marks the difference between the more and the less popular actors in all categories. This is the x factor that whets the spectator's curiosity and that helps us to recall specific names. And then return for more, in yet another film with the same actor.

This seemingly suggests that supporting actors on the brink of stardom, like Bettany, have an odd measure of charisma: enough to seduce loyal fans but not enough to seduce many fans and reach stardom. Bettany is very good at stealing scenes from the protagonists but not attractive enough (in a general sense) to bear the burden of a whole film on his shoulders. Perhaps he just needs a breakthrough leading role that tips the scales of charisma in his favour. Sometimes it takes a very long time, which is why I'm not writing Bettany off the list of 21st century stars. Sometimes it never happens. The good news is that characters actors like Bettany tend to enjoy longer careers than most stars as, ostensibly, spectators are more generous with their ageing

process. The whole planet is monitoring each wrinkle in Brad Pitt's face but, surely, this will not happen to Bettany.

My message today is that we need to reconsider success and failure. Paul Bettany's career suggests that long-lasting careers in secondary positions may be much more satisfying than downright success/stardom. Also, that each charismatic individual seems to have a different measure of this elusive quality. Brad Pitt seems gifted with an endless supply, but here we are, Paul Bettany's loyal fans, announcing to the world that we appreciate whatever amount he does have. This is a call, then, to look beyond the star and appreciate all the 'that guys' (and 'that girls') that make cinema such a wonderful experience.

28 February 2017 / CELEBRATING JUDY AND POPPY: GREAT FEMALE CHARACTERS IN ZOOTOPIA AND TROLLS

The fiasco following Warren Beatty's absurd proclamation of *La La Land* as this year's Oscar winner instead of *Moonlight* (despite realizing that he had the wrong envelope in his hands) has already been commented on to exhaustion. I'm really sorry for the public humiliation that the producers of *La La Land* endured; yet, at the same time, I'm happy that the error was corrected, as this a film I profoundly dislike. I share 100% the reasons for my aversion with David Cox, and, so, I'll recommend his insightful review (<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2017/feb/23/la-la-lands-inevitable-oscar-win-is-a-disaster-for-hollywood-and-for-us>).

I'd rather use my time and energy here to praise the winner for Best Animated Feature Film, the delicious *Zootopia* (a.k.a *Zootropolis* in Europe). Also, another charming animated film, *Trolls*, though this was only nominated for its wonderfully catchy song: Justin Timberlake's "Can't Stop the Feeling!" (he voices Branch, the male protagonist, in the film). I want to applaud in particular the leading female roles, Judy and Poppy, respectively, for being a breath of fresh air in the stale world offered to little girls.

I love animated films for children and I'm sorry to see that adults with and without children in their families look down on them as inferior products. I have been reading these days Jack Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* and enjoying very much his defence of Disney, Pixar and DreamWorks as producers of valuable work, worth analyzing from an academic point of view and actually quite subversive. Even so, he calls the films "silly" quite often, as if apologizing for dealing with them before those who despise movies for the little ones as sub-par cinema. This is the wrong attitude. So, please, here is my first plea today: do see films for children, and of all nations, not just American ones. I need not say that Japan's Studio Ghibli is producing wonderful animation, and so are others around the world.

I am well aware that animation need not be limited to children. Charlie Kaufman's *Anomalisa* (Oscar nominee last year) or *Persepolis* (nominated in 2007) are, obviously, not for children. Adults who make the mistake of believing that cartoon movies are for

kids may find themselves very much chagrined, as did the many embarrassed parents who rushed their children out of the screening of *South Park: Bigger, Longer and Uncut* (1999) which I attended. I was myself quite shocked to see what could be done with a few pieces of cut paper... At any rate, take a look at any list of Oscar winners and nominees for Best Animated Films, a category activated in 2000, (like https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Academy_Award_for_Best_Animated_Feature) and marvel at the many excellent films it contains. Indeed, *Up* (2009) and *Toy Story 3* (2010), also appeared in the list of Best Picture nominees, apart from winning in their own category.

This year, *Zootopia's* rivals were two other US films—*Kubo and the Two Strings*, *Moana*—the Swiss/French *My Life as a Zucchini* and the French/Belgian/Japanese co-production *The Red Turtle*. I have not seen *Moana* yet (known as *Vaiana* in Spain because *Moana* is the trademark... of a bathing soap!) and it might well be, this goes in the same positive direction I want to praise here. Leaving aside *The Red Turtle* for the purpose of my argumentation, I need to say that I was horrified by *Kubo and the Two Strings* (despite loving Laika Studios' *Coraline* and *Paranorman*) and will almost certainly not see *My Life as a Zucchini*.

Why not? Well, *Kubo* might be as beautiful and innovative as you may wish regarding its animation technique, but it begins with a mother running away with her baby after her own father gouges out the little boy's eye. Not that you see the actual scene but I could never get over this bit of patriarchal cruelty, so nonchalantly narrated. *My Life as a Zucchini* begins with the protagonist, um... Courgette, accidentally killing his mother and being sent to an orphan's home. Similarly, *Pete's Dragon*, which I saw recently, begins with little Peter's parents being killed in a horrifying car crash, which leaves him stranded in the forest for years. I usually go to the cinema with my little niece and after having put her through the terrifying experience of seeing *The Good Dinosaur* I have been avoiding like the plague this kind of traumatic children's animation—hence my pleasure in *Zootopia* and *Trolls*. And her pleasure.

You'll have noticed that in all the horrifying films for children I have mentioned, the protagonist is a boy (or a male creature). Odd. Call me naïve, but I'd rather push that ugly view of life as confrontation aside and focus on what cinema offers little girls, which seems far more upbeat. The trend, possibly started with *Brave* (2012), extends now to other products, like the TV series *Gumball* (2011-, with the amazingly well-balanced Anaïs) or *Miraculous* (2015-) with the girl superhero Ladybug. Even Spielberg's failed film *The B.F.G.* is part of a growing trend: an increase in the number of appealing female characters for little girls. It's not just a matter of up-dating the fairy-tale princess, though this is also happening, but of going a little bit farther. As my niece patiently explained to me, what is cool about Elsa in *Frozen* is that she is a queen, hence in no need to marry... and with power to do interesting things.

Zootopia and *Trolls* are, in this sense very different, for Judy Hopps is a rabbit very much focused on becoming a police officer, whereas Poppy is a troll queen, focused on saving her people from the ogres that want to eat them. At first sight, they seem to have little in common but they do share a main feature: the determination not so

much to fulfil a dream as to do their job well, and for the sake of their community. They also have a magnificent self-possession, totally extreme in Poppy's case, as she does not know the meaning of the word 'defeat' (Judy does, indeed). Jack Halberstam praises a series of animated films, from *Finding Nemo* to *Chicken Run*, precisely because they focus on characters that look beyond themselves to help others, something which he finds missing in our selfish society. In this sense, though I loved the French/Canadian film *Ballerina* (with its subversive Marxist conquest of 19th century bourgeois ballet by low-class Félicie), I realize that the plot repeats the selfish model of personal success. In contrast, Judy and Poppy are motivated, rather, by securing the best for their community; hence their being praiseworthy heroes.

Again, though the two films are very different, the central problem both in *Zootopia* and in *Trolls* is posed by predators. Judy's utopian world is based on the idea that carnivores and herbivores can live happily together—a dream spoiled by shady manipulators who attempt to present meat-eaters as pure beasts. In *Trolls*, things are even more straightforward: the big ogres see the tiny trolls as a delicacy and (as we do with animals) they even have an annual festival devoted to gorging on them. Judy and Poppy's mission, then, entails keeping a delicate balance that deters the potential predators from eating their prey, a category to which they themselves belong as a herbivore (Judy) and a troll, no matter how queenly (Poppy). In their efforts to redress the balance and avoid danger, Judy and Poppy are accompanied by a very reluctant male mate: respectively, the con artist Nick Wilde (a fox) and Branch, a severely depressed troll who lost all his colour because of a deeply traumatic event. Nick mocks in his stylish way Judy's earnest fight against crime; grumpy Branch dampens (or tries to) the spirit of the always cheerful Poppy. That is, until both gentlemen are won over by the girls, in friendly, rather than romantic ways.

Girls, the message is, can change men, hence patriarchy, with their optimism. This has been well received by *Zootopia's* audiences (the movie keeps a very high 8.1 score at IMDB) but not so much by the public for *Trolls* (only 6.5 at IMDB). I'm not sure whether this is important but *Trolls* is a DreamWorks, not a Disney, film. I loved every minute of *Trolls*, but others found it both too dark (in the sense I have been complaining here) or, confusingly, too mawkish. I enjoyed very much *Zootopia's* clever plot and the many playful references to adult films. Yet, I appreciated *Trolls* for being an in-your-face defence of cheesy good feeling.

Beyond the actual events in the plot, I very much believe that *Trolls* has pulled the amazing trick of turning the disgusting, creepy Troll dolls designed by Dane Thomas Mann in 1959, into something, well, energizing. Please, take a look at Judy here (http://zootopia.wikia.com/wiki/Judy_Hopps) and see how optimistic and forthright she looks—encouraging, right? Now, take a look at pink-skinned, pink-haired Poppy here: <http://dreamworks.wikia.com/wiki/Poppy>. She is irresistible... an image of complete and utter self-sufficiency. Both my home and my university office are now decorated with her image, completed by the motto 'I'm confident'—for so she is. And you know what? I feel confident when I look at her comical, slightly squint-eyed, glittery face... or when I see her sing her way into almost complete disaster and still be

positive: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IFuFm0m2wj0>. Who, I wonder, can connect with angry, one-eyed Kubo instead?

Is Judy and Poppy's optimism misplaced in our increasingly ugly world? Should we give little girls heroes like them at all? I'm not talking here about silly, pretty girls who only think of romance and fashion. These are, let me stress, females doing a good job (I puzzle, however, about why they are not human—perhaps I need to see *Moana/Vaiana*). Judy and Poppy are intelligent, resourceful, competent and, above all, positive. Not just happy in a bubbly, inconsequential way, but constructive, affirmative and encouraging of others. My heroes...

Now, thank you Jonathan Aibel and Glenn Berger for writing *Trolls*, thank you Erica Rivinoja for Poppy's story. Thank you Jared Bush and Phil Johnston for writing *Zootopia*, thank you Byron Howard, Rich Moore, Jared Bush, Jim Reardon, Josie Trinidad, Phil Johnston and Jennifer Lee for Judy's story. And the marvellous production designers for the way Judy and Poppy embody girl power.

7 March 2017 / BE BOLD FOR CHANGE: INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY 2017

This year the theme for International Women's Day is #BeBoldForChange, as you may see from diverse sites on the internet. Tomorrow, 8 of March, we women are also invited to join a worldwide strike to demonstrate that without us the planet will stop rolling. The latest calculations suggest that we are 170 years away from gender parity, and this is an optimistic piece of guesswork, as it does not take into account possible setbacks (think Trump, think Putin, think ISIS). It is clearly too long to wait for, hence the call for action. Right now.

I have been writing this blog since 2010 and every year this is the most difficult post for me. International Women's Day is a yearly reminder of our subjection to misogynistic patriarchy, for if we were truly free this celebration would not be necessary. For as long as we need to protest and show the evidence of the constant patriarchal terrorist campaigns against us, we women remain still subordinated and not at all citizens on full, equal terms with men. I do not like being reminded that my life as a woman is conditioned by patriarchy, hence my anger, sorrow and distress every 8th March.

Also my dismay. I go through the main newspapers websites in Spain, the USA and the UK regularly and it is always the same: most news items about women concern our bodies, whether these are on display for voyeuristic reasons or as objects of patriarchal violence. The same media that pretend to maintain a liberal outlook are guilty of the grossest misrepresentation of what women do and endure on a daily basis. Then, whenever there is a minimally positive article on women's achievements, or one that discusses inequality from an intelligent point of view, you get all those anonymous trolls pouring out the most toxic venom. In the Spanish media they run unchecked; in the British newspaper I read (*The Guardian*) many contributions are

erased by the moderators; some chains of comments are mostly blanks... I need not even mention the extent to which trolling on the social networks is becoming one of the most insidious, effective branches of patriarchal terrorism.

Yes, I am using the word terrorism insistently because this is how it feels today in Spain: about 20 women have died so far, killed by their current or previous male partners. I must say 'about' because not even the Director of the Observatorio por la Igualdad could name the actual figure with certainty (this morning on TV). It is possibly higher. Just reverse the situation and try to think of what would happen if 20 men had been killed so far this year by their female couples and ex-couples...

Whenever information like this appears in the media, I read a string of abusive comments from the habitual male trolls, with one argument that is constantly repeated: men also suffer from gendered violence, this might not be so obvious but it is also very harmful. Fine, if that is the case, please come out, you male victims of women's abuse. Men are doing much better than they used to in reporting sexual abuse endured as children (by men...). So, if you're being abused by your women, instead of pretending that patriarchal terrorism does not exist, do tell us what is happening to you and we will help you. Promise. What is not at all acceptable is a situation in which the women victims are made twice invisible by denying that they matter (I won't even speak about the children killed this year, and those made orphans by furious, violent, lethal patriarchal monsters). And, yes, I support the call to speak about the survivors of violence, and not only the victims, for it seems to me that the exclusive focus on brutality contributes to patriarchal terrorism as an invitation to commit copy-cat crimes.

More dismay: the women themselves, and how we are contributing to our own discrimination. The women who voted for Donald Trump, the women who support Putin in Russia, or ISIS in Europe and the Middle East. The women who bully other women in school and on the internet, or beat them up. The women who publish sexualized photos of themselves and call this invitation to a demeaning use of their persons a free feminist act. The women who let themselves be used in fashion campaigns that are an invitation to abusive misogyny. The women incapable of working with other women in alliances to end inequality, at any level. The women who exploit other women they employ. The women who allow their girls' genitalia to be mutilated. The women who reject feminism as if it is an infectious disease. The women who abuse the word feminism to defend absurd choices. I could go on...

Next, the lack of awareness and the refusal to know. I often feel like an abolitionist speaking to slaves who adamantly reject the idea that they are enslaved and, so, will not contribute to their own liberation. I wonder what it was like for the real abolitionists. I was teaching a seminar on Shakespeare within an MA course and we were discussing how having actresses play male roles (Hamlet, Richard III...) does not really alter the patriarchal nature of the plays, which, logically, reflect their time and society. One of the young women in class basically said that patriarchy is what it is and cannot be altered. Well, I replied, if that were the case you wouldn't be here in class as a student and I would not be teaching in a university classroom. No reaction.

It might be the case that because I teach Victorian Literature I am particularly sensitized about the times when women had no rights whatsoever but it baffles me that young women take two oxymoronic things for granted: a) that patriarchy is basic human nature, b) that their rights are guaranteed. Patriarchy is NOT the same as human nature—it can and it must be changed and it is certainly changing, but not fast enough. If patriarchy was human nature, our lives as women would have remained unaltered for ever and I would not be writing this post; I'd be minding my ten children and be possibly illiterate. The problem with patriarchy is that it is not disappearing fast enough, and it's clear to me that full equality can never be reached as long as patriarchy persists. 170 years? What a joke...

The other matter, that our rights are guaranteed, is another big joke. Right now the biggest best-sellers in the USA are George Orwell's *1984* and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. Orwell's classic is a horrifying story about how any individual can be coerced into completely submitting to an ideology, no matter how hard s/he tries to rebel. Big Brother, no mistake about it, is the personification of patriarchy. In Atwood's dystopia she narrates how fast and how easily women are deprived of all their rights in the early stages of the fundamentalist dictatorship that overpowers democracy in the USA. As happened to me while reading Houellebecq's *Submission*, I was horrified by the good men's reaction: the husband of Atwood's protagonist does not defend her rights, he just offers her his personal protection (don't worry if you cannot work anymore, I'll support you). This kind of, shall we say?, secondary complicity is to me even far more scarier than downright patriarchal terrorism. In the event of a frontal attack against women's rights, then, there is no guarantee that *all* women would fight for them, and no guarantee either that the good men would confront the evil patriarchs for us. Atwood got it right. And so did Orwell: it'll be everyone for themselves. And violent coercion.

And here's my main worry: it may be impossible to imagine a situation in which Africans would be again kidnapped and sent to America to be enslaved but 150 years after the formal end of slavery, a brutal racism against African-Americans persists. Likewise, homophobia and all forms of LGBTBI phobia persist despite the changes in legislation. As for us, women, yes, we may vote, study, work in the professions and make a thousand choices we could not make before the 20th century but the pressure of misogyny is not easing out, whether it results in bloody murder or in what Luis Bonino called 'micro-machismos', that is, the small everyday acts that make our lives harder: from a sexist joke by a workmate to a partner's dragging their feet until we lose patience and clean the dishes ourselves. How our energy, talent and time is wasted is a scandal if we think of how necessary women are for the survival of the human species and our progress as a civilization.

I discussed in my previous post two examples of positive female characters addressed to a children's audience, Judy in *Zootopia* and Poppy in *Trolls*. I insist that this is crucial: let's find positive role models, women who have been bold to change, and who have changed life for us by giving us more choices. Madame Curie, rather than Kim Kardashian, if you know what I mean. And may 2017 be better for women than 2016

was, though I very much doubt this will be the case. We may be as bold as we can to change, but if patriarchy is not altered nothing significant will change. And this, good men reading me, is our common enemy.

14 March 2017 / A WRITER THINKS ABOUT HIS CRAFT: GEORGE SAUNDERS

Today I am reading in detail here an article recently published by American writer George Saunders (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Saunders). He specializes in short fiction, children's fiction and the essay and is not, therefore, a novelist, the type of writers I most commonly read. I have only read one book by him, *Pastoralia* (2000), a collection said to be among his best work. He has won plenty of awards in the last twenty-odd years, among them the PEN/Malamud Award for Excellence in the Short Story (2013). He is since 2014 a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. All in all, then, a sophisticated kind of literary writer.

The article is "George Saunders: What Writers Really Do When They Write" (<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/mar/04/what-writers-really-do-when-they-write>) and has a subtitle that names to "A series of instincts, thousands of tiny adjustments, hundreds of drafts...", which is the gist indeed of the piece. The complete article runs to almost 4000 words and I certainly recommend that you read all of them.

Saunders narrates first how the seed for his latest book, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, which happens to be his first novel, was planted in his mind twenty years ago. Lesson number one: fiction very often arises from an image suggested by one particular experience in the author's life, which, while personal (it does happen to him or her) need not be auto-biographical, in the sense of dealing with the author's own life. Saunders visited the crypt where Lincoln's son was buried and was told that the grief-stricken President often visited it: "An image spontaneously leapt into my mind –a melding of the Lincoln Memorial and the Pietà". In 2012 Saunders felt finally ready to tackle the topic and write his first novel. Second lesson: inspirational images may live on for many years in the fiction writer's mind until they demand to be brought forth. Saunders denies as "some version of the intentional fallacy" that "art is about having a clear-cut intention and then confidently executing same". As he warns us, "The actual process, in my experience, is much more mysterious and more of a pain in the ass to discuss truthfully". He tries, nonetheless.

Saunders describes next his "method" to navigate the squalls of literary creation: "I imagine a meter mounted in my forehead, with 'P' on this side ('Positive') and 'N' on this side ('Negative')." Accordingly, he reads his work, "the way a first-time reader might", paying attention to how the needle reacts and ruthlessly editing his text: "watch the needle, adjust the prose" ad nauseam. Of course, we have a problem here already: the process of distilling what your mind produces as you write happens before edition. This is common to all kinds of writers. As I write this post, I know vaguely where I am going with my argument but I am constantly surprised by the exact shape

my sentences take. Why these words and no others? Actually, what I most enjoy in writing is that kind of surprise, which is why I make an effort to write a post every week: because otherwise my brain would be inactive. In the case of fiction writers, fabulation, as I call the process of imagining stories, happens, I insist, before edition. I believe that everyone can understand Saunders' needle for we possess one, more or less rudimentary, but not his powers to fabulate. Not even he himself.

It is true, at any rate, that a great deal of the pleasure of writing lies in rewriting, in the polishing of the sentences. Saunders enjoys in particular the impression that "the result of this laborious and slightly obsessive process is a story that is better than I am in 'real life' –funnier, kinder, less full of crap, more empathetic, with a clearer sense of virtue, both wiser and more entertaining". If, as he says, the author/narrator is more interesting than the person, the writer, this means that writing is, like being in love, about presenting the best side of yourself. Saunders makes a very interesting claim by declaring that his method aims at "increasing the ambient intelligence of a piece of writing", something which, "in turn, communicates a sense of respect for your reader." I don't know if this is mere politeness, for it seems that Saunders does believe that rewriting makes texts "less hyperbolic, sentimental, and misleading". I find, rather, listening to many other authors, that the reader matters relatively little and that any writer works for his/herself. The highest quality writers are those with the most demanding inner reading, so to speak, and how external readers react is of relative importance to them.

Saunders does attach greater importance to the "pursuit of specificity", to the honing down of the language so that it is both nuanced and more effective. Again, this is a rule of all good writing, in any genre, including academic prose. An artist, Saunders stresses, "tweaks that which she's already done" and, I would add, if this is art, then artistic writing (=Literature) should encompass many more genres, including, sorry to be so tiresome, academic prose. A rule my PhD supervisor taught me is that each sentence must advance my argumentation and be fully justified. This is not really that different from Poe's injunction to observe an "economy of style" in fiction writing, which is what Saunders also defends without naming it. His analysis of how he writes becomes, then, an analysis of how he edits his texts, which, while interesting ("But why did I make those changes? On what basis?") is not really about the unfathomable mystery of how sentences travel originally from neuron to screen (or paper).

Saunders turns next to another mystery, "the empathetic function" which, according to him, "is accomplished via the writer's relation both to his characters and to his readers". Revision, he explains, "is ultimately about imagining that your reader is as humane, bright, witty, experienced and well intentioned as you" –I find this very funny because it is intended to place the reader centre-stage and be flattering but in the end it reveals only the writer's (any writer's) narcissism. The point, as you can see, is to raise the reader up to your level via your writing, which might be a lovely exercise in intellectual seduction but feels more self-serving than that. In this sense, I believe that popularisers (sorry, I can't find an English equivalent of the serviceable 'divulgador') are the only writers who truly care about their audience, as they (we?) see writing as a

form of pedagogy. I know that I sound very smug in correcting Saunders but I truly believe that literary creation would happen even without readers.

