

# **THE JOYS OF TEACHING LITERATURE**

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**PLEASE, NOTE:**

These are the posts published in my academic blog *The Joys of Teaching Literature* ([blogs.uab.cat/saramartinalegre/](http://blogs.uab.cat/saramartinalegre/), since September 2010-) between September 2017 and August 2018. The six previous volumes are also available from <http://ddd.uab.cat/record/116328>.

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## 5 September 2017 / JEDIS AND TEMPLARS: TRYING TO UNDERSTAND OBI-WAN KENOBI

I am using this first post of the new academic year to process ideas I'm considering for my plenary talk on Obi-Wan Kenobi, to be given at the conference on 'Star