Next lesson: Saunders claims that writing a novel did not require a different method from writing short fiction, just a “slightly larger frame” and a sort of specific architecture: “it occurred to me that a mansion of sorts might be constructed from a series of connected yurts”. Again, this possibly reflects the experience of the specific case of a short fiction writer trying to write a novel for the first time, whereas habitual novelists would not describe a similar approach. In science fiction there is something quote curious, the fix-up, which is a novel made of short stories that may not have been necessarily written with a book in mind. The fix-up is, perhaps, closer than any other type of novel to the mansion made of many yurts. But, then, poor Saunders, I should not criticize him for describing what he honestly feels.

“Any work of art quickly reveals itself to be a linked system of problems”. Indeed! Again, I would say that this can be extended to any piece of writing. A PhD dissertation is, if you want to see it that way, the answer to the problem of ‘how am I supposed to write this particular thesis?’ Only when you’re done do you realize how it should have been done, which is, I know, vexing. If you wrote a second PhD dissertation, on a different topic, then leads to a different ‘system of problems’. Ergo, each piece of fiction is also the answer to the question of how it should be written, and how the problems should be faced and solved. As Saunders notes, a problem is solved when it is transformed into “an opportunity”.

Saunders’s final lesson is a that “a work of fiction can be understood as a three-beat movement: a juggler gathers bowling pins; throws them in the air; catches them.” The first phase would correspond to what I call fabulation, which Saunders describes only tangentially—which is why I feel frustrated by his text. It’s tantalizing. “Certain decisions I’d made early on forced certain actions to fulfilment”, he writes and I wish I could tell him that the vagueness of the word “certain” is exasperating –which decisions?, how did you make him?, to what degree are you aware of the process of choice? The second step, based on how “the rules of the universe created certain compulsions” is, I think, what most literary criticism explores (Hamlet sets in motion a whole chain of events by paying heed to what his dead father tells him). Yet, we know close to nothing about how the ‘bowling pins’ materialize. When his characters start behaving as if following their own decisions (a phenomenon which all writers report but on which there is no research at all), Saunders enjoys the “beautiful, mysterious experience”. The mystery is the reason why we worship fiction writers: because we don’t have access to it, it doesn’t happen to us.

Saunders ponders whether the creation of fiction is “a feature of the brain, the byproduct of any rigorous, iterative engagement in a thought system” but ultimately chooses Romantic celebration: There is “something wonderful in watching a figure emerge from the stone unsummoned”. Now, unless we, literary critics, sit by the writer as s/he writes and monitors the process as each sentence is written, there is no way we can understand the wonder of it all. Saunders gets very close in this piece to the ‘making-of’ habitual in cinema and we need to be thankful to him for the effort.

This is perhaps the way we should go: invite writers to delve into the experience of writing, popularize among readers the very idea of the literary 'making-of'. Not to destroy the 'mystery' but to retrieve literary creation from the intellectual fog surrounding it, and, why not?, make literary criticism a more confident art.

21 March 2017 / WONDERING HOW (POPULAR) CULTURE IS TRANSMITTED (WITH A REFERENCE TO STAR WARS)

As consumers of cultural products we seem to take for granted that texts are, somehow, automatically saved for survival and that any new generation has access to all of them. This is, of course, naïve, misguided and plain wrong. In the case of popular texts (and I mean here generally of all kinds beyond the printed page), we seem to assume that transmission is practically automatic and immediately guaranteed, in some cases, by the big cults around some of these texts. Even so, there are specific practices, companies and persons involved in the process of keeping a text alive. Just think of the constant renewal of interest in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. Do you, my reader, know exactly how Tolkien's classic has managed to survive since the day of its publication back in 1954-55? Could this rich trilogy ever disappear? Surely, this catastrophe is unthinkable for its many fans but it seems to me that at this odd jointure in the history of culture its future is impossible to predict.

As one of the children lucky to attend a cinema screening of the first *Star Wars* movie, back in 1977, the one now known as *Episode IV: A New Hope*, I find myself often thinking about how exactly texts are passed on. (By the way, I'll take the chance here to make the happy announcement of a forthcoming conference on *Star Wars* and Ideology at the Universidad Complutense for April 2018. Finally!!). You might think that something as gigantic as George Lucas's brainchild, now a Disney brand, has a life of its own. Actually, this is not the case at all. To begin with, when the first film was released, the producers and the director were absolutely sceptical about its success. So was the manufacturer in charge of selling the corresponding toys, to the point that many children who loved the film received that Christmas 1977 not an actual doll (soon sold out) but a sort of i.o.u., promising their future delivery. Today it seems as if everyone knew about how the merchandising would keep the saga alive but this is just an illusion.

I visited a few months ago an exhibition of *Star Wars* toys at Barcelona's Illa Diagonal (the shopping centre) and I paid close attention to the children. Some were very young, around six, and already familiar with most of the characters there represented. Their parents, clearly, had placed them before the TV screen as soon as possible to share the corresponding DVDs of the saga with them; most likely, they had also shared with them their own merchandising products and bought new items. This type of generational transmission, from parent to child, must be the most habitual one. The children I saw seemed eager, none was dragging their feet after an embarrassingly enthusiastic parent, all were smiling and wide-eyed, and so were the adults. I assume that many parents fail to transmit their love of *Star Wars* (or any other beloved text) to

their children but, then, the failed cases were not attending the exhibition. I'm sure that the frustration must be terrible in those cases...

I wondered, however, what happens to children whose parents are not keen at all on *Star Wars* (or that do not have a special favourite text to enthuse about). I know very well that elder siblings, cousins (either older or not), and aunts and uncles (rather than grandparents) play major roles in this generational transmission, still totally under-researched. At least, my impression is that Reception Studies tends to focus on the interaction between consumer and text, not caring too much about how consumers actually access texts. Anyway: there are five children in my family (four girls, one boy) and we, my husband and I, have failed miserably to instil in them a love of *Star Wars*. They're just not interested and find our own interest a bit peculiar ("the problem with being a nerd," one of my nieces sentenced, "is that you feel under the obligation of being a nerd and doing nerdy things"—this was when she declined seeing *Star Wars – Episode VII: The Force Awakens* despite our insistence...). Intent on enticing at least our youngest niece, and seeing how useful the new girl hero in this film, Rey, could be, we launched a relentless campaign... To no avail. Then, suddenly, one day she announced that she was ready to see the saga and, so, we started with *Episode IV*. It has not worked (or not yet) because she herself has decided that she is too young (she's 8) to make sense of the plot.

We still have hopes that she'll turn to the light side of the Force but in the meantime I have decided to learn from her how little kids get acquainted with famous texts, such as, well, *Star Wars*, in the event of there being no adult pointing the way to them. I hear you groan: playground talk, it's all it takes. Yes and no. Obviously, basing any conclusions on the experience of one single child is bad research but at least I have learned a few new things (to share with you). Here they are:

1) If my niece regards herself as too young to understand the saga, this means that many parents 'force' their children to consume texts for which they are not quite ready. It is not normal for an 8-year-old to claim, as one of my niece's classmates told her, that *Rogue One* (the prequel) is her favourite film. This is an excellent adventure film but also quite a dark story of heroic sacrifice, and if this little girl saw it this is because an adult disregarded how she would react to the bleak plot. Yes, I'm a bit scandalized... children are sensitive and impressionable...

2) The transmission of the text values among children is done through direct comment and, indeed, through the toys. On the school bus, in the school playground, at the home of other kids. The toy or any other items connected with the text in question (stationery, bags, clothing...) elicit curiosity, which leads to questions: what is this?, who are they? At this very early age, children's comments on the films are limited in criticism (the films are just 'cool') and include, rather, plot summary or scene descriptions. Often of shocking moments.

3) In this regard, I was surprised to find out that our focus on Rey was a bit misguided. My husband and I assumed that, just as little boys could identify with Luke Skywalker and hence enter into the spirit of the saga, Rey would have the same function for my

little niece. She loved the 'idea' of Rey but was terrified by her confrontation with Kylo Ren using laser sabres (this is the clip we showed to her). The idea of a laser sabre toy is very attractive to her, but, paradoxically, not the terrible potential of this weapon in the films. In contrast, she explained that she had asked us to see the first film because she is very curious about Darth Vader's death and his connection with Luke. Yes: we believe that spoilers are always negative but it turns out that sometimes they are the greatest enticement. A classmate told her about Luke's fearful father... and she is puzzled about Vader's person. My hope is that her curiosity keeps her interest alive and will eventually result in her seeing the three first films. At least.

4) A major lesson to learn is that children can make extremely clear judgements from a very early age about what they like. Not so much about why, logically. I keep on asking my nieces about their preferences and this is always a wonderful lesson for me. They, however, find explaining themselves quite a difficult exercise: they're flattered about my interest, but also concerned that I may find their answers too basic (poor things!). Another obvious lesson is that textual transmission works much, much better if you (the adult) avoid forcing the text on the child. "I'm going to take you to see a film you will love" doesn't work as well as "I'm going to see this amazing film, would you like to come with me?" In the first case, the child can even get a bit suspicious ("um... why do you want me to see this movie in particular?"), whereas in the second case, a better kind of complicity is built around the text. Sometimes it works the other way round: in the last year, my office has got a new set of tsum-tsum Disney characters, and some *Trolls* dolls... And my husband can't stop watching *Gumball*...

So, yes, basically you need the patience of an advanced Jedi knight/dame to bring a child to the light side of the Force but, here's the lesson, you're not alone. Other persons, particularly in the child's own circle, are also participating in the constant renewal of the saga. If nothing works, then, this is it: you gain no *padawan*. But then, you can still enjoy the company of many other *Star Wars* fans all over the world. Some comfort!

Although at the time I was not aware that this would be a crucial memory in my life as a film spectator, I thank now George Lucas for the unforgettable sight of the Imperial cruiser crossing the screen at the beginning of *Episode IV*, 40 years ago. I was 11, remember? The *Harry Potter* generation also enjoyed 20 years ago (how time flies!) that 'wow' moment that defines a whole cohort when Harry got that letter from Hogwarts, also aged 11. But, what about the children of 2017? I sometimes worry that they're trapped in the stories meant for other generations, as the machinery of cultural production stagnates. It's wonderful to see how our own texts last but, surely, today's children also deserve their own moment of wonder. And, then, we'll learn from them.

28 March 2017 / SEEKING A NEW VISION FOR UTOPIA

Last week I attended a talk by Lynne Segal (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lynne_Segal), a feminist academic and activist, born in Australia but based in the United Kingdom. I first heard about Segal because of her excellent book *Slow Motion: Changing Masculinities, Changing Men*; since then I have also read by her one of the very few outstanding books on heterosexuality, *Straight Sex: Rethinking the Politics of Pleasure* and her accomplished volume *Out of Time: The Pleasures and Perils of Ageing*. It appears that a very cruel member of the audience in a previous presentation asked Segal whether her next book would be about dying... She has chosen instead to write about happiness, and this is what her talk here in Barcelona dealt with.

Actually, the talk, which was a conversation with us, the 15 attendees, soon veered towards dystopia and utopia because Segal argued that personal joy can only be truly achieved in connection with the community (I paraphrase). This started your classic exchange about how we, Southern Europeans, appear to enjoy ourselves in the streets much better than our Northern peers, though I have never been fooled by this idea. Norway was recently chosen the happiest country in the world and this is pretty far up north. Next the conversation moved onto how a society can reach happiness in our current dystopian world, and whether utopia will ever resurface. Lynne Segal claimed that for utopia to re-emerge someone needs to have a clear vision of what it should be like. For her, generating this renewed utopian vision is the challenge today.

Since Margaret Atwood's dystopian fable *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) has become an instant best-selling novel in the land of Donald Trump, you hear plenty about feminist speculative fiction these days in the media. I'm not sure whether plans for this already existed before the November 2016 election, but next month a TV series based on Atwood's book will be released (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt5834204/>). There is already, by the way, a very good film adaptation (1990) with the late Natasha Richardson as the handmaid Offred. Every woman reader of Atwood's grim story is terrified (as I explained in my post on Houellebecq's *Submission*) not so much by the rise of the religious fundamentalism that takes over the US Government, as by the indifference of the protagonist's husband to the progressive loss of her rights as a citizen. I will insist on this again and again: the current feminist utopian project has made important inroads in recent years but it is still a very fragile structure that can be easily dismantled. As Atwood shows. And Trump.

Many feminist writers have transformed their impatience at this slow process of change into utopian fiction, intended to offer a shortcut towards a better future. The shape taken by this sub-genre has usually been that of the gender separatist utopia, beginning with Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Herland* (1915), and even earlier, *Mizora* (1880-1) by Mary E. Bradley Lane. Second-wave feminist gave new life to this type of fable, which resurrected with well-known examples such as *The Female Man* (1976) by Joanna Russ or *The Wanderground* (1978), by Sally Miller Gearhart, often with a

lesbian component. A later wave, with works such as Pamela Sargent's *The Shore of Women* (1986) and Sheri Tepper's *The Gate to Women's Country* (1988), are less optimistic about separatism. Nichola Griffith's *Ammonite* (1993) is quite critical of the supposition that lesbianism would (or should) be an integral part of the utopian resolution of conflict, not so much between the genders but among women. You may also want to check Lois McMaster Bujold's *Ethan of Athos* (1986) for an all-male gay utopia written from a woman's point of view, or David Brin's *Glory Season* (1993) for a man's view of matriarchal utopia.

I tend to avoid, as I have explained here many times, feminist utopia as I don't appreciate the separatist solution. As Segal claims, we need a new vision for utopia, but I find the ideas offered by classic feminist speculative fiction writers in support of separatism disheartening. I was beginning to think that the sub-genre had been buried two decades ago, when I came across all the hype surrounding Naomi Alderman's novel *The Power* (2016). You may read her own take on utopian/dystopian feminist fiction here (<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/mar/25/dystopian-dreams-how-feminist-science-fiction-predicted-the-future>). Now, here's the premise of her novel: because of something to do with pollution, women suddenly develop an ability to generate electrical discharges with their bodies—a literal new power which they use to dominate men (and generally go berserk). No, I have not read this novel yet, and I don't think I will (at least, I will not pay to do so) because I find the idea of reversing patriarchal domination simply disgusting: it increases misogyny and it offers women nothing positive. Alderman claims that what happens to men in her novel is close to what happens to women in real life. However, showing men that they could be victims of rampant hatred and be trapped by dystopia forced on them by women is the complete opposite of the search for a new utopian vision that should bring communal and personal happiness, following Segal's line of thought. Sorry to say so, then, but it seems that our energies as women are too caught up in our daily fight against dystopian patriarchy (which is the patriarch's utopia, of course) to offer this urgently needed utopian vision (beyond feminism, I mean, which *is* utopian).

I mystified everyone in the room in conversation with Segal by declaring that we are already in the middle of an emerging new utopia but too scared to even contemplate it seriously. I refer to the replacement of humans by robots and artificial intelligence in many aspects of work. The debate about this issue has been steadily increasing and, I should think, accelerating quite fast in just the last year. The usual headlines concern fears about the many millions that will lose their jobs, with a warning about how these will mainly be the unqualified *men* now in low-paid jobs (<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/mar/24/millions-uk-workers-risk-replaced-robots-study-warns>). Yet, for the first time in decades, there is also a debate about whether the income generated by the robots could be taxed so that citizens can be offered a minimum wage, beginning with those soon to be replaced at work. Someone in the room objected that this will be catastrophic, as our identity centres on work and being deprived of this would destroy our lives. Whenever I come across that kind of comment, I always hear in my mind the voice of the late comedian Pepe Rubianes: "They always say that work helps you to fulfil yourself—sure, this is why I see

every morning happy people in the metro, singing all the way to work... ." Everyone listening to him would laugh in discomfort.

Fears of the utopian vision in which robots and A.I. give us leisure to live our lives in content (if not total happiness) depend on which dystopian texts you are familiar with. Even though Isaac Asimov spent his lifetime promoting the idea of the positive contribution that robots could make to human wellbeing, the film adaptation of his *I, Robot* (2004) is the typically shallow story about robots rebelling to eliminate humankind and rule the world. I even fail to see that negative version as dystopian, since, from the point of view of Planet Earth, our elimination would surely bring much relief and a new breath of life. But, anyway, bear with me: utopia lies that way, in letting the machines take over. Obviously, the idea is not mine, and my belief in this utopia shows how deeply influenced I am by the novels of the late Iain M. Banks.

Once again, then: in the civilization imagined by Banks, which he simply called the Culture, the formidable artificial intelligences known as the Minds have taken control. The inhabitants of the Culture live on the artificial planets and on the colossal spaceships (the General System Vehicles) that the Minds have built. Banks explained that the Culture comes from a combination of ideas: to survive (in space) you need to cooperate with each other, trusting the machines to do the right thing can be extremely liberating and communal happiness can only be reached by embracing socialist anarchism. A citizen of the Culture craves nothing because all their needs are cared for. Property, and this fundamental, has not only been abolished but made simply ridiculous. So has crime. In the Culture, you can do as you please with your body (they are all technically post-human), including changing species if you like, and with your mind. Immortality is not ruled out, though most people have enough of life after a few millennia... And, yes, utopia works.

Critics of Banks' eutopia claim that the Culture is boring. Utopia as a narrative genre is, indeed, boring, which is why Banks organized his tales around the idea that the Culture feels bound to export utopia to other civilizations. The clashes with these other more or less reluctant peoples are the focus of the novels, whose protagonists tend to be Special Circumstances Agents, part of the (secret) body preaching utopia to the galaxy. Living in eutopia might also be boring, for all we know—Norwegians, the happiest nation on Earth, remember?, do not hesitate to declare themselves boring. Offer Syrians and Iraqis a chance to be bored for a lifetime and see how they react... I am totally serious when I argue that if boredom is the reason why we are rejecting utopia, then we deserve dystopia. You cannot begin to imagine how depressed I feel when I think that I will never be a citizen of Banks' Culture. I could cry, really. Of course, the challenge of utopia is how to fill your time productively without the onerous obligation of work—but we already have that: it's called retirement and we all want it. So, here's utopia: we live off what the robots and the A.I. produce and we use our lives for whatever we want, as retired people do. Whatever we want may include work, if you're so inclined. Work would not consist, however, of the kind of backbreaking, mindsquashing jobs most people devote their lives to.

Now, here's my call to women: if you, my dears, can look beyond gender and imagine utopia that gives everyone a new vision beyond patriarchy, we all win. And thank you Lynne Segal for the inspiring talk.

4 April 2017 / GURB, STILL AT LARGE: REVISITING EDUARDO MENDOZA'S QUIRKY BARCELONA TALE

Sin noticias de Gurb (1990, English translation *No Word from Gurb* [2007]), is a short novel by Eduardo Mendoza (b. 1943, Barcelona; Premio Cervantes 2016), which was originally serialised in *El País*, back in 1989. It belongs to the science-fiction subgenre of the 'stranded alien tale', popularized, above all, by Steven Spielberg's family film *E.T.* (1982, written by the late Melissa Mathison). In Mendoza's novel a pair of extraterrestrials land in Cerdanyola, next door to my own university, on a Christian/anthropological mission to explore Earth. Both are pure intellects capable of metamorphic embodiment, though they don't particularly enjoy being human. Tired of the monotonous company of his crewmate and boss, the fearless Gurb soon transforms into a woman, is picked up by one of my colleagues at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona in his car, and vanishes. The other alien—whose name we never learn—starts then an anxious search for his lost mate. Throughout this chase, the alien narrator tries to make sense of the city of Barcelona, then getting ready for the Olympic Games of 1992. His bizarre nature and the no less bizarre city clash, which is why *Sin noticias de Gurb* is often read not as science-fiction (which it definitely is) but as a satire of Barcelona's Olympic aspirations. An extremely funny satire.

I'm thinking of this book today because, to my immense pleasure, it was the centre of this week's episode of David Guzmán's *Rius de Tinta* (<http://beteve.cat/programa/rius-de-tinta/>). This is a series on Literature and the city of Barcelona, and I have become frankly addicted to it. I believe that we're extremely lucky to be offered this kind of cultured television in what appears to be a total international dearth. There had already been an episode on Barcelona and science-fiction (with, among others, Antoni Munné-Jordà and Marc Pastor), which is why I never expected *Gurb* to be the subject of another one. But, then, David Guzmán and his team decided to explore Mendoza's very popular work as, possibly, the best-known novel about Barcelona. I absolutely admire what Mendoza did in *La ciudad de los prodigios* (1986) and I personally believe that this is the most relevant work about the city (sorry Juan Marsé). *Sin noticias de Gurb* captures very well a particular moment in recent times and although I do recommend it, even Mendoza himself is surprised that this particular work has so many fans of so many different types.

Right after watching the interview with Mendoza, I picked up the book and read its 139 pages again, in one sitting. That was possibly my fifth reading and I still laughed hard. I remember carrying the novel to read on the train as a post-grad student, and having to stop because I was in tears, trying to suppress my out-of-control hilarity. What's so funny about *Gurb*? Mendoza speculates that readers find the narrator 'entrañable', which has no exact equivalent in English ('cute', not in the sense of 'pretty', seems to

be as close as we can get). An academic article by Benjamin Fraser (there seem to be only three... in English, Spanish, and Italian), focuses on the ‘costumbrismo espacial español’ of Mendoza’s novel, connecting it with Alex de la Iglesia’s appallingly bad TV series *Pluton BRB Nero*, which is an insult.

There is ‘costumbrismo’ in *Gurb*, and a great deal of the comedy is no doubt generated by the contrast between the common people of Barcelona and its outskirts, and the befuddled alien narrator—equipped, poor thing, with very defective information about what humans are. Yet, this is not enough to explain the success of the novel. What is so funny is how deadpan everyone’s reactions are: no human shows surprise at the alien metamorph, not even when he chooses the most absurd shapes, from pop singer Marta Sánchez to historical figures like Conde Duque de Olivares. As for the satire, I was amused to discover yesterday that though part of it is dated —Up & Down is no longer the reference club for the glitterati, but a gym, and so on—, another part still works very well, particularly as a critique of the specific life of the city of Barcelona. Every reader of *Gurb* remembers for ever that in our city “it rains as the Town Council acts: very little but brutally”. As for other matters, such as Gurb’s transpecies fondness for being a woman, what can be more up-to-date?

The most interesting part of the interview, and the challenge to any local Barcelona writer, were Mendoza’s comments on another kind of transition, that of the city from boring backwater to touristic world icon. As he explained very well, Barcelona “makes no sense” since it lacks a major river, its harbour is too shallow and it is not at all a communications hub to other places in Europe. Mendoza noted that the accounts of foreign visitors from the remotest past up to 1992 show mostly disappointment. Then he explained that, for reasons he fails to understand, particular buildings that were considered just an ugly, inconvenient feature of the city have been re-read as unmissable attractions. Casa Batlló, he recalled, used to be known as Iberia House, for this is where the airline’s only agency in Barcelona used to sell the tickets. There was a lab for blood analysis in one of the tops floors.

There have been a number of novels in Spanish and Catalan about post-Olympic Barcelona—Miqui Otero’s *Rayos* was named in the programme—but not just one that has managed to capture the *zeitgeist* as *Gurb* did in 1989/1990. And the question is that we, Barcelona’s disheartened citizens, need to understand (like Mendoza) why we’re losing our city to the swarm of tourists that are so actively pushing us out—to the alien invasion. A friend once told me that Parisians are not nice at all because they are sick of tourists—well, we’re going that way. One *Gurb* and his mate are welcome indeed; millions are just an impossible burden.

Going back to *Sin noticias de Gurb*, then, reminds us of how fast the change has been. The only tourists mentioned are the Japanese, harbingers of the later hordes, who, perhaps even more than the Olympics, put us on the world-map by declaring Antoni Gaudí a genius. Surprisingly, there is actually very little about the Games in *Gurb*, whereas in *La ciudad de los prodigios* Mendoza shows a unique awareness of how hosting major international events transforms a city. In that novel the protagonist of the unlikely name—Onofre Bouvila—is direct witness and participant in the two events

that frame the action: the International Exhibitions of 1888 (which gave us the Ciutadella park and buildings) and 1929 (the excuse for Montjuich's regeneration). In interview with Guzmán, Mendoza noted that the 1929 exhibition was actually a failure, as it came at quite a bad moment in world affairs—the start of the Depression—and in national history (the second Republic was established in 1931, the Civil War started in 1936). Though things were not as dramatic, the 2004 Forum de les Cultures also failed to galvanize the city, perhaps because we had already started the decline into our current status as a theme park. There has even been an attempt, better forgotten, to stage the Winter Olympics here, in association with the ski resorts in the Pyrenees. Our imagination is not only stagnant but positively flagging. And without it, any city dies.

Mendoza stressed that he will not write again about Gurb, still at large somewhere on Earth, nor about his nameless lonely mate, still seeking Gurb's whereabouts. My guess is that whereas Gurb is possibly in Tahiti, his mate is not very far from where he landed; maybe one day he'll even visit my office... The readers' insistence that Mendoza writes a sequel of *Sin noticias de Gurb*, I guess, is not motivated by the need for some humour—though I can tell you that we do need this in our city—but by his key role as interpreter of the changes Barcelona has gone through. We are somehow asking Mendoza whether he can write not quite a sequel of *Gurb*, but a sequel of *La ciudad de los prodigios*, with our favourite stranded alien as observer/narrator. Perhaps because only an alien can begin to grasp how we have managed to become alienated from our own city, while believing that we were finally fulfilling the cosmopolitan dream that would show rival Madrid one thing or two. Now in Madrid they are beginning to talk of the negative impact of tourism as 'Barcelonification'...

I am these days giving the finishing touches to a monographic issue for *Science Fiction Studies* on Spanish sf. To my chagrin, I realized this morning that I had neglected to include *Sin noticias de Gurb* in the bibliography/filmography, an error I have quickly repaired. I am certainly dismayed by my own omission, particularly because the list (in special the films) suggest that comedy is a fundamental ingredient of Spanish sf. In the introduction to the issue, I explain that comedy compensates for our low self-esteem as a nation. I have already written here, just one year ago, a post on this issue (12 April 2016, "President Rajoy and the Starship that Failed to Land on Nou Camp"). I did discuss there *Gurb* as an example of Valle Inclán's 'esperpento' (or the bizarre), though funnily some of the plot details I gave were wrong... Gurb and his mate, however, land here in Barcelona at a moment when self-esteem was at its highest (hey! We got the Olympics!), and yet, still the raucous comedy is needed. Why? Most likely, Mendoza already had an intuition that the Games would change the city for ever but also reveal that behind Gaudí's gaudy buildings, there is nothing much—even less than there used to be.

Gurb, wherever you are on the planet, go on having fun. The other one: my office doors are open, and I specialise in science-fiction... We could have a very nice conversation (and there will be lots of those 'churros' you love so much, promise...).

18 April 2017 / WHEN OFFICIAL CENSORSHIP EXISTED IN SPAIN: RECALLING THE CASE OF MANUEL DE PEDROLO

There has been much talk recently about the case of Cassandra Vera, condemned to one year of prison and banned for seven from holding a public position or office, because of a series of tweets joking about the E.T.A. terrorist attack that killed Admiral Carrero Blanco back in 1973. The law used against Ms. Vera is supposed to defend the victims of terrorism from humiliation and although this is a respectable endeavour, there has been much debate about whether it applies to the case judged. Even a granddaughter of Carrero Blanco's has publicly declared that Ms. Vera's tweets were not offensive, whereas many have complained that gallows humour had been applied to his death for decades, long before Twitter existed. There are doubts, logically, also about how long must mediate between a tragic event and the emergence of black humour about it, for it seems that one thing is joking about a recently deceased person and quite another poking fun at historical figures (like Carrero Blanco). Underlying all these debates is the pressing issue of whether Spanish legislation is actually implementing some form of official censorship.

The word censorship has, understandably, a very bad press in all democratic states as it attacks one of the foundations of civic life: the right to free speech and self-expression. As we all know, however, the social networks and, generally speaking, any internet site to which you can contribute an opinion, have generated a fabulous amount of trolling. The trial of Ms. Vera seems, under this light, quite unfair for, although she posted jokes in very bad taste disrespecting the memory of a dead person, at least she did so using her own identity. In contrast, many persons are terrorized on a daily basis by anonymous abusers that seem immune to any just application of the law. So, whereas official censorship is, generally speaking, a truly regrettable practice, it seems quite clear that some form of censorship should be applied to online comments that may offend others, beginning with the strongest possible self-censorship. It would also be preferable to rule out anonymity in all the social media, for persons are inclined to be much nastier under its cover than using openly their names (as blind peer reviewing shows in academic life...).

My topic, in any case, is not Twitter censorship but the official censorship of books and periodical publications that existed under Francisco Franco's regime (1939-1975). Actually, beyond it, since official censorship was abolished as late as 1977, in allegedly democratic times. I have chosen this issue today because I recently attended a presentation on Catalan writer Manuel de Pedrolo, jointly given by his daughter, Adelais, and Anna Maria Moreno Bedmar, a specialist in this highly accomplished author. I attended it with a young master's dissertation tutoree, and if I was surprised by what I heard—despite being already familiar with the idea of Franco's repressive regime (I was 9 when he died)—just imagine my student's surprise.

Censorship, by the way, extended to peculiar corners in Spain beyond the artistic. There was, for instance, legislation against naming your own child in a language that was not Castilian Spanish and against using a name that did not correspond to a saint. Incongruously, then, since Sara is a biblical name, my mother was christened María

Sara to smooth out the 'problem'. Manuel de Pedrolo's daughter had to carry for 36 years, as she explained, a saint's name in Spanish, which she never identified with, until she was finally allowed to officially call herself Adelais (an Occitan cathar name, incidentally). When in Pedrolo's *Mecanoscrit del segon origen* (1974), then, Dídac chooses to call his baby boy by the androgynous name of Mar he is carrying out a whole revolution.

Anna Maria Moreno explained to the audience that Manuel de Pedrolo was the local writer in any language most often censored in Spain. I'm summarizing here what she explained, basically for the benefit of any young reader who might ignore not only Pedrolo's case—most people even in Catalonia ignore it—but the existence itself of official Francoist censorship.

All authors in Spain had to face a complicated circuit before publication by which, basically, anonymous readers were put in charge of detecting any offences against morality, religion, sex and the regime in power. These readers would famously mark in red pencil the offending passages: sometimes just one word, sometimes the whole book. Spain had already gone through a very dark phase with the implementation of the Inquisition's index of forbidden books, which went through a long series of revisions between 1551 and 1790, with supplements in 1805 and 1848. I don't know enough about Spanish history to claim for sure that the Catholic Church's censorship was quickly replaced by state censorship; I assume that was the case. There was, as far as I know, official film and theatre censorship during the Second Republic (1931-6). This suggests that, although Franco's regime was particularly ferocious, there was never a time in Spain when writers were completely free to publish as they wished until the late 1970s. More or less...

Back to Pedrolo, then. Pedrolo was active as a writer for 41 years: between 1949, when he published the first of his 128 volumes (a book of poems), and 1990. He was, then, under the scrutiny of the censors for 28 years and able to express himself freely only for the last 13 years of his literary career. I am not sure how censorship in Catalan operated, and whether the censors had to be necessarily Catalan speakers themselves. In any case, Adelais de Pedrolo explained to me that when her father was accused of public scandal for publishing a novel about homosexuality (*Un amor fora ciutat*, 1970), the text had to be translated hastily into Spanish for the benefit of the judge. This novel is exceptional in Pedrolo's career because of the harsh accusation launched against him (which he managed to dodge by selling underhandedly most copies with his publisher's complicity); yet, it is also typical, since, having been written in 1959 the novel had to wait for 12 years to be published.

As Adelais de Pedrolo explained, her father saw himself as a humble worker at the service of the Catalan language, literature, culture and nation. He very much wanted to get readers used to Catalan in all genres, which is why he ended up being a one man's national literature. Using a persecuted minority language was risky enough for any Catalan writer (Catalan could not be used in any kind of teaching, the media or the administration under Franco). Pedrolo wrote, besides, from a personal position that accepted no limits. This is why, as Anna Maria Moreno explained, he used a singularly

resilient method, consisting of writing all he wanted but keeping some of his production in the drawer, waiting for better times. If a book was, anyway, banned, Pedrolo would wait for a few years to resubmit it, often using a different title to fool the censors. The result of all this repression (and authorial scheming) is that practically none of his books were published close to the year when they were written, with the time lag stretching from 1 to, in the worst case, 36 years.

No system of censorship can be truly objective as, certainly, what is offensive to one censor may be irrelevant to another. Spanish Francoist censorship, however, seems to have distinguished itself by a systematic lack of a clear method, paradoxical as this may sound. Pedrolo became extremely adept at using diversionary tactics in his prose, phrasing his texts in ways aimed at befuddling censors; yet, as happened to many other authors in Spain, censors managed to see offence where none was intended. I cannot repeat any specific examples that Moreno gave, but most were simply ridiculous. Since Pedrolo often used abstraction (particularly in his plays) and allegory, it was often hard for the censors to zero in and use the red pencil rationally. A report that Moreno showed evidenced the difficulties censors faced when trying to explain how exactly a novel was offensive, particularly when this novel did not have a recognizable realist setting. Amazingly, although it defends incest as a tool to regenerate mankind, *Mecanoscrit del segon origen* was not censored at all, presumably because it is science-fiction and censors possibly believed that it was just harmless entertainment...

The worst part of all this sad tale is that not only in Pedrolo's case but in many others the original texts have not survived. This means that in many instances, the books we read are the censor's, not the author's. Anna Maria Moreno started a dissertation on Pedrolo and censorship, which she did not finish because she found a new job at another Department, and this meant a change of topic (her thesis on the reception of Pedrolo's science-fiction among young readers is available at <http://www.tdx.cat/handle/10803/392659>). When I suggested to her that she should go on and explain how the censors tormented Pedrolo, she kindly explained that this is expensive, time-consuming research (at the censorship archive in Alcalá de Henares, mainly). Even supposing she had funding, time and a team, few of Pedrolo's originals could be restored. There was even the suspicion that in some cases his editor at the corresponding publishing house had modified the original text before sending them to the censor for a licence. This, Anna Maria clarified, was not unusual, with or without the writer's consent. In other cases, the writers themselves applied a rigid system of self-censorship, for they very much wanted to publish.

Pedrolo died, as I have noted, in 1990, one year after another form of censorship appeared: the *fatwa* launched in 1989 by Iran's supreme leader, the Ayatollah Khomeini, against Salman Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses*. This was not limited to banning the book in Iran but actually encouraged any Muslim in the world to murder Rushdie as a punishment for having committed anti-Islamic blasphemy in his book. The author had to live under police protection at least until 1998, when the British Government obtained a formal promise from its Iranian counterpart that it would not support any assassination attempt. The *fatwa*, however, has never been lifted and

Rushdie still receives death threats regularly. Quite absurdly, this intolerable attempt at censoring an author only resulted in giving world-wide publicity to a dense novel that few would have read otherwise... and thus spreading the alleged offence.

Today, the debate rages about whether political correctness is an even more insidious form of censorship than the official red pencil. These are complicated waters to navigate. Official Francoist censorship, everyone agrees, could only delay but not stop the inevitable erosion of the dictatorship; Spanish society simply evolved and the censors always lagged behind. They did much harm to individual artists and certainly stunted the mental and intellectual growth of many readers, which is why the work of official censors should always be deplored. Also, as Pedrolo's case shows, the censor's task was often self-serving, plain ludicrous and preposterous. I do not wish, then, to defend any form of official censorship. As for political correctness, if this means a pressure to implement values that help to erase discrimination of any kind, then we cannot call it censorship. If a white author, for example, publishes a racist book, it is only right that the weight of negative public opinion falls on him/her. Now, the kind of censorship applied in Spain under Franco's regime had nothing to do with this: it was a system intended to control any dissent from a repressive ideology. Of course, the censors believed they were doing the country a service...

What about self-censorship? Again, tricky... One thing is hypocrisy: 'I'm going to pretend that, as the Francoist authorities want, I believe that sex should only be practised within marriage, only because I want my book published'. And quite another making an effort to avoid offending others: are jokes about midgets (or dead Admirals) truly necessary, and valuable examples of free speech? As for Pedrolo, I must say that, as much as I love *Mecanoscrit*, sometimes I am offended by his sexism. I don't want, however, the censors to return from the grave and give *me* the red pencil. I read Pedrolo's works as products of his time, though I would not like to see similarly sexist scenes in books written today. Some see this attitude as yet another red pencil—I don't...

We'll have to wait, then, a few decades to finally understand which aspects of current fiction will disappear under pressure from political correctness. And fight official censorship wherever it still exists.

25 April 2017 / STUCK IN A RUT: MISOGYNY AND FEMINISM

My post today is inspired by an article in the *Verne* section of *El país*, which offers a summary of the messages that many Spanish women have sent to Twitter in reaction to the hashtag #comomujermehapasado (more or less: 'as a woman I have gone through that') (see http://verne.elpais.com/verne/2017/04/13/articulo/1492088562_028524.html). I find that whenever a piece of news that decries misogyny is published in the Spanish press, the readers' comments offer an appalling stream of anti-feminist abuse. I believe, then, that in this specific case and also generally, the real situation of gender issues in

this country is reflected not by the article, or even by the women's tweets, but by the negative comments written by male readers (either anonymously or using their own name).

This specific piece inspired 446 contributions (apart from the many, perhaps 50, erased by the moderator), which amount to a much, much longer text than the article itself. Actually, the persons contributing to the discussion were few, perhaps around 20 and, of course, it's difficult to say if any of them were women because of the nicknames (I would say 2 were women). Here, in any case, I highlight a particularly recurring trend: many comments by male readers express complaints about the negative situations that men face; this is done not at all in solidarity with women but arguing that women should not complain because men do not complain.

Let me rephrase this. Many men feel that they face unfair situations yet, instead of exposing these situations—as they should—they reject women's exposure of their own abuse (by men). I keep silent, you keep silent. This seems to be their motto. I don't whine, you don't whine—yet they do whine. The men's attitude is summarized by the words of one 'Julito Iglesias': "hay montones de situaciones injustas que afectan a los hombres y ellas aquí llorando??" The other most common feeling is expressed by 'horton': "Adoctrinamiento diario de las femis. Coñazo diario. Nada nuevo" and "Las femis ya no saben qué inventar para sacar mas (sic) tajada y aumentar su ya millonario negociazo". Incidentally, the word 'hembrista' appears quite frequently in the comments. According to this ideology, a reader explains, men who wish, for example, to access public bodies such as the police or the fire fighters need to possess higher physical qualifications than women. That is, life is made more demanding for men than for women because 'hembrista' women want it so.

I think that rather than quote verbatim the many comments, and since you may read them for yourself, I'll just sum up the most often repeated arguments. These are also common to many similar articles I have read in the same newspaper:

- *there is also a long list of clichés about men (about which men do not complain)
- *women also abuse men verbally all the time (men put up with this with no complaint)
- *women may not abuse men physically, but the psychological violence they cause is even more harmful than the physical violence by men; women's violence, however, is not visible because the media silence it (also the 'femis' allied with the Government)
- *(contradicting the above), women also use physical violence against men; men do not complain out of prudence, or because they are mocked (by women, also by other men)
- *the statistics indicate that at least 29 men were killed in 2013 by their female partners or ex-partners (see https://www.buzzfeed.com/beatrizserranomolina/no-existen-los-30-hombres-asesinados-por-mujeres?utm_term=.feJ5QNgN5#.oiowY6l6w)
- *men put up with many daily inconveniences, such as dress codes requiring suit and tie for the office even in summer (when women may wear light dresses)
- *men often have to put up with women's criticism about the following: they don't know how to handle babies, can't do two things at the same time, lack a fashion sense, are always thinking about sex, obsess about the size of their penis, are all of them violent...

- *when men did the military service, women simply went on with their lives; in other instances in which men are unfairly treated, women keep silent
- *men complain that if they report inequalities against them, then they are insulted (called 'marichulo') both by women and by men
- *men are discriminated against in cases of divorce and hardly ever granted custody of their children, either individually or jointly
- *many women who report couple-related violence to the police lie (see http://politica.elpais.com/politica/2016/03/17/actualidad/1458206253_890573.html)
- *all persons receive negative comments and those which women receive are not part of generalized sexism, but just individual occurrences
- *gender-specific violence does not exist: violence is a fact of life for both men and women
- *the pay gap is a myth: women earn less money because a) they choose jobs with lower financial rewards; b) they are not as good as men at negotiating their salaries for top positions
- *the tweets in answer to the hashtag #comomujermehapasado are quite trivial and only show that misogyny is decreasing; many men face similar situations but do not complain precisely because they are banal

The underlying supposition is this: the institutions favour 'hembrismo', facilitating the imposition of a radically androphobic feminist culture and legislation. Feminists are part of a powerful circle that benefits greatly from the Government budget, both collectively and personally. Any complaint by men is either silenced with abuse, or treated as politically incorrect—which is why men do not express their own suffering, as they see no point. Women have all the power, since "Tiran más dos tetas que una carreta, y eso la mujer lo aprende desde joven. Lo demás es tontería. Ellas mandan" (this is a verbatim quotation in the same article, appeared, remember in *El país*).

If this lengthy exchange happened, this is because there were at least two dissident men. One, a teacher, intervened again and again, telling at one point one of the contributors: "¿No te da pena? ¿Hay un montón de situaciones injustas que afectan las mujeres y tú solo te miras tu ombligo? Además de machista egocéntrico (perdón, que va incluido)". Another one writes: "Tengo dos hijas y quiero mucho a mi mujer, a los hombres que se ríen aquí ¿de verdad pensáis que, aún, no existe desigualdad y prepotencia de nosotros a ellas? No creo que lo vuestro sea sólo machismo, es egoísmo". I need not add anything to these men's words. Let me insist, however, that they are the only dissenting voices in a string of misogynistic comments published by the leading liberal newspaper in Spain. If readers of *El país* are so recalcitrant, I really wonder what the rest are like. (See my previous post "Of men and grassroots reality", <http://blogs.uab.cat/saramartinalegre/2016/03/28/of-men-masculinities-studies-and-the-grassroots-reality/>).

Clearly, misogynistic men cannot be addressed with rational arguments, as to begin with they are already convinced of their positions. Of course, they will reply that so are we, the feminazis. There is, then, very little hope that we can understand each other. It seems to me, then, that we, feminist women, need to support above all the men who are willing to speak for us, like the two I have quoted above. Not instead of us, mind

you, but for us—as true gentlemen, the kind of men we need in the anti-patriarchal fight. And I really mean it.

Beyond the issue of the responsibility that liberal pro-feminist media like *El país* bear in granting a space for misogynistic trolling to these readers, which is not really a minor issue, we need to wonder why recalcitrant men are locked in this no-win situation. If, as men, you are suffering and need to express your grievances, by all means go ahead. If a woman is ill-treating you, the way to make this situation visible publicly is not by declaring “I’m also a victim of abuse but I don’t complain”. The way to go is to say “I’m also a victim of abuse; if we join forces, then we can hopefully liberate all personal relationships from violence”. If, however, a man begins by denying that gender-related violence exists, how can he expect to be heeded as a victim? If you deny someone else’s suffering, you’re complicit with the perpetrator.

I agree 100% that all situations of abuse are caused by a power imbalance. Since power is mainly in men’s hands (not all men’s hands, I know), they appear to be the main perpetrators of violence. The women who abuse their power within the couple, their family, their work environment, etc., also commit unpardonable offences. What is totally unfair is to disregard reality and claim that the amount of abuse committed by men and women is the same. Supposing the gender gap does not exist, and this is a lot to suppose, the reality is that women are abused collectively by Governments that deny their citizens’ rights and individually by patriarchal men who think that female bodies are objects for their pleasure—just because they are women.

The point I’m raising is that we are not moving forward because for us, women, to sympathise with men’s patriarchal grievances, ours have to be acknowledged first. The “I don’t whine, you don’t whine discourse” leads nowhere. Well, it leads to the pages of *El país*... Deep sigh.

Misogynistic and androphobic bitterness often has personal reasons. I don’t mean by this that it’s purely an individual matter. However, feminism taught us long ago that the personal is political and there is no doubt that radical feminism and misogyny also reflect personal experience. The man who declares that he loves his wife and daughters (and if he does that, this is because he is loved back) is not misogynistic. One of the most recalcitrant male readers ends up commenting on his difficult separation from his wife. Many opinions are based on personal experience at work, as well.

Am I saying that we should put up with misogyny and androphobia for the sake of inter-gender peace? Not at all. What I am saying is that each of us is both an individual and a representative of our gender (sorry to use basic binarism here). If you crack a joke at women’s expense, expect women to retaliate—and the other way round. Etc., etc. Some men will be misogynistic no matter what women do, and some women think that men are collectively despicable no matter what they actually do. But let’s aim at the rest, who happen to be the majority.

The silent majority that leaves no opinions in *El país*, because, as one reader concludes, “the better I know people, the more I prefer the company of fish”. Me too.

2 May 2017 / FOR STUDENTS: HOW A UNIVERSITY DEPARTMENT WORKS

Talking with students in my Department, I realise that none has a clear idea of how teachers' work is organized. I wrote a document in Catalan for the benefit of the Students' Delegation, but I have ultimately decided to translate it into English and publish it here for anyone to see. This post is based, on course, on my experience of working at a particular Department and the information I offer here may vary from university to university. If you're reading me from abroad, then please bear in mind that the Catalan/Spanish university has a specific situation, which is what I try to describe here. It is not my aim, I insist, to describe one particular Department but a situation to improve students' knowledge of the institution surrounding them.

A university Department is a unit within a larger institution, called in Spain 'Facultad' (the closest English equivalent is 'School'; here's a warning about a false friend: 'faculty' refers to the staff that works in a university, or one of its units). A Spanish university is constituted by a group of Facultades, and also of 'Escuelas' (I believe that Escuelas are more narrowly specialized). Some universities, like Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya, only house Departments dealing with science and technology, but most Spanish public universities, like UAB, tend to gather together all kinds of Departments. Universities also include other units, such as Research Institutes, which, in principle, offer no teaching.

The 'Facultat of Filosofia i Lletres' at UAB is quite unusual: it has 11 Departments, ranging from 'Cultural and Social Anthropology' to 'Philosophy', and passing through 'Geography'. In contrast, the 'Facultat de Dret' (our Law School), only has 3 Departments. We offer 25 BAs and 23 MAs—it takes a lot of courage to be part of the Dean's team, or the Dean, that is, the head of the school. The Facultat is responsible for organizing all the degrees (except the Doctoral programmes), and it delegates to the Departments the running of each specific BA or MA. They all have a Coordinator, acting as a link between Department and Facultat. Our yearly academic calendar and course schedule is, incidentally, the Facultat's responsibility.

The Department faculty (=the teachers) is determined by 'Rectorat', the team running the whole university, depending on our budget and our teaching needs. The budget is never enough—guess why—and so we suffer a chronic staff shortage, now really worrying. By law the teaching positions in a Spanish Department must be at least 50% tenured positions (that is, teachers must be full-time civil servants). Currently, few Spanish Departments obey this rule, and too many teachers are hired as part-time associates (for one year, with renewable contracts). Just consider: the last tenured position obtained by my Department dates back to 2008, 9 years ago. Most tenured teachers are now 45-65 years of age.

Full-time university teachers are mostly civil servants of the Spanish State (the categories are: Titular de Universitat [Senior Lecturer], Titular de Escuela Universitaria (no longer offered) and Catedrático [Professor]). I'm Senior Lecturer since 2002, though I have been working in the Department since 1991. Alternatively, many full-

time teachers have permanent work contracts with the regional Government; they're not civil servants. The categories in Catalonia are Lector (Lecturer, hired for 4 to 5 years), Agregat (similar to Senior Lecturer) and Catedràtic (also Professor). In both cases, civil service or contract, all teachers pass a stressful public examination, open to other candidates. According to current legislation, you may only apply only if you have the corresponding accreditation, issued by the national agency ANECA or the Catalan AQU. You need to be at least a Doctor to apply. Accreditation requires that you prove your merits, and it is a complicated, demanding process.

Full-time professors (of either type) are supposed to divide their time (technically 37 hours a week) in three ways: teaching, research and admin work. Universities have professional administrators (or PAS) but we teachers are also expected to run the organization. We volunteer, then, along our career to take positions as Head of Department, Secretary of Department, BA Coordinator, MA Coordinator, Doctoral Programme Coordinator. These are official positions, compensated with some money (very little considering the hard work they entail) and/or a reduction in the teaching workload. Other positions (TFG Coordinator, Erasmus Coordinator, etc.) are meagrely compensated, often with a small teaching reduction. I have been Head of Department and Coordinator (both BA and MA), and I can tell you that this may be nerve-racking. Particularly being HoD, which often involves dealing with human resources and the budget, in ways we are not prepared for as teachers.

Teaching is currently determined by legislation devised by Minister Wert and implemented back in 2012. This 'Real Decreto' connects research with teaching. Research refers to the obligation that university teachers have of producing publications that contribute significantly to the progress of their chosen field of specialization. Their impact is assessed by CNEAI, a state agency, and by AQU. Not all university teachers are active researchers and not all active researchers choose to pass CNEAI assessment. Yet those who do, must explain the importance of 5 publications highlighted among the list of all their publications every 6 years. Each assessment exercise is known as 'sexenio' (teachers may also obtain 'quinquennios' for teaching excellence and 'trienios' for seniority).

This is how it works now. The usual workload for a full-time teacher are 24 ECTS, that is to say, 2 courses per semester. There are, however, variations, depending on the sexenios:

- 3 valid sexenios mean you only teach 16 ECTS (2 courses a year, plus tutoring dissertations: BA [TFG], MA [TFM], PhD). Curiously, Catedráticos must have 4 sexenios to be offered this reduction. The last valid sexenio must have been obtained in the last 6 years (it must be 'alive'). The teaching is reduced for you to go on doing research... not as a reward, or free time.
- if a teacher has 1 or 2 valid sexenios, then the workload is 24 ECTS (4 courses, plus tutoring).
- without any valid sexenios, then the workload is 32 ECTS (plus tutoring). Teachers in this situation may have never done any research, or may be active researchers whose last sexenio was not validated.

Associate teachers usually teach 18 ECTS a year (sometimes 12, or 6). They have no obligation to do admin work, or research, yet in my Department most are active researchers with a Doctoral degree. Associate teachers can only be hired if they prove that they have another job, for this is a position designed to invite professionals to teach university students about their profession. A decade ago there were still temporary full-time contracts, but they were extinguished. This means that researchers hoping to obtain tenure one day, accept contracts as associate teachers, combining in this way two or three jobs. They often have very long working days and only manage to do research because they work weekends. Researchers may remain trapped in that kind of situation for decades. By the way: in my Department all associate teachers are hired by means of a public examination. Contract renewal is not automatic, and associate teachers may have to pass an examination of this kind every year.

Departments also have 'becarios' (interns, fellows, depending on the word you wish to use). They receive a grant that enables them to work full-time on their doctoral dissertation. My Department offers 2 PIF ('Personal Investigador en Formació') grants, one for Language and one for Literature, renewed only every 4 years. The Ministry and the Generalitat have their own grant programmes; these are extremely competitive and usually awarded to candidates connected with research groups.

Not all university teachers do research, as I have noted, even though this is their obligation. For those of us interested in research, this is the most important part of our job, even above teaching. Unfortunately, some researchers see teaching as a nuisance but ideally a good researcher should also be a good teacher.

Research in my Department is extremely varied depending on the area and the individual, ranging from experimental phonetics to cultural criticism. We, nevertheless, share the same aim: the generation of innovative knowledge. This needs to be transmitted though publication in specialized journals and books. Right now, one of the most controversial issues is whether our research (I mean all over planet Earth) is adequately measured. There is a certain obsession with rankings and often researchers feel that what is valued is not what they publish but where they publish. Anyway: each researcher specializes in an area, which may not even be closely connected with their teaching. Students should check the Department website to learn what their teachers specialize in (or teachers' websites, or ask us). I myself specialize in Gender Studies and Popular Fictions. I love teaching Victorian Literature but this is not an area on which I publish (or not regularly).

An academic career is an obstacle race, now more than ever. How do you become a tenured teacher? Well, be ready to invest 10 to 15 years of your life... if you're lucky:

- first you take an MA degree, then write your PhD dissertation. This is self-financed, unless you get a grant (see above). 1 year for the MA, 3 to 5 for the PhD.

- accrue as many merits as you can, from your MA year onward: present papers in conferences, publish articles in journals, publish your thesis as a book, etc... All self-financed. Rooky academics are always surprised that we pay to attend conferences, and for all our research materials... Welcome to academic life!

- get an ANECA or AQU accreditation to opt for a 4-5 year contract. The problem is that right now there are very few contracts of this kind. If I remember correctly, UAB offered 6 for the whole university in 2015-16. None has been offered in my Department for years more than 10 years.

- this is why so many researchers with accreditations (even to be tenured teachers) accept part-time, temporary contracts as associate teachers. They are, I insist, more than 50% of our current Department faculty.

As I'm sure you realize most university teachers are under enormous stress; few of us have a peaceful working routine. Associates cannot know whether they'll ever get tenure, and need to combine at least two jobs. Teachers who do no research now have a 32 ECTS workload instead of the until recently habitual 24 ECTS. If you do research, you are under constant pressure to validate your sexenios, publish in prestige journals and university presses, run or be part of research projects. In addition, we all must put up with an exasperating bureaucracy, and often spend precious research and teaching time filling in endless paperwork.

Do not be surprised, then, if you find us tired or irritable in class, though we do our best for students to get the best possible education. Because we are under constant pressure to perform, we do feel frustrated, I acknowledge this, when students show indifference (they have not read the required texts, failed to do homework, not met a deadline...). It is important that you understand that collectively we are making an effort and that we cover teaching needs far above the hours in our contracts.

By the way, our salaries can be checked here:

<http://www.uab.cat/web/personal-uab/personal-uab/personal-academic-i-investigador/retribucions-del-personal-academic-i-investigador-1345695026088.html>

These are figures before taxation, so you need to deduce from them 20%-28%. It's complicated to work out but, basically, an associate teacher makes about 600 euros a month (after taxes) and a Senior Lecturer between 2300 and 3300 depending on merits (teaching, research and admin). A full Professor earns about 600 more euros monthly, so I guess that the top salary is about 4000, perhaps a few more hundreds for teachers past 60 with 30 years' experience. Full-time university teachers are not allowed to generate extra income elsewhere above 30% of their salary and only in special circumstances. Some teachers may be consultants, or make money by lecturing. I was myself for more than 15 years an associate teacher at the Universitat Oberta de Catalonia.

I hope this helps to satisfy your curiosity and to improve your understanding of the Department. I also hope that, once you see how precarious the situation of many teachers is, you feel inspired to make an effort and collaborate with us in your own education.

9 May 2017 / BRIDGING GAPS (AND FEELING SPLIT) BETWEEN DIFFERENT CULTURES

I am currently in the middle of my reading project for this year (see my post of 4 January): going through the 46 novels which comprise Benito Pérez Galdós' series, *Episodios Nacionales* (1872-1912). To be specific the *Episodios* consist of four complete series of 10 novels, and one incomplete series of 6. I'm finishing today the second series (each novel is about 250 pages, hard to say how many exactly as I use a Kindle; all can be downloaded for free from www.dominipublico.com). Reading Galdós' simply marvellous historical fiction is something that I have wanted to do for a very long time and I am certainly enjoying myself very, very much. I will eventually explain why, once I'm finished. Or read to the end...

I have been procrastinating, however, because I had this feeling that I should be reading 46 novels by different authors in English, instead of, somehow, waste my time. This is an impression that I haven't yet managed to shake off. After all, I'm an English Studies specialist. Shouldn't I use all my reading time for English works? I feel, and I know this is absurd, a bit guilty, as if I were a little girl skipping school... Maybe because of this sense of guilt I am hurrying, absolutely devouring Galdós' books, in the hopes that in this way I'll have time to return to English Literature before the year runs out. But, then, here's another major gap in my education: I have not read *Tirant lo Blanch* yet...

Reading Galdós is bringing back to me the History lessons about 19th century Spain which I received in secondary school. Since then, and with the exception of a 19th century Literature course which I took as a second-year undergraduate, I have learned nothing about this very complicated period in Spain. My focus has been, rather, the Second Republic, the Civil War and Franco's regime, and only in recent years. Since I teach Victorian Literature, then, it turns out that I know much more about Britain than about Spain in the same 19th century period.

This, you might think, is as it should be for obvious professional reasons. And, anyway, it is my fault if I haven't managed to find time for Spanish History in such a long time. I believe, nonetheless, that the lack of a comparative approach in English Studies, as we practice them in Spain, translates into a too exclusive focus on British History and that of other anglophone countries, mainly the USA. Again, maybe this is my fault but I have never taught my students 19th century History in a comparative way and I wonder if anyone does. I also wonder what use this comparative method would be as I very much doubt that my students have been taught any 19th century Spanish History at all...

This lack of a comparative approach and the intensive focus on English Studies means that I always feel split from my own two cultures, the Spanish one and the Catalan. I recently met an American scholar, Dale Pratt, who teaches all kinds of Spanish fiction (in Utah), from *El Quijote* to science-fiction, and who is currently doing research on Spanish novels dealing with prehistory. I was awed by his extensive knowledge of Spanish Literature, of which I know really very little. Of course, I'm sure that many

native anglophone speakers would also be awed by the detailed knowledge that many Spanish specialists in English Studies have of their Literature, also including peculiar little corners. Yet, I do feel illiterate in my own two languages, and this is not a comfortable feeling for a Literature teacher. At one point I even thought of taking a second doctoral degree—but, then, in which area? Spanish or Catalan Literature? And, really, a second PhD seemed overdoing it...

So, you might be thinking: just give yourself the education you're missing. I do not know what my peers all over Spain do, but every year, as I have explained here, I promise myself to do 50% of my reading in Spanish and Catalan, the rest in English. Usually by February I have already given up, under this self-imposed pressure that I should be reading in English all the time. The flow of novelties is so immense, the list of classics so vast... The result of my yearly abandonment of my two cultures is that my ignorance of their Literature grows in the same measure as my knowledge of English Literature increases. Perhaps I should have specialized in Comparative Literature... but there was no degree of this kind back in the 1980s.

Ironically, while we here in Spain insist on working in English Studies as if our local cultures were of no consequence for what we teach, and for how we teach it, in anglophone areas we are seen from a very different perspective. Let me give you as an example my most recent work. In March I published in the journal *Science Fiction Studies* an article on British author Richard Morgan. Last Friday I finished editing for the same journal a monographic issue on Spanish science-fiction. In the first case, I was acting as a specialist in English Studies. In the second case, my role has been very, very different, for I have acted as a bridge between two cultures.

The chance to edit this monographic issue fell into my hands quite by accident but once it materialized, I knew I had to do it. With the help of my co-editor Fernando Ángel Moreno (trained in 'Filología Española' and in Literary Theory) we assembled a solid team of authors, including Prof. Pratt, who have certainly done their best. I am extremely proud of our collective effort and of the end result, and I do hope that the volume (to be published in June) gives Spanish science-fiction a much more definite place on the world map of SF.

Now, happy and pleased as I am, still I feel concerned about how to announce the publication of this special issue to my English Studies peers. Perhaps I feel too paranoid but I'm sure that many will wonder why I have put so much energy into doing something for Spanish, rather than English, Studies. My answer, 'why shouldn't I?', might not be satisfactory. Perhaps I should think of a second argument: 'none else could have done it', at least none in my position. In this case, as in the case of my translation of *Mecanoscrit del segon origen* and of the edition of the forthcoming monographic issue on this novel for the US journal *Alambique* (also to be published in June), what has happened is very simple: I happen to write academic English, and this has been my main qualification to bridge gaps between different cultures.

Although some of the authors who have collaborated in the *SFS* monographic on Spanish SF have written their texts directly in English, language is a powerful barrier

which I can easily cross, like any other English Studies specialist. The authors have contributed their expertise and, as I learned about Spanish SF (of which I knew very little when I started), I have shaped their articles into academic work that can function in English. This is not always easy, as we work in very different academic traditions. For my own article in the *Mecanoscrit* volume I have chosen to apply Masculinity Studies to a close reading of the male protagonist, Dídac, a methodology that while well-established in English Studies, is absolutely new to Catalan Studies. In both cases, by the way, we have decided to translate the work done in English to, respectively, Spanish and Catalan, thus closing the scholarly circuit. Bridging the reverse gap, so to speak.

As you can see, I am not speaking about translating texts, which, by the way, should be a much bigger part of our task as Spanish specialists in English Studies (if only the Ministry valued translation as academic work). I am speaking here about being a sort of cultural interpreter, giving access into our local cultures to anglophone audiences by means of English Studies traditions and, in the process, opening up the local field. I'm not seeking an acknowledgement of merits, if I have any, but a debate about why this type of work is so limited. Or a correction of my views, if these are wrong.

In recent years, I have been also frantically translating into Spanish everything I have published in English and making it available through my university's digital repository for, otherwise, who would read me here, in Spain? As for what I publish in English elsewhere, I wonder whether it is read at all and by whom. And I have the impression that the *SFS* issue on Spanish SF might matter much more than any other work I may have done in English precisely because it bridges an important gap. We have insisted, by the way, that Spain is not the same as Latin America but a separate cultural domain that happens to be in Europe.

Funnily, going back to *Episodios*, as I wrote here about two years ago, Benito Pérez Galdós was also a cultural bridge-builder between Britain and Spain. In the post 'Charles and Benito: A Celebration of Influence' (11 August 2015) I explained that Galdós was absolutely fascinated by Dickens, who died in 1870, the same year when the Spanish author started publishing. A very young Galdós managed to publish a Spanish translation of *Pickwick Papers*, even though he knew no English and most likely translated the book from the French version. Reading these days the *Episodios* there are moments when I feel that I'm reading Dickens in Spanish, so strong is his influence. The detailed descriptions, the structure of feeling, the plot twists are so Dickensian and at the same time so profoundly 'castizos' and Galdosian, that I marvel at how they overlap. At the same time, the Dickensian influence often reveals what is obvious: that Dickens knew *El Quijote* by heart, as did Galdós. You see how I'm justifying to myself my reading of the 46 *Episodes*: this is actually about how Dickens influenced the rest of Europe and Spain in particular. And I'm wasting no time...

I do envy Galdós, for he created something new and unique in Spain by merging two very different traditions. Perhaps it's about time we debate why as Spanish specialists in English Studies we are finding so many difficulties to do something similar and why our main aspiration is to be treated as honorary anglophone academics. *It is*: let's

begin the debate by acknowledging this. Our real mission, however, seems to lie elsewhere: in explaining our culture(s) to anglophone audiences, bridging gaps between us and them; most importantly, healing the split from our own background.

Back to Galdós... How Dickens would have loved the *Episodios!!!*

16 May 2017 / CULTURAL APPROPRIATION (AND THE MATTER OF SPANISH NEO-VICTORIAN FICTION)

I'm just back from the "1 International Seminar on (Neo-)Victorian Studies in Spain", held in Málaga and organized by Prof. Rosario Arias, leader of the '(Neo-)Victorian Studies in Spain Network (VINS)', of which I am currently a member. I have learned these days that many more Spanish scholars than I assumed are bridging the gaps between Spanish and Anglophone cultures. This is very refreshing and I stand corrected in my pessimistic assessment of the exchange with great pleasure. I have also learned, however, that bridging gaps often reveals other problems that widen the cultural split which I discussed in my previous post. Problems that seem very hard to solve despite the apparent increase in intercultural communication, as they have to do with cultural appropriation.

Although others dealt with this issue, I'll refer here to two papers and a writer's presentation. The first paper even carries the word 'appropriation' in its title: Begoña Lasa Álvarez, of the Universidade A Coruña, offered a presentation called "From Agustina de Aragón to *The Maid of Saragossa*: Cultural Appropriation of a Heroine". Sonia Villegas (Universidad de Huelva) did not directly discuss 'appropriation' in her paper "Espido Freire Visits the House of Writing: The Role of Material Traces in *Querida Jane, Querida Charlotte* (2004)". Yet, I find this was implicit in Freire's positioning. Finally, the writer invited to the seminar is young Victoria Álvarez (Salamanca, 1985). She is currently specializing in Neo-Edwardian mystery fiction, which we might call a sub-set of the Neo-Victorian, of which she has published five novels already (see www.victoriaalvarez.es).

Begoña Lasa's argument was straightforward: a series of British writers borrowed the heroic figure of Agustina de Aragón; using stereotypes connected with the representation of Spanish women (think Mérimée's *Carmen*, 1845) and of a variety of female heroes, they progressively transformed her into a heroic fantasy. Furthermore, these British authors made the point of stressing that they had honoured Agustina in a way that was much above what Spaniards could do. In the process, the real Agustina became yet another loss to the truth of History.

As Begoña explained, unfortunately Agustina was connected by Franco's regime with Spanish fascist patriotism in a way that had little to do with the original Agustina's efforts to stop the French troops from storming Zaragoza. This is why so many of us have paid so little attention to her figure; I was very much surprised to learn that she was actually Catalan. No matter. While in her thirties (not her twenties) this woman,

who may or may not have been pretty (probably not), and who was married to an artillery officer (and had seen what needed to be done), decided to fire a canon against the enemy. This common enough action for a man was magnified into a colossal feat for a woman, which had the downside of obscuring the participation of many other women in battle and in the diverse sieges. Typical patriarchal thinking: choose a woman, claim she is exceptional and pretend no other women are capable of doing like her. Then turn her into myth.

Agustina is only mentioned in passing in Benito Pérez Galdós's novel *Zaragoza*, part of the first series of the *Episodios Nacionales*. Tired of the 'Artillera' legend, a character quickly dismisses it as he seeks information about someone else: "Ya, ya tenemos noticia del heroísmo de esa insigne mujer—manifestó D. Roque". 'Agustina' is finally mentioned by name when a shy woman, Manuelilla, is offered a gun, which she does fire, "radiante de satisfacción". The man who tempts her simply declares, echoing the author: "Si a estas cosas no hay más que tomarlas el gusto. Lo mismo debieran hacer todas las zaragozanas, y de ese modo la Agustina y Casta Álvarez no serían una gloriosa excepción entre las de su sexo". In short: by the time major Spanish novelist Pérez Galdós undermined (in the 1870s) the heroic exception that Agustina embodied in order to show that many other women had fought the Napoleonic troops, a series of British writers had already taken her from Spanish hands to turn her into a folk hero which only represented their own fantasies of Spanish womanhood. When asked whether these fantasies of exalted passion, dark beauty and rash actions had been finally lost in our global age, Begoña politely answered that she was not sure. I thought of Penelope Cruz—playing Agustina in some silly English-language epic...

Sonia Villegas analyzed in her paper the singular volume by Spanish writer (Laura) Espido Freire, *Querida Jane, querida Charlotte: Por la ruta de Jane Austen y las hermanas Brontë* (2004). This is partly travel book and partly writers' biography, and has been advertised as the volume that solves the mystery of why these women authors wrote as they did. The solution comes from a fellow female author and not from academics who, it seems, can never share the same writerly sensibility and sensitivity.

Freire, as Sonia explained, presents herself as an illustrated super-fan with a more refined approach to the material traces left by these celebrity writers, in particular the Brontës. She touches the dresses, the furniture, the books exhibited at the Brontë Museum at Haworth and these objects lead her to understand who her 19th century peers really were. The mention of Emily's bed was, however, a little too much for me... even though I am guilty of having made a (small) donation to the museum. I asked Sonia privately whether she had found any sentence in the book suggesting that a) Freire aspired to the same kind of fetishistic immortality, or b) Freire lamented that her survival into that kind of literary eternity was not likely. Apparently not, though Sonia granted that, yes, perhaps there is something parasitical in Freire's volume or similar books. Now imagine the Brontës brought back to life and wondering why so many authors are piggybacking on their success with the excuse of paying them homage.

Espido Freire is, of course, Spanish and this leads me to the third part of today's post: Victoria Álvarez. I'll just note before this that the two cases I have mentioned, the appropriation of Agustina de Aragón by the British and of the Austen/Brontë set by Freire, seem to be mirror phenomena: I take your heroine and claim I know her best than you do, and viceversa. There seems to be a draw, then, in this game, but you will see that, oddly, this is not quite the case.

I want to open up here a debate about the appropriation of the British Victorian and Edwardian ages to produce fiction in Spanish. Please, note that Espido Freire's book is non-fiction. In contrast, the very popular *El mapa del tiempo* (2008) by Félix J. Palma, followed by *El mapa del cielo* (2012) and *El mapa del caos* (2014)—the three of them translated into English—has started a trend that needs to be considered in depth, and that Victoria Álvarez is cultivating.

I started reading Palma's first volume and gave up after just a few pages because I had the uncomfortable feeling that his novel, set in 1896 London and closely following the work of H.G. Wells, was fiction translated from English. Perhaps I am being unfair to Palma, and also running the risk of sounding censorious, but I wonder what the point of choosing this background is. I assume that he and his literary descendants, like Álvarez, will claim that writers should be free to use their imagination as they please—and who am I to say otherwise? I worry, however, very much at the decision to ignore the Spanish 19th century to focus instead on the British 19th century, simply because while there are plenty of British writers to lend new life to the Victorian past, the relatively few Spanish writers are seemingly choosing to turn their backs on Spain. And I don't think that British writers will suddenly return the favour and start fantasizing about our 19th century.

The British, as we all know, excel at selling their past and their heritage worldwide—in the Málaga conference Mark Llewellyn noted that the biggest British export to China in recent years has been *Downton Abbey*... We, here in Spain, are not immune to the charms of British fiction from the Victorian and Edwardian periods, as I know first-hand very well. But, from what I have seen these days, I think that the Spanish specialists in English Studies are among the only Spaniards aware of a very simple truth: this is not our culture.

It feels like our culture, in the same way that 20th century and current American culture does, because its products have colonized our cultural market. Also, because many of us can access them in English or enjoy the experience of travelling regularly to anglophone areas. Nonetheless, when I heard Victoria Álvarez tell us about her problems with the many anglicisms (or English borrowings) in her prose, because she reads all the time in English, I worried. Unless she ends up writing in English, she happens to be a Spanish writer and she should be concerned with mastering the language which is her artistic tool. As for the use of Victorian and Edwardian times in her fiction, although she was clear about her trying to stick to a plausible, well-researched view of them, the risk of her using second-hand clichés is still enormous. Read a summary of Palma's books and you will also see that name-dropping is essential in his novels. So, should Victoria Álvarez cease publishing her peculiar neo-

Edwardian fiction in Spanish? No, of course not. It's her choice and she has many readers, it seems. My aim is not, as I have said, censorship but raising our collective awareness as Spanish readers about why we need to fantasize about other people's cultures. And appropriate them.

I am finally reconciled with the TV series *El Ministerio del Tiempo*, as it is, precisely, fulfilling the much needed task of turning local Spanish history into material for (fantasy) fiction. In one of the conference talks there was a scene from an episode on real-life Joaquín Argamasilla, who claimed to have x-ray vision but was exposed as a fraud by Harry Houdini. This is, I believe, a most fruitful strategy: make Spanish personages known, and bring international personalities into the tale if this requires it.

The British have found a very rich treasure in their past for their fiction and this is what we need to do: explore our own and claim it. It seems a better kind of appropriation.

23 May 2017 / BLURRED LINES: TRYING TO UNDERSTAND THE WRITERS OF THE PAST

No, sorry, this is not a post about Robin Thicke's catchy, appallingly sexist 2013 hit, which, by the way, turned out to be plagiarised (from a Marvin Gaye song). No: today I'm dealing with our difficulties to produce a clearly defined portrait of the writers of the pre-media past. By pre-media I mean the historical period before the invention of the recording (and broadcasting) of sound and of the moving image, even though the press and photography may have been already available. And I'm using the Brontës as an example.

It has taken me a long twelve-step Google search to finally find out thanks to *The Penguin Book of Interviews* (edited by Christopher Silvester in 1993), that the first text of this kind to be published (in an American newspaper) dates back to 1859. The person interviewed was Brigham Young, leader of the Mormon Church, and the conversation appeared in the *New York Herald*. Silvester's volume includes interviews with writers Robert Louis Stevenson, Mark Twain, Rudyard Kipling, Emile Zola, Oscar Wilde and Henrik Ibsen, just to name a few authors who started writing in the 19th century. As an undergrad, I remember reading with immense pleasure a couple of anthologies gathering together the excellent interviews with writers published by *The Paris Review*, funded in 1953 by Peter Matthiessen, Harold L. Humes and George Plimpton.

So here is the first point: before 1859, the tools available to build the portrait of the writer, beyond the texts they chose to publish, are tangential. We have pictorial portraits, photos (from the 1830s onwards), impressions written by others, biographies and, here's a vexing question, private letters. And the memorabilia. But not their voices in answer to our questions.

In the case of the Brontës, poor things, we have the dismal portrait of the three sisters painted by their adored but untalented brother Branwell. The photo believed to depict Charlotte has been revealed to be of someone else. Charlotte was the subject of a pioneering writer's biography, written by fellow-author Elizabeth Gaskell. This volume, however, is now regarded as a manipulative instrument to present a more palatable image of the author to Victorian readers (even against Charlotte's own wishes). And then there is the Brontë Parsonage Museum, where you can touch Emily's bed, among other personal objects.

Obviously, even when portraits of the writer from the past exist, these are confusing objects. The slow speed of pre-20th century cameras required subjects to sit still for a long time, which is why all Victorians look so stern and unsmiling. Victorian photography was a new art and, above all, a new social habit; 150 years before the invention of the selfie, people simply lacked the know-how of self-presentation. See the ridiculous photos of Charles Dickens—a writer very careful of his public image and the first one to market himself as a brand—to understand how far he was from mastering this specific aspect.

In the absence of reliable elements for a clearly focused portrait, then, we use whatever we have at hand, and this is mainly letters, or diaries. Leaving aside the problems attached to the use of private documents which may have nothing to do with the literary craft to study how writers do write, it might well be the case that none have survived. Here's an example of our difficulties, found in Josephine McDonagh's 2008 introduction to Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848): "The absence of an autobiographical record makes it difficult to be sure of Anne's motivations in writing *The Tenant*, but episodes of her life have led commentators to suppose that not only were some of the characters and events based on her own acquaintance and experiences, but that the novel itself was conceived as a response to troubling family circumstances" (xvii). This exemplifies the biographical phallacy that still dominates research (surprisingly): if you could map the writer's life down to the most private detail, you would be able to explain his/her writing.

Interviews with living authors, however, reveal that this is not the case, as they have a mysterious something called 'imagination' that seems to lead a life of its own. A typical academic reply to writers' strenuously denying that the biographical approach is correct is that writers themselves do not understand the process of writing. Or, as my PhD supervisor would remind me: "Writers lie all the time". If, in short, we could interview Anne or her sisters, I'm sure they would be flabbergasted by the amount of speculation poured onto their lives... but they would not necessarily tell us the truth. What a vicious circle.

Here's an alternative, coming from the same introduction by McDonagh: "Anne Brontë's immersion in the print culture of her time, and specially her acquaintance with these more ephemeral forms of magazines and albums, may account for some of the stylistic features of the text" (xxxii). Observe the hesitation implicit in 'may' and 'some'... This is the classic philological approach: if we could have access to the

complete list of all a writer has read from infancy, then we would eventually be able to explain how his/her style works.

This stance led, as we know, to two apparently incompatible approaches: the intense Russian formalism later borrowed by American New Criticism (from which our close reading practices derive) and Harold Bloom's idea of the 'anxiety of influence', which still respects the presence of the writer but tries to exclude the gossipy biographical approach and focus on authorship. Julia Kristeva cut an important Gordian knot by proposing that since influence cannot be really proven we should speak of intertextuality. This is both an extremely productive idea and a surrender, for it tells us that writers remain impenetrable fortresses better left alone. Just connect the texts with each other.

Let me recap: despite the immense energy poured by countless researchers, the portrait of the Brontë sisters we have today is a poorly assembled collection of blurred lines. Perhaps this is part of their myth and if we had them on television and on YouTube as much as we wished, they would not be the object of so much veneration. Or would they? I'm thinking of how contemporary writers market themselves and beginning to realize that fans would never tire if J.K. Rowling gave daily speeches and interviews.

In neo-Victorian conference I recently attended, there was someone very earnestly speculating whether Charlotte Brontë was actually pretty or not. A letter by her publisher George Smith was quoted, in which he offered a very unflattering description (later partially corrected by his daughter). We may disagree whether we find Rowling pretty or not, but in the age of the selfie it is absolutely frustrating that we cannot even be sure what Charlotte looked like, much less Emily or Anne. You may be thinking that, despite the countless interviews, press articles, documentaries, photos, etc., we're not really closer to knowing who Rowling is. Our exploration of her work is not closer, either, to revealing how she managed to imagine the world of *Harry Potter*. Of course, but at least we can ask her whereas in the case of the writers from the past, unless new evidence appears, we are constantly stuck with the same limited, tangential material.

So what should be, as researchers specializing in Literature, do? I don't know myself and I am beginning to be increasingly perplexed. It is clear to me that our central mission—the faith we profess as professors—is the survival of the texts from one generation to the next. Also, the correction of false impressions: *Wuthering Heights* used to be considered trash, and now it's part of the canon. I am personally doing all I can in my classes to vindicate Anne Brontë's *Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. Every teacher of the Brontës fiction knows that biographical gossip helps to fix an idea of who these women were in the students' minds. Yet, I certainly don't want to discuss with them in class whether Charlotte was pretty; and the realization that *Jane Eyre* is the expression of sexual frustration regarding her unrequited passion for a married man has very much damaged my pleasure in this novel. Meaning that the more I know about Charlotte, the less I like *Jane Eyre*...

Perhaps, and here's the rub, the problem is that as teachers and researchers we are bound to fail: even if the best Brontë researcher devoted all his/her energies for the next fifteen years to *Tenant* and to Anne, this person would still be far from disclosing the mystery of her literary creativity. It's back to the blurred lines. I don't like speaking of 'mystery', as this makes literary research sound subjective and romantic in the worst possible way. But scientifically speaking, a mystery is that which cannot be explained with the current tools for research. And the ones we have are extremely limited. Even in the case of contemporary writers for, unless we sit by them as they write, we cannot really get a true insight into how writing works. And I see no author tolerating that kind of academic intrusion, not even for the sake of literary glory. For many, interviews even appear to be something they put up with and not something they truly relish...

Having just re-read Anne's *Tenant*, with great pleasure, just after reading H. Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines*, I am wondering whether we should produce more criticism. We often teach texts or write about them taking for granted that they are good and this is why they are canonical. My fellow teachers and I decided, precisely, to include *Tenant* in our course on Victorian fiction because it has excellent features but also some problems, deeper than the faults to be found in *Wuthering Heights* or *Jane Eyre*. Rather than teach, then, that Anne's Arthur Huntingdon is based on her brother Branwell's, we focus on why the friendship between Gilbert and Lawrence is not convincingly narrated. And the challenge of explaining why *King Solomon's Mines* is so inferior to *Heart of Darkness* and, at the same time, so indispensable to understand Conrad appears to be now very exciting. I'm glad we have chosen to teach Haggard.

So, yes: let's apply a better focus on the texts, let the authors remain blurred, ghostly presences. And enjoy the mystery.

30 May 2017 / ON THE DECLINE OF CINEMA (WITH SOME MUSINGS ABOUT THE 1980s)

This post is a mixed bag of ideas about cinema. Some are suggested by reading this weekend the Spanish version of Hadley Freeman's pop essay *Time of my Life* (2015), a book about the pleasures of 1980s movies. Other ideas spring from the controversy at the Cannes Film Festival (which closed yesterday) on whether Netflix and Amazon films, which do not get theatrical releases, are cinema at all properly speaking.

Cinema is, roughly speaking, a century-old business which is possibly seeing its end as an art enjoyed in public. This is a situation that true cinema lovers bemoan, even though they (we) have been the first to desert our local cinemas. I am trying to return again but what puts me off is the discourteous behaviour of my fellow spectators.

As we all know, in cinemas people speak with each other in loud tones (or use their cell phones) as if they were in their own living room. Any complaint risks a really nasty incident, whereas in the pre-multiplex past ushers would invite obnoxious spectators

out.... Then, I happen to abhor the smell of popcorn, which is a great inconvenient if you enjoy visiting cinemas; it can be worse in evening sessions mid-week, when bocatas de chorizo are a common snack. Also, my small size means that I am only truly comfortable in a handful of cinemas (a special recommendation for Balnes O.V. if you live in Barcelona). Many committed cinemagoers have chosen to attend the least popular sessions (here, Monday 16:00) but this is a sad solution to the basic problem of people's inability to behave in cinemas. And, so, dear Pedro Almodóvar, president of the Cannes Festival Jury, and Netflix hater, here's the explanation for why cinema is dying: spectators.

I don't have a Netflix subscription but I have checked the monthly fees and, basically, they are the equivalent of a single cinema ticket. I paid 8.50 for my last film—*Dancer*, the wonderful documentary on ballet star Sergei Polunin—whereas a basic Netflix fee is 7.99 (standard 9.99; premium 11.99). Streaming requires, please remember, a good internet service (at least 40 euros a month) and, although you can watch films on tiny smartphone screens, ideally you should also possess a 50-inch television (which may cost thousands of euros). But, then, people pay anyway for these.

If you happen to be a teenager seeking to have a good time with your friends but only carry 15 euros in your pocket, you're not going to spend them at the cinema—you'll go to McDonalds (!?) and then use your parents' subscription at home to see as many films as you want. Although, funnily, subscription channels like HBO and now internet services like Netflix are, essentially, platforms based on the appeal of television series, not films, which they have started to produce only a few years ago. Here is, Pedro Almodóvar, another question for you: is a film released on Netflix a TV movie? How come TV series are no longer really TV series, but internet series? But I digress...

To sum up: people are dragging their feet and thinking twice before going to the cinema because a) the other spectators are (mostly) obnoxious, b) the tickets are (relatively) expensive. A Netflix (or similar) subscription solves both problems at once: if you are still interested in films, you may enjoy them in the comfort of your home and for little money. You also get the series, of course. Cinemas lose business and we, who love cinema, lose the pleasure of the big screen. But, then, this pleasure seems to have been lost long ago, possibly with the introduction of the multiplex and the dismissal of the ushers to cut corners...

I had been avoiding the book by Hadley Freeman, *Time of my Life*, because the title is an allusion to *Dirty Dancing* and this is not the kind of 1980s cinema I enjoy. I'm an *Aliens* (1986) and *Predator* (1987) fan, rather, which I combined with art-house fare like *Paris, Texas* (1984) or *Do the Right Thing* (1989). Freeman doesn't like *Star Wars*, and that's all I need to say about our diverging tastes. In the 1980s I managed to avoid all the films by John Hughes, and although I find *Ghostbusters* (1984) fun, I really see no reason to see it many times as she has done. If I had written a book about 1980s cinema, *Blade Runner* (1982) would be all over the place. Ok, I grant that I also enjoy *When Harry Met Sally...* (1989)—and I would like to kill the incompetent person who translated 'met' as 'encontró' instead of 'conoció', as if Sally was a pebble on the beach.

What I appreciate about Freeman's essay is the effort she makes to explain that, although not everything worked well in 1980s Hollywood movies (they could be blatantly misogynistic, homophobic and racist), many things are wrong today. Perhaps because she was a child in the 1980s, rather than a teenager, Freeman feels unencumbered by the generational loyalty and nostalgia that has led others to defend fanatically the cinema made in that decade. She's, in short, more clear-headed and can number very accurately the problems of current cinema. These can be summed up in just one short sentence: Hollywood studios are working for the lowest common denominator and addressing a spectatorship they wrongly believe to be homogeneous.

More specifically this means that, after the old studios became at the beginning of the 1990s tiny cogs in the wheels of massive corporations: a) the people deciding which movies are greenlighted are executives, not cinema lovers (or even producers...), b) there is a total fixation with the blockbuster, with the subsequent loss of the mid-budget film, c) the only demographic truly taken into account are 12-year-old males (but why?? they don't even read comics), d) the weight of the foreign market has increased (hence the downplaying of nuanced local issues), f) women's role as spectators and creators has sharply diminished (men don't see women's films, women see all kinds of films)..., g) racial and ethnic variety is decreasing (if you have noticed more Chinese actors in recent blockbusters, this is because China is now the main Hollywood market). In short, and I think she is right, *When Harry Met Sally...* would not be made today. Or it would be a Netflix series. With Billy Crystal and Meg Ryan recovering their lost popularity.

Please, notice that the current decline of Hollywood cinema also affects the blockbuster. The 1980s *Aliens* and *Predator* are excellent films which have no match today. Prequels, sequels and spin-offs simply show how scared everyone is of producing something fresh and new. Hundreds of millions of dollars are poured onto films impossible to watch and forgotten the next day: the plots are either confusing or inexistent, the action scenes are just sound and fury signifying nothing, poorly designed cgi only contributes to this sense of chaos and randomness. Now and then a popcorn film fulfils the task of keeping you entertained (*The Fate of the Furious*, part 8 of the *Fast and Furious* series). Yet most films are unendurable because despite being edited for spectators with a three-second attention span, they go on for more than two hours on average (films used to be a satisfying 90 minutes long). One might choose to be bored, if thus inclined, watching the grass grow in a French avant-garde film, as Woody Allen explained, but not, I'll add, watching a blockbuster, which is supposed to thrill you.

One need not be very clever to notice that the current passion for watching series is very closely connected with the decadence of cinema. I need another post to explain how series are now about to enter their process of stagnation (perhaps not decline) but just let me say that the recent release of the new *Twin Peaks*, closes a cycle started by the old *Twin Peaks* in 1990. When HBO feels the need to go back to ABC to stay competitive it's time to say that something smells rotten... Or, rather, very briefly:

David Lynch's quirky series was a product made for national American television, specifically ABC. The gauntlet of how to make eccentric quality series was then picked up by Chris Carter's *The X-Files* (1993-2001), which was made for Fox—one of the first major TV channels to appear in the decade which saw film studios swallowed into the maws of greedy, blind corporations. While film studios were slowly eaten up from the inside, like teenagers in a bad horror movie, cable TV grew: hence HBO with *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) and *Game of Thrones* (2011-). Now it's Netflix's turn... which started film production in 2013.

What I am arguing is obvious. Film and series, whether TV or internet, are communicating vessels: there is only a certain amount of audiovisual narrative talent around and if this has migrated to the series, it is only because cinema started being destroyed in the early 1990s by the corporations that dominate the film studios. Indie cinema appeared as a counterweight but, precisely, the problem is that it is too light in business terms to truly offer an alternative. I must thank Freeman for making me realize what was missing in this evident argumentation: despite the gigantic budgets of series like *Game of Thrones*, cinema has lost to the series the mid-budget list. In 1990, *The Handmaid's Tale* was a (quite good) mid-budget film, today it is a 10-part-series (second-season announced...). And the series is publicized as if the film never existed, though its makers are MGM.

The problem is that the series may kill but not replace films. Freeman notes, and I very much agree, that whereas one may see a favourite film dozens of times, this is less likely to happen with a 50-hour drama (e.g. *The Wire*). Also, I add, whereas a film is a self-enclosed product (even when it is part of a trilogy, etc), series are sprawling products that tend to last for as long as possible, even past the right time for closure (this is known as 'jumping the shark'). It is now known, besides, that with the exception of a few A-list series, spectators tend to abandon series around the third season. It might well be that, eventually, series start dying of their own success and the mini-series become everyone's favourite format.

What do we do with cinema, in the meantime? Pedro Almodóvar was adamant that only films released in cinemas count as proper cinema, whereas his fellow jury member at Cannes, actor Will Smith, argued that all forms of seeing films should co-exist to ensure maximum exposure. Theatre, after all, still exists and in ways more diversified than ever (is it because theatre-goers are better behaved than film-goers?). Possibly Smith is right but I will insist again that platforms like Netflix or Amazon are not the problem. I am really serious when I say that cinemas started dying the moment ushers were deprived of any authority and spectators started behaving as if they were at home. Hopefully, this rude breed will soon desert the cinemas for their own home cinemas and let us, film lovers, enjoy films again on the big screen.

6 June 2017 / REVIEWING THE VAMPIRE: WHAT SEEMS TO BE AT STAKE

This is an anecdote I have often told in class and to my tutorees. I was in a tutorial with my PhD supervisor in Scotland, Prof. David Punter. My topic was monstrosity in 1980s and 1990s fiction. I had reached that low point which all doctoral students hit when you realize that nobody cares about your mighty efforts... I was working on my chapter on the vampire, and, sick and tired, I blurted out, “but who cares?, vampires don’t even exist!” Prof. Punter went gnomish—as if he was onto something I could never guess—and replied in a style that Oscar Wilde would have loved, “Oh, but they do exist! At least, they take a great deal of our imagination”. Or similar words. That taught me a most valuable lesson (also about vampires): just as we spend much of our life dreaming, we spend many hours daydreaming, and both our dreams and our imagination are as important as our waking hours. A truth that readers who limits themselves to realist fiction can never suffer. Poor things.

We have included again Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897) in our syllabus for Victorian Literature—or rather, like the repressed, the uncanny Count has returned to haunt us. I have not re-read Stoker’s novel yet, a text which I admire very much because of its singular mixture of fake documents and its sense of modernity scandalized by the intrusion of the atavistic. I have, however, spent a great deal of the past week thinking hard about vampires for a seminar I am to teach soon. You might think that a specialist in Gothic Studies like myself already knows everything about vampires but a) even specialists forget details as juicy as the fact that Stoker wrote theatrical reviews for a Dublin newspaper that Le Fanu, author of *Carmilla*, owned, and b) there is nothing like having to teach a subject to learn a few new lessons.

For instance, I believed that the famous image of Count Dracula in modern evening dress complete with a red-lined black satin cape comes from the 1931 film with Bela Lugosi. It actually comes, though, from the 1924 play by Irish actor and playwright Hamilton Deane (he played Van Helsing; Dracula was first played by Edmund Blake). I can’t tell, however, whose idea the cape was. This may seem trivial but then other people employ their energies in recording how many goals Leo Messi has scored this past season (54...). Forgetting myself for a second on the track of the vampire, yesterday I even considered whether I should finally read Stephanie Meyers’ *Twilight* saga; yet, seeing how fast and how far Kirsten Stewart has distanced herself from her on-screen Bella, I thought perhaps not. I’ll read instead a similarly long book which promises to be far more thrilling, and sexy, and which will fill in a more glaring gap in my (Victorian) reading list: the serial *Varney, the Vampire* (1845-7). Good company for *Dracula*.

Generally speaking, I find vampires very boring creatures, though I must grant that the 19th century variety is far more exciting than the 20th and 21st century breed. The Romantic and Victorian vampires are in-your-face predators pretty much comfortable with their animal nature. In the late hippie times of 1976, Anne Rice had the very questionable idea of letting the vampiric creatures in her novel *Interview with the*

Vampire, particularly silly Louis de Pointe du Lac, brood and mope about their sad fate. Fancy lions bemoaning being carnivores... Even worse, Rice revealed through reporter Daniel Molloy that secretly we all want to be vampires because they are immortal, a hidden truth that should have stayed hidden because it has led to endless horrors—implants of artificial long fangs and also the idiotic consumption of actual human blood by those who ignore the meaning of the word ‘metaphor’. Insert a shudder here.

I should leave all discussion of the vampire to more learned scholars, like my dear friend Antonio Ballesteros (read his volume *Vampire Chronicle: Una historia natural del vampiro en la literatura anglosajona*, 2000). But, still, I have re-discovered a few issues about the 19th century vampire that I’d like to share here. Actually, this re-discovery begins with the 18th century for this is the real turning point in the history of the vampire.

We fail to understand how it felt to live before the first serious, rational attempts to dispel the fog of superstition. The vampire emerges, precisely, from this fog with the strange cases of two Serbian peasants, Petar Blagojevich (1725) and Arnold Paole (1726), ‘executed’ for crimes committed once dead. The real novelty here is that the cases were documented by officers of the Austrian Empire using a pioneering rational perspective, later also employed by Dom Augustine Calmet. This abbot penned an indispensable essay with a wonderfully mixed title, *Traité sur les apparitions des anges, des démons & des esprits et sur les revenans et vampires de Hongrie, de Bohême, de Moravie & de Silesie* (1746, vol. II 1751), from which my own dissertation on the monster descends. The difference is that Calmet was not sure whether angels and ‘revenants’ (i.e. vampires) could exist whereas I, a belated child of the Enlightenment, know that they don’t (*pace* Prof. Punter). A pity, in the case of the angels. Extraterrestrials I still swear by, though.

The second point of re-discovery has to do with the fact that before the vampire reached prose fiction with John Polidori’s Gothic tale “The Vampyre” (1819), it had already colonized 18th century German poetry and, a bit later, the English Romantic variety. Of course, I knew about Coleridge’s transgender “Christabel” (1816), a tantalizingly unfinished text which leads to *Carmilla* (1871-2) but I had forgotten that sex and vampirism had come together much earlier in “Der vampir” (1748) by Heinrich August Ossenfelder—a poet who had possibly read Calmet and who actually anticipates Gothic fiction tropes, rather than copy from them.

Another crucial element that we fail to grasp is seduction, which is integral to the vampire. In the 18th and 19th centuries, as countless stories narrate, seduction was not at all sexy foreplay but a form of psychological violence which today we consider plain rape. From Richardson’s Lovelace to Lord Byron’s Don Juan, the seducer is a man who subdues the will of his female victims, and, so, it took only a tiny step for Polidori to turn him into a vampire, as Ossenfelder had already suggested. That “The Vampyre” is also a personal comment on how doctor Polidori saw his patient Lord Byron (possibly more sinned against than a sinner...) is incidental. And though “Christabel” is an early announcement of the misogynistic transformation later in the 19th century of the seducer’s victim into a victimizer (in *Carmilla*), it is worth remembering that during the

last quarter of the 19th century and in the early 20th until Bela Lugosi, women were *the* vampire. Tellingly, the first film 'vamp', Theda Bara, was also the first great female film star.

Another surprising re-discovery is that once it colonizes poetry and prose fiction, the vampire tends to spread to other media and keep a good hold onto them: the stage (plays, melodrama, opera) and, we tend to forget this, painting and illustration. In our time when novels lack any ornaments, we have serious problems to understand how interconnected literature and painting were in the 19th century (the whole Pre-Raphaelite movement seems to be about that); particularly, how the iconography of even the cheapest penny dreadful conditioned the later iconography of stage and film adaptations. I'm thinking of the crude woodcuts that accompany *Varney, the Vampire* and of the higher quality images for *Carmilla*. Also of Füssli's pseudo-vampiric painting 'The Nightmare' (1781) and misogynist Edvard Munch's endless variations on the theme of the female vampire (1895-1902). As for Polidori's "The Vampyre", this tale inspired an astonishingly long chain of texts for the stage in French and German, and then back to English, which is certainly mindboggling.

And, then, there's a mystery which I cannot solve satisfactorily, mainly because I'd rather it remains a mystery. It is clear as daylight that Bram Stoker took his inspiration for *Dracula* from *Carmilla*; plainly, he read Le Fanu's novella and he thought that he would like to write an equally brilliant vampire tale. But when? The question is that there is a long lapse of 28 years between *Carmilla* (1871-2) and *Dracula* (1897) in which Stoker passed from Irish civil servant who wrote theatrical reviews in his free time to experienced manager of Henry Irving's Lyceum theatre. A long, long lapse. Perhaps suffering what Harold Bloom famously called the 'anxiety of influence', Stoker felt that he could never do better, which is why he poured so much energy and spent so many hours at the British Museum library doing research. Beautifully, the Lyceum, formerly the English Opera House, had welcomed the vampire onto the English stage with James Robinson Planché's *The Vampire; or, the Bride of the Isles* (1820), a translation of the eponymous pioneering melodrama by Charles Nodier, who had taken his inspiration from Polidori. Was, then, Planché's vampire waiting in the wings of Irving's Lyceum to bite Stoker? Just a thought...

As happens with the other two masterpieces of 19th Gothic, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and R.L. Stevenson *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), Bram Stoker's *Dracula* seems to arise from something beyond the author which transmits itself to the public through his imagination, as if he were only a medium. Also, as happens with Shelley and Stevenson, the creature that sprang from Stoker's pen is not at all the caricature we got from the 20th century stage and film adaptations but the real thing—a scary monster. Not the ridiculously handsome Edward Cullen of *Twilight*, but an inhuman, undead, abject thing that you don't want to touch (much less be touched by). Today we have zombies playing that role but unlike *Dracula* they are mindless creatures—perhaps what we deserve (and how we all feel) in our mindless times.

Thank you, Prof. Punter, for that nugget of deep, wide wisdom. I have never forgotten that vampires do exist and do matter, though I may have forgotten some details. Never again, and I promise to read *Varney*...

13 June 2017 / ASEXUALITY REVISITED (WITH SOME THOUGHTS ABOUT LABELS)

Two years ago I published a post with the title “And now for the asexuals... : Ceaseless labelling in Gender Studies” (15 March 2015). This was inspired by the draft of a chapter in a PhD dissertation, which I was asked to assess. Yesterday I had the pleasure of sitting on the board for the finished dissertation, presented by its author (and new doctor), Petra Filipová (<http://kaa.ff.upjs.sk/en/people/159/petra-filipova>). During the viva and afterwards over lunch I had a lively exchange with Dr. Filipová on the difficulties of connecting asexuality with other labels used in the past; indeed, she defines this identity as a “new sexuality”, which very much puzzles me. Hence my post today.

As I explained in my 2015 post on this issue, asexuals have made a point of clarifying that they are neither celibate nor frigid. Celibacy is seen as a repression of sexuality willingly chosen by the individual concerned, whereas frigidity is understood to be a sexual disorder that causes distress to sufferers. Asexuality, let me stress this, is the identity embraced by persons who feel no sexual desire but are not distressed by the situation—they feel simply normal and reject both their medicalization and their pathologization. As Petra Filipová argued, many problems beset asexuals: their lack of public visibility, the disrespect poured on them when they announce their identity, the absurd idea that heterosexual romance can ‘cure’ asexuality and, above all, the rampant presence of sex in all aspects of our private and public lives. The point she is raising is that, precisely, this obsession with sex (booming since the 1960s) is what conditions the appearance of asexuality as a new identity and label in the late 20th century and early 21st century.

This posits a problem similar to the one elicited by the introduction of the new label ‘homosexual’ in 1869: how do we define the identity of persons who engaged in the sexual practices that currently define homosexuality before the word even existed? Some believe that homosexuality has always existed as an identity, regardless of its previous invisibility and diverse labelling, whereas others believe that the emergence of the label created the identity: what used to be defined clinically as a perversion and/or abnormality, was eventually transformed into a positive, normalized identity. Following the same line of thinking, I asked Petra whether she believed that there have always been asexual people adapting themselves to whatever social constructions of sex and gender were available to them. She replied that she was not quite sure we could call them asexual since, as happened with homosexuals in the past, they would not self-identify themselves as such, lacking the label. This is a singular conundrum...

I'd like now to consider celibacy, though I'll leave frigidity aside (what an ugly word...). I often have to explain to students in my Victorians Literature class that one of the most serious obstacles we face to understand the Victorians is that we characterize them as sexually repressed because we apply to them our own (inconsistent) rules about sexuality. As Michel Foucault admiringly explained, the Victorians, far from being repressed, gave sex a great deal of thought and basically invented the labelling system we are still so keen on. The catalogue of perversions that Victorian doctors and psychologists came up with was actually a major step forward since it was their intention to liberate sex from the taint of sinning and the authority of religion. Leaving the so-called perversions aside, it seems plain that the Victorians had other rules than ours for sex, so different that we simply cannot make sense of their lives. Celibacy is, in this sense, a major bone of contention.

We tend to connect celibacy with priests and nuns and see it as an unnatural choice that leads to the criminal abuse perpetrated by many Catholic priests against children. Protestants, allegedly more attuned to the needs of the body, allow their male and female priests to marry; they have no nuns. However, it seems to me that religious celibacy actually confirms the impression that (as a quotation in Petra's dissertation claimed), the more sex you have, the more you need it; the less sex you have, the less you need it. Celibacy, by the way—as I learned from the excellent, very scary documentary *Deliver us from Evil* (2006) —was implemented by the official Church as a way to make sure that Church property would not be lost to the children of priests. What occurs to me is that the Catholic Church may also have been a welcome refuge for male and female asexuals uninterested in forming a family. Yet we always think, for this is how our times work, that giving up sex is a major sacrifice for a person. Indeed, many priests and nuns have abandoned their habits and we suspect all the others of secretly engaging in homosexual acts. Yet there might be another truth hidden behind religious celibacy, Catholic or otherwise, if so many people consider it worthwhile to follow the call of divinity...

This connects with my recent realization that in the 19th century (both in Britain and in Spain as far as I can see) celibacy was often a synonym for singlehood. In our modern view being single is no obstacle at all to practice sex, quite the opposite: we think that marriage kills sex. But in the past, when sex was connected mainly with reproduction, many men and women lived openly as bachelors and spinsters, making thus a public declaration of their celibacy. I know what you're thinking: many Victorian spinsters were actually unhappy old maids who had failed to catch a husband; many Victorian bachelors were far from celibate, using the services of the prostitutes, often minors. Literary examples of the bachelor, such as Stevenson's notoriously duplicitous Dr. Jekyll fuel rather than quench our suspicions. Yet, I keep thinking of Dickens' respectable John Brownlow in *Oliver Twist*, who embraces celibacy when his fiancée dies. And I usually share with my class the passage in Harriet Martineau's autobiography in which she declares that the early death of the man she was to marry happily freed her from the obligation of being a wife and mother—also, implicitly of having sex. My students always stare at me in disbelief...

I am suggesting, as you can see, that asexual persons may have led lives of their choice within the church or in society in ways no longer available to them. I grant that celibacy is not at all the same as asexuality but I am hinting that in the times when celibacy was not seen with as much incomprehension and dislike as we do today, it may have been a convenient 'cover' for many asexuals still lacking that label. In our times, celibacy is seen as an aberration because we believe that all bodies feel sexual needs; hence, sexual repression is, essentially, akin to ill-treating yourself. No wonder then that asexuals, who feel as normal as you and me can be (whatever identity you have), face so many problems when explaining themselves.

The other theory I will volunteer today is that the current proliferation of labels is tied to plain gossip. I was very surprised by many new labels I found in Petra Filipová's dissertation, such as 'demisexual' (only partly sexed, or partly asexual) and 'sapiosexual' ("A person who is sexually attracted to intelligence or the human mind before appearance" or "a person who finds intelligence to be a sexually attractive quality in others", depending on the definition). But why the interest in knowing what people do or don't do sexually? Isn't this simply gossip?

Dr. Filipová believes that each new identity label helps individuals to present themselves publicly and to shape their own psychology around the idea of normality. If this helps, then it is fine, though I am truly tired of how little we actually know about the supposedly best-known identity, heterosexuality –often confused with patriarchal normativity. To begin with, heterosexuality used to be up to the 1920s yet another label to define a perversion: that of differently gendered people who engaged in sex for pleasure, not to reproduce... And, let's be honest: the moment you know that someone is gay, lesbian, queer, trans, bisexual, asexual, you name it... what comes to your mind is not the word 'normal' but a strong curiosity to know what exactly they do in bed. The same applies to heterosexuality and its many varied manifestations. And celibacy: you see a young, handsome priest, as I did recently, and the first thing you think is... It's all down to gossip, believe me and in this sense asexuality is, from the outside, the most perplexing puzzle.

Insisting again that we attach far too much importance to sexuality, I wonder whether discrimination and intolerance will end when we feel real, healthy curiosity (gossipy or less so...) rather than contempt or disgust at what other people do (or don't do) with their bodies. The more I learn about (a)sexuality, the more convinced I am that the categories and labels we live by are plainly ridiculous. Of course, it is my heterosexual privilege to say so and we still have a long way to go before everyone feels comfortable in public no matter their gendersexual identity. I can hardly ask for an abolition of labels when LGBTQphobia is growing so fast around me... Yet I hope I see in my lifetime the moment when gender and sex will stop defining persons in private and in public (though I know that gossip will never end).

And congratulations Dr. Filipová!! It's been a pleasure...

20 June 2017 / POSTMODERNISM IS DEAD, LONG LIVE POSTMODERNISM: SEEKING A NEW LABEL FOR THE NEW TIMES

Today, I'm commenting on Alison Gibbons' article in the *Times Literary Supplement*, "Postmodernism is dead. What comes next?" (12 June 2017, <http://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/public/postmodernism-dead-comes-next/?CMP=Sprkr- -Editorial- -TimesLiterarySupplement- -ArtsandCulture- -JustTextandlink- -Statement- -Unspecified- -FBPAGE>). There are many important questions about Postmodernism which nobody seems to agree on: 1) when did it begin: was it 1960s, 1980s, later even?; 2) is it already dead?; 3) when did Postmodernism die, if it is dead at all?: 1989, 2001, 2008?; 4) if it is dead, what label should we use for the culture of our own time? Post-postmodernism? Other labels being circulated, Gibbons informs us, are, brace yourselves: altermodernism, cosmodernism, digimodernism, metamodernism, performatism, post-digital, post-humanism...

First, allow me to clarify that Gibbons, a lecturer in Stylistics at Hallam University, is concerned specifically with creative or literary fiction, whereas I have always understood Postmodernism as a whole cultural movement better exemplified by certain landmark buildings (Frank Gehry's Bilbao Guggenheim Museum) or styles of gourmet cooking (Ferran Adrià) than by Literature. This difference, however, might be moot because the point she is raising is also valid for the wider cultural view of Postmodernism.

What is at stake here connects with my previous post about the current obsession with labels. If you allow me, Gibbons' piece and the many comments it has generated seem to be hinting at a critical failure we don't know how to solve; she seems to be begging for somebody, please, to offer us a workable label, even if it is parodic (Romanticism was originally intended to mock the poets of this school). I don't have a solution for this problem (see below...) but if anything astounds me at all about this period of so-called human civilization is its intense narcissism, banality and... disinterest in Literature. Current literary authors are also guilty of the same narcissism and, sorry, banality. Perhaps not even they are interested in Literature.

Let's assume for the sake of argumentation that Postmodernism began in the 1960s with works such as John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969). In this clever novel the author eventually intrudes to a) teach us History lessons about the Victorians, b) claim he has no idea how his characters will behave, which is why readers are offered three possible endings. There is a more or less widespread consensus that Postmodernism in Literature is, above all, playful in diverse degrees of seriousness: its authors question the convention that reality can be represented at all; they introduce many linguistic and textual games which repeatedly break sacred boundaries between high and low culture; they also reject all the grand narratives shaping Humanism, and, perhaps above all, hold the view that History is a slippery matter, or, as historian Hayden White sentenced in 1973, just "an agreed upon fiction". Gibbons claims that Postmodernist writers show "cool detachment", thus

suggesting that what used to be, precisely, a cool value is now a suspect declaration of emotional frigidity.

So, what is new in Literature? Gibbons argues that “in today’s cultural climate there appears to be a renewed engagement with history and a revival of mythic meaning-making that the arch-postmodernists would have abhorred”. To begin with, mixing history with myth is what Postmodernism often did: just think of Salman Rushdie, author of the seminal Postmodern novel *Midnight Children* (1985) and the ill-fated, or ill-fatwaed..., *Satanic Verses* (1987). If Gibbons means that more and more novels are set in the recent or remote past, she is right although I often get the impression that instead of real commitment they exemplify a (narcissitic) desire to show off on the writers’ side. They claim to have done tons of research and want to be admired for it, as if they were academics (see the current debate between the Oxbridge historians and Hillary Mantel). Then, frequently, the novels deal with times or areas remote from the author’s own, which actually shows a lack of engagement with the history happening on their doorsteps. Let me rephrase this: writing about historical episodes, past or present, can be done with or without an earnest political attitude and this is what I mean by lack of commitment: novels are apolitical today, or blandly liberal, not militant. Why write, in Spain, about 2010s corruption if you can write about the Civil War?

Next, Gibbons notes that when today’s writers obey the impulse to “blur the lines between fiction and reality” and appear in their own texts, as Fowles once did, “their presence is intended to signal realism, rather than to foreground the artifice of the text (...)”. Realism, Gibbons concludes, “is once again a popular mode”. Well, Postmodernism has made readers more sophisticated and they have got tired of literary games that, in time, have gone stale: fiction is fiction and, as such, artificial, and this is a lesson that we all know well by now.

On the other hand, realism has never gone out of fashion despite the early efforts of Modernism and, later, of Postmodernism to undermine it; these, as I see it, almost resulted in the total abandonment by readers of highbrow fiction for its middlebrow little sister (something realistic and about History? Ken Follett will do). “Emotions”, Gibbons writes, “are again playing a central role in literary fiction, as authors insist on our essential relationality”—but, then, what is Literature without emotion, as Wordsworth asked 220 years ago? Nothing but an empty shell. I believe that Gibbons means ‘empathy’, for emotions have always been around in Literature, though they may have been negative, as it is often the case in Postmodernist fiction. She mentions, by the way, “autofiction, a genre that integrates the autobiographical into fiction, and that has blossomed alongside the so-called memoir boom”. Autofiction is, as I’m arguing here, an example of the narcissism that dominates literary creation today; readers are dominated, rather, by gossip, which explains the memoir boom. And the interest in (exasperatingly boring) autofiction.

The end of Gibbons’ article expresses what’s behind her exercise in pattern recognition: her wish, shared with many others, that new literature can “examine complex and ever-shifting crises – of racial inequality, capitalism and climate change –

to which it is easy to close one's eyes", as implicitly, Postmodernism did (or still does?). In our times, when we see globalization as the capitalist lie it always was and when 'post-truth' defines public discourse, there is, however, "little sign of a radical literary avantgarde sweeping away the old to make way for the new". And that is the crucial problem: quickly burnt out by the demands of the market and by academia's self-interested search for novelty, the rising generation lacks the mental energy to truly think and offer a "literature that engages earnestly with real-world problems", beyond the petty problems of privileged individuals in the West which fill autofiction.

The prediction by Postmodernist guru Francis Fukuyama that History was reaching an end, made in 1989, and that capitalist utopia was here to stay, whether we wanted it or not, was proven wrong by 9/11. The terrorist outrage jump-started History and now we see that it could never be over because until the Sun goes supernova, or patriarchy manages to wipe all human beings out, events will succeed each other. History can hardly reach an end, then, and we'll see a succession of more or less apt labels for each forthcoming period. I wonder whether we can say the same for Literature and in particular its most creative or artistic branch.

Like the universe in the Big Bang Theory, which first expanded and is now seemingly contracting towards the ultimate black hole it came from, Literature seems to have started with the bang of the classic period and is now contracting with a whimper. I can see why Gibbons and others are concerned to spot the trends that define the Literature of our times, for we are curious to know which label will win the contest and make us memorable for the future. My impression, nevertheless, is that this is the equivalent of marvelling at the discovery of a new tree species when the whole wood is on fire.

If someone can define a catchy equivalent of the phrase 'wilfully illiterate' then this exactly what describes current culture, at least in the decadent West. As a Catalan I've had to accept the label 'Decadence' for the early modern period of our Literature (more or less overlapping the 'Siglo de Oro' in Spain), no matter how disputed this label is today. And perhaps it is now time to acknowledge that this is what we're facing today in Western Literature. Not perhaps a lack of talent, but an inability to make this talent truly matter socially beyond sales figures. This is what decadence means in culture.

Perhaps the problem with Gibbons' approach and that of many others struggling to find a label for our current Literature is that they're putting the cart before the horse, that is, trying to write the History of today's Literature before it is even happening. One thing is chronicling the present and quite another is understanding the main trends of the past. The Victorian Age did not emerge until it was over and it is possibly not for us but for the future to choose a label for what writers are collectively producing today. If we need the label for academic reasons—a course, a book... —then Contemporary will do. Use that, or call up a competition to ask writers how they want to be known.

And if someone in the future uses the labels 'Narcissist Period' or 'Western Decadence' I'll be happy enough to have contributed a little grain of sand to Literary History.

4 July 2017 / TRYING TO CATCH UP...: A BOOK ON RECENT (SCOTTISH) LITERATURE

I have given myself the task of checking my university library's catalogue and select a variety of volumes for summer reading, in an attempt to catch up with the novelties in the areas I'm interested in. The function of journals used to be exactly that: keeping researchers informed about the latest advances in a given field. This seems to work better for the sciences but my impression is that in the Humanities we no longer read journal issues from beginning to end (if we ever did that). Rather, we read single articles and most likely only those that we cite in our own work, as there is no time to spare for reading around. In my personal case this lack of time also means that my visits to the library have diminished along the years. I feel that am slowly but steadily falling behind in my fields of research, and teaching, despite trying to frantically keep up.

This impression is, perhaps, not well grounded, however as I find that the enormous proliferation of academic writing in recent years has not resulted in deep changes in our methodological paradigm. I worked on my doctoral dissertation between 1993 and 1996, more than twenty years ago, and so I should expect new research to be radically different. I see, nonetheless, essentially the same names and the same bibliography established in the 1990s quoted again and again. I urge my students to not use anything published before 1995, except when it is fully justified, but I see that I'll have to revise that rule for everything that matters today to us regarding theory in Literature and Culture seems to come from the early 1990s. The two most prominent big names of recent times, Zygmunt Bauman (who died in January) and Slavoj Žižek (born 1949), published their breakthrough work also in the 1990s. And I don't see anyone under 40 making a big splash (yet?).

The dominion of 1990s academia over us connects with the prevalence of post-modernism as a label that has overstayed its welcome, an issue I discussed in my previous post. Perhaps the lack of progress in academic research has to do with this collective inability to move beyond labels but what worries me very much, besides this stagnation, is that the very few calls to action lean towards universalism and formalism, the two evils that the 1990s emphasis on identity tried to correct. I have come across much universalism in the dubious application to Literature and Culture of fashionable Affect Theory (see my conference presentation on the body here <http://ddd.uab.cat/record/174232>). And I have just come across a vindication of formalism in Marie-Odile Pittin-Hedon's *The Space of Fiction: Voices from Scotland in a Post-devolution Age* (2015).

Let me stop here, for the issue is complex. Basically, there is widespread agreement that Scottish Literature bore the brunt of keeping the voice of the nation alive while

politics progressed towards Devolution. Scotland used to be a separate kingdom but its devious aristocratic rulers signed a Treaty of Union (1707) with England, which resulted in the dissolution of its Parliament and the loss of its independence. The re-emergence of nationalism in the 20th century led to the ill-fated 1979 referendum for Devolution under Margaret Thatcher, which was lost, and, hence to an intense period of national self-doubt which only ended (relatively speaking) in 1997. A second referendum, this time under the aegis of Tony Blair's Labour Government, resulted in a positive vote and, so, the Scottish Parliament was restored in 1999 (though not independence). In a recent referendum, in 2014, authorized by David Cameron's Tory Government, independence was rejected by 55% of the voters. Another referendum, voted by all Britons in 2016, started Brexit by a narrow margin, 51.89%, and led Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon (SNP) to declare that she would call yet another independence referendum; most Scots voted against Brexit (62%) and in favour of remaining in the European Union. This second referendum is still in the air, as I write.

In her conclusion, Pittin-Hedon quotes Gerry Hassan's words warning that "Analysing trends is not enough, however good the data. Imagining the future is an empowering process that opens up the possibility of action" (186). To do so, Pittin-Hedon argues, we must follow Alex Thomson's "lead" and "look for specific features" that are "stylistic, formal rather than systematically trying to connect" Scottish writing "to the political context" (186). She refers to Thomson's 2007 article "'You can't get there from here': Devolution and Scottish literary history", which I have not read (yet). This is what worries me: the word 'rather', as it implies an either/or situation by which looking into stylistics is incompatible with looking into context.

This is even more puzzling because Pittin-Hedon never leaves context aside in her book; unless, that is, her extensive literary analysis of the works she presents is an attempt to downplay context. How, however, can any literary critic take politics for granted when Scottish academia has widely accepted 'Post-Devolution' as an apt label to discuss contemporary literature? In Catalonia, a nation mirroring Scotland in many ways beginning with the chronology of recent History (the Generalitat was 'devolved' back in 1980) nobody uses the label 'post-autonomic' (the equivalent of 'post-Devolution')—just 'contemporary'. Even though nationalism is of immense importance, Catalan writers and critics are not restricted in this sense as the case seems to be in Scotland. Judging, that is, from Thomson's call to formalist arms... echoed by Pittin-Hedon.

Actually, though, like Pittin-Hedon, I agree with Janice Galloway's complaint that it is about time Scottish authors write 'through' the nation and not 'about' the nation, there is another kind of context that Pittin-Hedon ignores in her book. First, I need to explain that even though this volume has an obvious introductory inclination it is by no means didactic. She discusses the selected writing as if it were already very well known by her reader in the dense academic style typical of most contemporary Literary Studies. Struggling to make sense of her arguments, as I made notes about what I should read to catch up, I suddenly wondered who she was writing for—and why she wasn't mentioning the elephant in the room: our collective fears that the very habit of reading fiction might soon die, for the younger generations are mostly non-readers. It

turns out, and here's a paradox, that this anxiety is central to Scottish fiction. At least, one of the writers that Pittin-Hedon praises, Ewan Morrison, asked the question none of his peers dared ask: "Are books dead, and can authors survive?"

This is the title of a talk Morrison gave back in 2011 at the Edinburgh International Book Festival and that he published in *The Guardian* (<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/aug/22/are-books-dead-ewan-morrison>). His argument is transparent: books will disappear because, "within 25 years the digital revolution will bring about the end of paper books". Also, said revolution "will not emancipate writers or open up a new era of creativity, it will mean that writers offer up their work for next to nothing or for free. Writing, as a profession, will cease to exist". The readers' comments, divided between half-empty glass defenders and half-full glass opponents are marvellous to read... And while it is true that Pittin-Hedon brings her readers' attention to this crucial article, she writes about the selected books with no reference to the issues that Morrison raises. As if Literature were still a central aspect of Scottish society and not an endangered cultural species in the whole Western world.

Introductions and updates are very difficult books to write, since trying to make sense of the present is extremely complicated. At the same time the academic writer undergoing that kind of task has the wonderful chance to shape literary History and even the canon simply by choosing what to include. Interestingly, Pittin-Hedon devotes a chapter to Scottish women writers specializing in crime, and although I miss their sisters in science fiction and I'm not at all fond of gender separatism in literary analysis, this chapter is symptomatic of how genres are merging to challenge canonical visions. I wish, nonetheless, to sound less like a reviewer and more like a reader and so, I'll note, that, somehow, I find the genre of the academic introduction or update stubbornly resistant to... digitalization.

The whole point of volumes of this kind is to put the reader in touch with books s/he might want to read and the middleman or middlewoman's role should be to facilitate the encounter. I really think that this is best done through a hypertext: a website combining actual reviews and interviews with authorial comment that would allow readers to navigate among a constellation of unknown books. I just don't know anymore how to read a few hundred pages of literary analysis about books I have not read. The analysis sounds very clever but it might be all wrong, and even if it is brilliant and spot-on, I will have forgotten it by the time I manage to read the book.

I understand that the most positive feature of introductions, updates (and companions) is that they are, ironically, limited. The Victorian Web, for instance, (<http://www.victorianweb.org/>) does a very good job of presenting this age to interested readers but it is a sprawling text that cannot be read with the same ease as a volume that can be underlined (whether paper or e-book). Perhaps we don't understand well how to use the digital media. This morning I have also been browsing through the impressive collections of Cambridge and Routledge companions that my university subscribes and, well, the volumes are now digital but what this means is that each one is fragmented into the .pdf for each chapter, not that they are hypertexts

with links to other resources. This is a necessary academic revolution, I think, if the didactic value of this type of introductory book is to be enhanced. And made attractive for post-baby boomer generations...

The lessons I'm learning, then, as I try to catch up with recent developments is that academic literary criticism seems anchored in the 1990s, with few recent developments. The proliferation of new writing is asking for a new way of presenting readers with introductions to particular periods that might work much better as online hypertexts than as (paper) books. This revolution is not happening because we, academics, don't know very well how to maximize the use of digital media in our favour. The very media that, if Morrison is right, will kill Literature. Or, at least, deprive writers of a living.

How in the middle of this cultural (and political) turmoil we can make sense of stylistics is, for the time being, beyond me—though, ideally, text and context should be always studied together. If anyone cares for reading at all...

11 July 2017 / RETHINKING THE POSTCOLONIAL: VANDANA SINGH, INDIAN SF WRITER

My colleague Felicity Hand is organizing yet another exciting conference, this time on India. Having learned much about Postcolonialism from previous similar events, I have submitted a proposal (see <http://jornades.uab.cat/aeii2017/en>, also Felicity's research group Ratnakara <http://grupsderecerca.uab.cat/ratnakara/>). I decided to focus my paper on science fiction, a genre with a very rich history in India in several languages. Narrowing down the field to just one name was, though, quite difficult. Fortunately, the recent monographic issue published by *Science Fiction Studies* (#130, or 43.3, November 2016) led me to a simply wonderful writer, and an indispensable name in the genre: Vandana Singh (<http://vandana-writes.com/>).

Singh, born and brought up in Delhi, describes herself as a writer of “speculative fiction, which includes science fiction and fantasy”. She has a PhD in Theoretical Physics and works currently as an Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of Physics and Earth Science at Framingham State University, Massachusetts. Although she started writing both in Hindi and English, her main focus is now the latter language. Singh is known not only for her sf but also for a couple of children's books: *Younguncle Comes to Town* and *Younguncle in the Himalayas*. Her sf consists of short stories and novellas, some of which can be found online (see http://www.freesfonline.de/authors/Vandana_Singh.html). She has published her work in a variety of magazines and anthologies, and has collected some of her earlier stories in a volume, now out of print, *The Woman Who Thought She Was a Planet* (2008). Her second, forthcoming, volume is *Ambiguity Machines and Other Tales* (<http://smallbeerpress.com/not-a-journal/2017/05/17/a-new-collection-from-vandana-singh/>).

Singh is also co-editor with Anil Menon of the anthology *Breaking the Bow: Speculative Fiction Inspired by the Ramayana* (<http://zubaanbooks.com/shop/breaking-the-bow-speculative-fiction-inspired-by-the-ramayana/>). Most Indian sf writers agree that a singularity of the genre they cultivate is how deep it sinks its roots in Indian myth. What readers enjoy in Singh's fiction, as I do, is the excellent combination of her original cultural background with insights provided by her work as a scientist, now focused on climate change.

I chose initially to work on "Somadeva: A Sky River Sutra", one of Singh's most obvious incursions into the mythical. This is what my conference proposal announced to the organizers. I read, however, many other stories by Singh, passing from the most often anthologized "Delhi" (classic Singh...) to the eccentrically romantic "Ruminations in an Alien Tongue", a story about a dying old woman, a black hole and an eternally lost lover. Next I read "Entanglement", the first truly global story I have ever come across. Eventually, a doctoral student explained to me that the title refers to a scientific concept, a point corroborated by the author. The more I read, the more I realized, then, that Vandana Singh cannot be pinned down under a single label, whether this is woman, Indian, speculative writer, or scientist. How, then, should we make sense of her work?

Trying to explain Singh's work to my friend Mariano Martín I told him that she reminds me, above all, of fellow sf short fiction writer Ted Chiang (the recent film *The Arrival* adapts—poorly—one of his brilliant stories). I explained how academic analysis of Singh centres on her status as a postcolonial writer and Mariano complained that this is reductive... as absurd as studying Chiang as an Asian American writer, when everyone knows that he is, above all, the new Borges. Disappointingly, as I told Mariano, MLA offers only 6 entries on Chiang, half of which refer to his ethnic background. None mentions Borges.

As happens, Chang and Singh met at the Asian American Writers' Workshop (perhaps more than once?) and she interviewed him in 2012 (<http://aaww.org/the-occasional-writer-an-interview-with-science-fiction-author-ted-chiang/>). It comes as no surprise, in view of her own work, that she praises Chiang's tales: "I love how so many of them posit and approach fantastical made-worlds in a wholly scientific way". Pleased that she asks proper questions on science, he stresses how "the sense of wonder that science fiction offers is closely related to the feeling of awe that science itself offers". Inevitably, racial issues come up... "Does your being Asian American inform your stories in any way?", Singh asks. Chiang answers: "Race inevitably plays a role in my life, but to date it's not a topic I've wanted to explore in fiction" because "the events of my own life are too dull to be the basis for fiction". A bit annoyed, Chiang complains that "People have looked for a racial subtext in my work in a way I don't think they would have if my family name were Davis or Miller".

Academics, nonetheless, insist on using what Chiang defines as "extratextual information" to read fiction produced by non-white writers, while ignoring the whiteness of white writers (excuse the tongue-twister). At least, I have never come across an analysis of, say, Jonathan Franzen, emphasizing his race or his ethnic Swedish

background. Either we stop asking Singh and Chiang about their background or, perhaps more to the point, we start asking the white writers about theirs. Jackie Kay once warned that she would accept seeing herself described as black, lesbian, Scottish, only when Martin Amis started being presented as white, heterosexual, English.... At the same time, the labels used to name non-white writers are absurdly loose: why should 'Asian' be a common label for writers from backgrounds as diverse as China and India? Nobody would label, for instance, a Portuguese and a Rumanian writer as 'European', so why use 'Asian', or 'African', in this comprehensive way?

Vandana Singh's work has already attracted some quality academic work. I'll refer here to two examples, before I turn to another interview, this time with Singh herself. The two examples highlight the problem I am dealing with: how are we supposed to read non-white authors in a context in which the category 'white' is both normative and non-existent?

On the one hand, Suparno Banerjee (Texas State University) claims in "An Alien Nation: Postcoloniality and the Alienated Subject in Vandana Singh's Science Fiction" (*Extrapolation*, 53.3 (2012): 283-306) that one of the major topics of recent Indian sf is "the specter of an alienated postcolonial subject caught in the flux of historical eddies" (283). This is precisely, he argues, the kind of estranged character that Vandana Singh explores, calling attention "to the different types and levels of alienation that haunt the people who negotiate their surroundings and identities in this new world order" (283). Reading "Delhi", "Infinites", "The Tetrahedron" and the novellas *Distances* and *Of Love and Other Monsters* Banerjee argues that Singh "is a writer of the new postcolonial alienation: a form of alienation emerging out of the colonial discourse, yet different from it" (285). He grants that Singh's style allows her "to speculate about different scientific and philosophical notions" but firmly insists that "alienation in the postcolonial subject becomes her most important concern" (286).

Banerjee's Indian surname lends to his article an authority as a cultural insider that I cannot have as, well, an alien—a foreign Spanish/Catalan reader. Yet, I feel oppressed and constrained by his interpretation, mostly because he subordinates the essential scientific reading of Singh's fiction to the ethnic, nationalist reading. Having recently edited a monographic issue for *Science Fiction Studies* on Spanish sf I believe that no Spanish writer would appreciate being defined by his or her belonging to a (white) postimperial nation: they would rather have academics discuss the specific themes of their writing. Singh does write about India but as we can see in her eagerness to ask Chiang, she is primarily concerned about how to turn science into narrative poetics, a point to which I will return.

The *SFS* issue on Indian sf offers an alternative to the exclusive postcolonial reading, offered by Eric D. Smith (University of Alabama in Huntsville), a white specialist in Postcolonial Studies. Yes, 'white' needs to be mentioned. In his article "Universal Love and Planetary Ontology in Vandana Singh's *Of Love and Other Monsters*" (514-533), Smith proposes that we rise above "the limits of certain postcolonial theorizations in the postmillennial present". More explicitly, by reading Singh's novella through the critique of love proposed by French philosopher Alain Badiou, Smith argues "the

insufficiency of postcolonial theory for capturing the event of postcolonial sf and the latter's potential for the production of planetary being" (514). He cites Banerjee (the very words I have quoted) to oppose him and show that beyond the postcolonial, Singh's fiction "insists on themes of infinity, interdimensionality, and, indeed, universality, frequently underpinned by a referential framework of theoretical mathematics (...)" (514). Half-way through his article, however, I found myself resisting Smith's reading fiercely: who is this white guy to force Singh's stories into the philosophical mould set by two other white guys, Alain Badiou, and, guess who?, Slavoj Žižek? How does this approach serve Singh better than Banerjee's?

In the same issue, Malisa Kurtz (PhD from Brock University)—who looks Asian American as the category goes...—interviews Singh. She prioritizes in her questions the author's "fascination with scientific speculation" (534) and with "the provisionality of scientific knowledge" (536); also the issue of whether her sf is 'hard' (it is, though not gadget-oriented). Kurtz gets Singh to explain how her sf connects with the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* epics, and also to disclose her relief at discovering Bengali writer Premendra Mitra (read in English) for "I didn't want sf written by people from the West to be the only standard with which to compare and contrast my stories" (537).

Yet, Kurtz also gets from Singh the story of how US white female sf writers (above all Ursula Le Guin) saved her from alienation as a newly migrated PhD student. "What she showed me", Singh enthuses, "was an array of alternate worlds, futures, histories, in which people like me existed" (537). Instead of the "white-male technofetishist(s)" Anglo-American sf authors she read as a teen, "Le Guin's works restored sf to me, made it welcoming in a way I hadn't experienced before" (537). Another source of enthusiasm, of course, is how Singh "cannot separate the aesthetic impulse that drives me to create worlds from the pleasure I get doing physics" (538). Her current work, "on the pedagogy of climate science"(538) is, thus, a direct inspiration for "Entanglement".

The racial question pops up, again: how does Singh feel about the label 'postcolonial science fiction'? Singh lets "the scholars worry about definitions", noting that 'postcolonial' "has its uses" if it helps to dismantle what she calls "paradigm blindness", that is to say, the "blinkers" imposed by the colonizers. But, and this is a very important 'but', "an implication of the term 'postcolonial' is that the unit of measure, the standard, is still the colonizer. That can be limiting. So while I acknowledge the importance of the term, I also want to transcend it, to go off and play in the much larger universe we inhabit" (543). In this sense, sf offers the "experience of playfully trying to decolonize my mind—shaking free of hitherto unexamined paradigms, trying to look at new vistas through new eyes" (544).

The question, ultimately, and the challenge, is whether Literary and Cultural Studies are ready to 'transcend' Postcolonialism and take as 'the unit of measure' something else. Not the white, male, European philosophical discourse that Smith summons from the past under the guise of modernity but, hopefully, a wholly new discourse that looks "at new vistas through new eyes" in a "much larger universe". Transnationalism and cosmopolitanism have been often invoked as alternatives. Singh's sf suggests,

however, that just as her characters move across the many dimensions of the multiverse while being both deeply rooted in their places *and* alienated from them, we need to see how humanity functions in all backgrounds, including whiteness. Otherwise, we just contribute to prolonging normative racist ethnocentricity, forcing non-white writers to be spokespersons for just one segment of the human species, instead, as they are, of the whole species.

8 August 2017 / KINGS OF DANCE, MEN IN BALLET: FROM LOUIS XIV TO SERGEI POLUNIN

Many complain that the most neglected area in our cultural education is music. I disagree: I believe it is dance, and ballet in particular. The current syllabus for secondary education in Catalonia includes a course called 'History of music and dance' (see

http://xtec.gencat.cat/web/.content/alfresco/d/d/workspace/SpacesStore/0084/cc151bd5-caee-4c3d-8e35-a7053619c91e/historia_musica_dansa.pdf), which seems an improvement in relation to the total absence of these two arts from the secondary school curriculum back in the 1980s. Of course, one may learn about any field of interest outside formal school education: after all, cinema does not even have its own BA degree in Film Studies in Spain but this has been no obstacle for many Spaniards to become committed, self-taught cinephiles.

With dance, however, matters are far more difficult as, apart from the general public indifference to this art, there is actually very little accessible introductory material, both print and audio-visual. This surprises me very much in view of the proliferation of ballet schools for middle-class children. At any rate, I have been unable to find a good audio-visual introduction on YouTube, a basic history of ballet, beyond brief amateur presentations or boring professional TED lecturing. Likewise, there seem to be very few books addressed to beginners in the field, beyond Susan Au's *Ballet and Modern Dance*, as ballet books are primarily about the practice, and not the history of dancing. Actually, most children introduced to this art (and their parents) have no idea about who the current main stars are—much less about why they must practice particular dance steps, or that truly strange staple of ballet, Pointe work.

The volume I am currently reading, the *Cambridge Companion to Ballet*, demands a certain stamina from readers and, like any other book on this topic, it is limited by the lack of moving images, without which ballet terminology may be quite daunting. Searching, then, for an illustration of the issues covered in the first part of the *Companion*, specially baroque dance, I came across the BBC documentary *The King Who Invented Ballet: Louis XIV and the Noble Art of Dance* (2015). This turned out to be a beautiful film presented by Birmingham Royal Ballet's artistic director David Bentley, with a wonderful surprise: whereas the first hour is devoted to exploring what ballet meant for the Sun King, the last 35 minutes offer Bentley's own ballet *The King Dances*. Without forgetting that English culture has also produced rowdy Magaluf

tourists, I marvel at its public television. I just don't see Spanish or Catalan TV walking down the ballet road and, thus, remain wonderfully ignorant of the local situation.

Let me pass on what I have been learning these days. Ballet is a ritualized dance form originating in 15th century Italian courts which reached France thanks to Catherine de' Medici. All European courtiers were expected to master ballet as a social skill applied to controlling body language but also to offering spectacular displays of power. Louis XIV, a keen dancer since childhood, made the best of this aspect of ballet, as the BBC documentary explains, to solve a major political crisis which threatened to dethrone him when he was still a teen king under the regency of his mother and of Cardinal Mazarino (or Mazarin). The twelve-hour *Le Ballet de la Nuit* in which young Louis dazzled his subjects by playing the dancing Sun King, gave the monarch not only a lasting nickname but also the authority he craved for. Hard as it is to imagine any contemporary crowned individual dancing in public—beyond perhaps waltzing in gala dinners—the fact is that Louis did so for decades, and to great acclaim. He eventually founded the first ballet academy in the world in 1661, the Académie Royale de Danse.

Formally a celebration of Louis XIV's major contribution to ballet, the BBC documentary—or, rather, choreographer David Bentley—also has a gendered agenda: vindicating the role of men in ballet. My own interest in this field is being fuelled by the paradoxical position as public women of 19th century ballerinas, owners of the only female bodies on display which deserved artistic respect and even stardom (hence, power). All scholars agree that ballet has been dominated by women since the Romantic period but Bentley's approach is part of a currently ongoing reflection on the role that male dancers may play in art form today much conditioned by rampant homophobia.

You may see the problem summarized in the 35 minutes of *The King Dances*: although he had devised the piece for an all-male cast, Bentley reluctantly decided to cast a ballerina as the ethereal Moon spirit; her appearance on stage reduces the principal male dancer playing the King to becoming a supporting prop, what men mostly are in classical ballet. This is frustrating, as throughout the rest of the piece he interacts wonderfully with the rest of the male cast in original, creative dance moves. The controversial suggestion then is that, if male dancers could free themselves from the burden of the ballerina (a figure unknown in Louis XIV's reign) then they could take centre stage again. And dance as men—as the Sun King did.

Bentley's film connects with another excellent documentary which I have mentioned just in passing here: Steve Cantor's *Dancer* (2016). The film focuses on Sergei Polunin, a young, brilliant ballet dancer whom you may have seen in a viral YouTube video, directed by David LaChapelle. There, Polunin offers an amazing display of formidable dancing accompanied by Hozier's catchy song "Take me to Church" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c-tW0CkvdDI>). As it turns out, Polunin intended this video to be his goodbye to ballet but, paradoxically, its success made him reconsider his decision. This is what Cantor's film documents: the cost of being a ballet star in a world in which ballet's demands may no longer make sense, much less to a young man.

As dancing male bodies on display, Louis XIV and Sergei Polunin occupy diametrically opposed positions: one is the King of the most powerful nation of his time using ballet to flaunt his political power; the other is a poor boy from Ukraine whose working-class family collapses under the burden of lifting him onto stardom. And here lies the problem in Polunin's case: for Louis XIV, ballet is an extension of his absolutism, inherited by divine right; for Polunin, ballet is not a personal choice, but a road onto which he is placed by teachers and family because of his body's uncanny capacities and abilities. In my Marxist reading, Louis XIV puts the foundations of an elite taste for ballet which allows Polunin to leave poverty behind in 21st century post-Communist Ukraine at a very high personal cost. This includes his radical de-classing, his permanent exile from his home town, the divorce of his parents and even his own estrangement from the whole family. Polunin wonders, as the film does, whether the sacrifice is worth it. The dancer's many tattoos and his athletic style (see the video) also hint what he later vocalizes: ballet is a world in need of updating, particularly for male dancers. Bentley's own message...

And, then, there's homophobia. In an encounter with the audience at the Toronto Film Festival, after a screening of *Dancer*, a shy man asks Polunin (himself quite shy despite his undeserved 'bad boy' reputation) how homophobia can be combated and, thus, more young boys introduced to ballet. In Polunin's Ukraine boys were given, as he was, a choice between gymnastics and ballet and perhaps because of this he seems puzzled, also a bit uncomfortable. "I do a man's job", he quips and this is it. Both Louis XIV and Sergei Polunin, beginning and present, embody what ballet is at risk of losing: heterosexual masculinity. It seemed that after the phenomenally successful *Billy Elliot* (2000), the problem would have been solved. Yet, it has not. This does not mean that gay male dancers are acknowledged and respected, either. The Bolshoi's recent decision (June 2017) to cancel the world premiere of a ballet based on top Russian ballet star Rudolf Nureyev (1938-93) has dismayed many. Although the Bolshoi authorities have invoked technical problems to justify their decision, Russian legislation against promoting homosexuality in any way is most likely their main consideration. For, of course, Nureyev was gay and died of AIDS-related complications.

Ironically, then, although ballet was formally codified to display men's power it eventually became an art focused on the iconic femininity of the ballerina. I don't intend to discuss here this femininity, nor how it fits the current cult of the unnaturally thin woman. What anyone knows is that ballet schools are full of girls because most parents believe that ballet gives even the less gifted girl tools to carry her body gracefully, still, believe it or not, a much appreciated social skill. But what about little boys? Whenever I attend a ballet school's performance, as I do yearly, and see just one or two boys surrounded by twenty or more girls, I wonder who they are, what is motivating them and what obstacles they're facing, whether they're gay or straight. Louis XIV would not understand this situation at all.

By the way, Polunin was discovered thanks to the Ukrainian public school system, of which ballet was part. This is hard to imagine in my local context. I'll leave for some

other day why the supposedly cultured, cosmopolitan city of Barcelona offers so little ballet and at such prohibitive prizes. This, I believe, King Louis XIV would understand.

22 August 2017 / INDOCTRINATING YOUNG MEN: IN SEARCH OF IDEALS

I'm writing this post in the aftermath of the terrible Barcelona attack on 17 August, in which 13 persons were killed by a young man driving a van into the crowded Rambles, leaving 180 others injured. The van driver, 22-year-old Younes Abouyaaqoub, is still at large. Later, in the early hours of 18 August, the Catalan police shot dead a group of five young men who were carrying out yet another terrorist attack in Cambrils, about 90 kms south of Barcelona. There seems to be a connection between these crimes and the blast which destroyed a house in Alcanar, where three men died, apparently members of the same terrorist cell. All reports agree today that the terrorists intended to blow up a lorry loaded with dozens of butane canisters, either in Rambles or near Sagrada Familia, killing hundreds.

The Mossos d'Esquadra (the Catalan police) suspect that one of shattered bodies in Alcanar belongs to Abdelkabi Es Satty, the imam of Ripoll's mosque and allegedly the mastermind behind the attacks. As it has happened in England, France, Belgium, Germany and other countries under attack by radicalized Islamic terrorists born and bred in their midst, everyone is wondering today in Spain how a group of apparently well-integrated, well-behaved young men have been so quickly transformed into inhuman fiends. Es Satty, apparently also connected with the 11 March 2004 bombings in Atocha and other Madrid train stations which left 192 dead, is blamed for the brainwashing of the boys by families desperate to shift their horror of what their children have done onto somebody else's shoulders. An article by Lluís Urría in *La Vanguardia* today, titled "One of Us" concludes that, like their peers in other European nations, the Ripoll boys were vulnerable to predators like Es Satty because migrant integration is failing. Whether following the British multicultural approach or the French denial of difference, we don't know how to make second generation migrants feel integrated. Instead, we place them in ghettos where jihad seems an appealing way out. Into death and destruction.

These seem to be incomplete arguments. To begin with, let's consider the terrorism that we used to suffer in Spain, caused by the Basque separatist band E.T.A. This was not at all the product of disaffected young men in migrant neighbourhoods of, say, Madrid and Barcelona. It was, rather, the product of nationalist indoctrination of the worst kind, apparently connected at some points with the Catholic church in the Basque Country. Yet, I don't recall this kind of sociological analysis applied to the case, at least not on the media. The point I am making is that the pattern is much wider than the current case: whether this is the KKK, the IRA, ETA or Daesh, each successive terrorism thrives by offering new members a potent ideal through indoctrination. Much more potent than the ideal taught in schools and families, as the case of the Ripoll terrorist cell shows. If these young men could be brought to the side of horror in

just two months, then we need to consider not really the efficiency of their brainwasher but the fragility of the boys' education and values.

Although there are also young women who have made the decision to join ISIS, like German teen Linda Wenzel who was on the news after her capture about a month ago, patriarchal terrorism finds its breeding ground among young men. Indeed, one of the main, nastiest surprises in the Barcelona and Cambrils attacks is that they were caused by very young men, aged 17-24. This is possibly good news, though tragic, as it shows that ISIS needs to appeal to increasingly younger boys, even mere children, to capture adepts. Boys as young as 8 are being recruited in the war zones of Syria and Iraq to be suicide bombers (girls, too, but they are selected to be mainly sex slaves, as corresponds to the patriarchal mindset of Daesh). It is very, very easy to launch here a feminist attack against the readiness of boys and young men to engage in violence—another man in his twenties, a Chechnian migrant in France, was on the news a few days ago for brutally kicking an Italian young man to death in a crowded Lloret disco. This is not my point. My point is, rather, that if young men are so vulnerable to patriarchal brainwashing this is because the alternative is not working. That is to say, they lack an alternative masculinity strong enough to say 'no' to patriarchal violence. And to report monsters like Es Satty to the police. In a parallel, ideal world, Abouyaaqoub and his friends would be hailed as heroes today for helping to avoid a catastrophe, not abhorred as brutes for causing one.

There are two strategies before this situation. One is offering texts that represent in all its crudity the horrendous nature of the evil that seems so attractive from the outside. One example of this trend is the mini-series currently being broadcast by Channel 4, *The State* (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt6068620/>). Written and directed by Peter Kosminsky, the four-part story traces the misadventures of young British Muslims travelling to Syria to join the Islamic State. The review by Mark Lawson in *The Guardian* wonders, however, in its very title whether “this show about British jihadis” can “avoid justifying extremism”. The series, released on the Sunday after the Barcelona attacks, “brings an extra shiver”, Lawson writes, as it was shot in Spain. Lawson concludes that watching *The State* would make it less likely for British teenagers to be recruited, yet he does not mention that teenagers are not today an easy target for TV programmers. Lawson's review downplays the PR that Daesh is carrying out precisely on the sites which teens do access on the net and that the adults around them mostly ignore. For there are all kinds of manipulative youtubers, all indoctrinating young persons in one way or another.

The other alternative, in which fiction may also participate but which is everybody's responsibility, consists of building positive, rewarding images for young Muslim men to embrace. I know: a tall order. If you google the word 'indoctrination' you will see that most results refer not to Islam but to feminism, as there is widespread fear that men are being moulded in the West through education in the ideology of liberal feminism and thus deprived of their masculinity. I have been explaining for years that to begin with this is not true and, anyway, it is the wrong approach: both men and women should be taught to resist patriarchy and work to reinforce equal-rights citizenship. What strikes me this summer—as I read anti-feminist books written by men, such as

the late Horacio Vázquez-Rial's *Hombres solos: Ser varón en el s. XXI* (2004), and also anti-patriarchal books like Miguel Llorente's *Los nuevos hombres nuevos: Los miedos de siempre en tiempos de igualdad* (2009)— is how badly we need positive role models for men. Rial's lashing out against radical feminism and Llorente's disgust at publicly sanctioned sexism (what he calls 'postmachismo') reveal a similar inability to tell us what a man should be like in our times. Men are defined by both authors for what they are not: Rial complains that not all men are rapists as Susan Brownmiller and company sentenced; Llorente criticizes men for abusing women and not being good fathers. Yet, neither can truly explain what a man should be like. A good man.

I have been arguing for more than two decades that we need a new code of chivalry, new forms of gentlemanliness and heroism. I'm not naively returning to the 19th century from which horrors like the knights of the KKK emerged but proposing, very seriously, that men codify formally new codes of conduct that can be appealed to. "You're no gentleman" used to be a very potent insult, but this has been replaced with "You're a bastard", which is no use. The insult should hurt the man's pride, not confirm a deviousness he may have embraced willingly. The same applies to women. I don't know if telling young wannabe terrorists "you're not a good Muslim" is any use but as long as Daesh determines who is a good Muslim we are not making headway. Likewise, President Trump missed recently the chance to tell white supremacists "You're not good Americans" by blaming "all sides" for the hatred unleashed by these racists. Indeed, he is basing his chaotic Presidency on praising the wrong people and for the wrong reasons.

I ramble but in the end the argument is easy to understand: Daesh/ISIS has managed to build an image of what a Muslim man should be like which is spreading like burning oil all over Europe among the young men of immigrant origins because it is finding no positive alternative. So, let's offer one through education at home and at school, without forgetting mosques if it has to be that way and, above all, the internet. An image and a model that can convince other young men like Younes Abouyaaqoub that the heroic thing to do is to resist all forms of barbaric indoctrination, rather than kill innocents. This must be a joint effort, no doubt, by the Islamic communities in the world but also by anyone who opposes terror.

And, please men, give us positive images for the new times, we need them. And so do you.

29 August 2017 / A FAST AGEING CULTURE: (NEW) PROBLEMS IN THE STUDY OF POPULAR FICTIONS

This summer I am giving myself a crash course in ballet because I don't think there is a bigger pleasure than discovering a whole exciting field one knows nothing about. Two posts ago, I already commented on the lack of sufficient introductory texts and the role of men as 'male ballerinas' (this is a tag used on the internet). Yesterday, I watched on YouTube the Paris Opera Ballet, dancing Pierre Lacotte's reconstruction of

Filippo Taglioni's *La Sylphide* (1832), which is the first Romantic ballet (or classic, as we call it today). It is also the ballet that placed the ballerina centre-stage for good, thanks to the marvellous talent of Marie Taglioni, Filippo's daughter. I was enjoying enormously Aurore Dupont and Mathieu Gaiño's performance and I thought to myself, 'this is really weird—why has this specific branch of theatrical performance survived for 180 years already?' And 'will it survive 180 years more?' What am I doing watching this and not, like everyone else, *Game of Thrones*? How can contemporary culture accommodate both *La Sylphide* and Daenerys Targaryen?

This is a very clumsy way to reach the issue I want to raise today: the increasing difficulties to understand what truly matters, culturally speaking. If anything matters at all. I've been writing yet another text defending the importance of studying popular fictions using the same level of commitment we apply to the artistically ambitious, and I realize that a new problem is emerging.

In a context in which the Humanities are always struggling to survive it seems safer to rely on the classics and on the study of any cultural manifestation that seems most likely to endure the test of time. I realize that those of us in Cultural Studies have complicated matters very much by demanding that the present is studied with the same interest as the past, for I firmly believe that there is no sense in not teaching students and not researching our own living experience. Having said that, and seeing this summer each new chapter of *Game of Thrones*, season seven, summarised and discussed on the front pages of many international newspapers, I have started wondering what exactly is going on. Mainly in terms of the hunger for texts universally shared, beyond the classics. Also in terms of what we do, both in traditional Literary Studies and in Cultural Studies to help texts survive beyond the time when they were created.

For convenience's sake, I'll argue that Cultural Studies started having a considerable impact on how we study contemporary culture, without a capital C, around 1990. I know we can go back earlier, even to 1950s pioneers like Raymond Williams but the point I am making is that for, roughly, the last 25 years Cultural Studies has grown to be a fully established discipline (at least in Anglo-American universities). Let's suppose that in a perfect world nobody insists any more that studying Virginia Woolf is relevant but studying J.K. Rowling is not (remember, please, that according to Ian McEwan Woolf was a novelty in the 1970s English university context from which he graduated). Now, consider whether academic analysis of a popular text actually contributes to its survival for the subsequent generations. My answer is no: right now, nothing guarantees the survival of any text, whether classical or popular, much less academia. This is because of our extremely short-range cultural memory.

The case study I have in mind is the TV series *Buffy, Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003). You may not know about this but Joss Whedon's series is, arguably, the most popular text among academics devoted to the study of popular fictions. There is a thriving field of Buffy Studies (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buffy_studies), a label that, while informal, is well-known. The journal *Slayage* of The Whedon Studies Association was launched in 2001 (<http://www.whedonstudies.tv/slayage-the-journal-of-whedon->

[studies.html](#)) by academics David Lavery and Rhonda V. Wilcox. They were also editors of the first collective volume on Whedon's series, *Fighting the Forces: What's at Stake in Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (2002), though the first academic articles appeared back in 1998. An MLA search throws 301 entries for *Buffy*, including MA and PhD dissertations, peaking in 2013 with 38 entries (34 for 2004, right after the series finished). A recent book by Patricia Pender is titled *I'm Buffy and You're History: Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Contemporary Feminism* (2016). It's final chapter is "'Where Do We Go From Here?': Trajectories in Buffy Studies".

Whedon, of course, reacted positively to this attention, back in 2003: "I think it's always important for academics to study popular culture, even if the thing they are studying is idiotic. If it's successful or made a dent in culture, then it is worthy of study to find out why. *Buffy*, on the other hand is, I hope, not idiotic. We think very carefully about what we're trying to say emotionally, politically, and even philosophically while we're writing it"

(<https://web.archive.org/web/20160305034153/http://www.nytimes.com/2003/05/16/readersopinions/16WHED.html?ex=1198213200&en=292c3c27d77f61ac&ei=5070>).

The problem, however, is that *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is already, excuse me, a fossilized text. By this I mean that it is already a text older than our undergrad students.

What those of us in Cultural Studies are discovering is that there is a huge difference between studying a 'living' text—being issued/broadcast as we study it or very recently—and a text you need to introduce, whether this is *Great Expectations* or *The X-Files*. You may be raising an eyebrow now, as there has been a recent mini-series of *The X-Files* but I believe this has only proved the inability of Chris Carter's text to remain 'alive'. In short, after more than 25 years of Cultural Studies what we are learning is that very often popular texts have a shorter life span than the academic interest they may raise. *La Sylphide* is alive—and please, remember this was conceived as commercial entertainment—but who knows whether *Game of Thrones* will be remembered in 2027?

Does this mean that a) Cultural Studies has failed in its mission? and b) that the only way to save its project is by teaching/researching 'living' texts? No, this is not part of my argument. Even using the traditional methodology of conservative Literary Studies, which prefers its authors and not only its texts dead (or 'fossilized'), we face the same problem: twenty years is part of living memory for most academics currently employed all over the world, but it is a whole new generation as regards the students sitting in our classroom. We sound old-fashioned, quaint and uncool whether we teach Rushdie's *Midnight Children* (1981) or *The Matrix Trilogy* (1999-2003), and whether we use Literary or Cultural Studies. For it is all about fossil texts.

All of us interested in contemporary culture are, like surfers, trying to catch waves to sit "on top of the world" as The Beach Boys used to sing, hoping that the texts we favour have survival value. Often, when I write about a specific topic I wonder whether my choice is already condemning my work to not even make the tiniest splash. This has always been a major critique of Cultural Studies: that we are not academics but a sort

of cultural journalist working on ephemeral texts and producing short-lived analysis of the latest hip text. The joke, of course, is that academic work on any canonical author is beset by the same problem: nobody cites work published before 1990, whether this is on George Eliot or on Tarzan of the Apes (if, that is, anyone published on Burroughs before 1990).

So, in the end, the difference between high and popular culture within academia is no longer down to the binary trivial/serious, as we used to be told (or believe), but short-lived/long-lived, and at all levels. The trend is actually being reversed, if you know what I mean: living authors and 'living' texts are cooler to write about than dead or 'fossilized' ones. I very much wanted to write my doctoral dissertation about J.G. Ballard back in the mid-1990s, when he was a hot academic property still to be explored and very much alive. Would I recommended today a student to choose Ballard, who died in 2009, for his/her PhD? You tell me... Likewise, the monographic course on *Harry Potter* that I taught three years ago made perfect sense in 2013-14 when the original readers were sitting in my classroom. Now it is beginning to sound stale, which is why I'm already planning an elective on *Game of Thrones*, if Martin ever finishes his saga, *A Song of Ice and Fire*.

So, to sum up my argument, the revolution that Cultural Studies started back in 1990 by inviting academics to study living authors and all kinds of texts beyond the strictly artistic, did not take into account ageing. Both the ageing of academics with cultural memories stretching beyond several generations of students, and the ageing of the contemporary texts of any kind, which is much faster than it used to be 100 years ago. This means that all of us working on the contemporary face an impossible situation: we need to keep up with the latest developments in the field that we have chosen to study as the bottom of shared memory drops. Students, besides, have on the whole little interest in texts produced before their year of birth. I can hear the conservative academics who never tried to catch the 1990s 'new wave' smugly reply to my post: 'I told you so, stick to the fossils'. But, then, if *Buffy, the Vampire Slayer* is now becoming fossilized or already a fossil, just imagine what Walter Scott, who died in 1832, the year *La Sylphide* was first performed, sounds like.

I'm not watching *Game of Thrones* because, although interested, I'm not passionate about it. Also, because, after the fiasco of *Lost*, I'd rather wait for stories to be over before I see or read them. I really would like to teach an elective and I hope that Martin is done soon, but if he finishes, say, in 2025, which might well be, the TV series might be ancient history by then... A strange situation.

As for how contemporary culture can also accommodate *La Sylphide*, perhaps the best I can do is argue that in this ugly 21st century only classical ballet (and perhaps photography) insists on providing some beauty. Enjoy!!

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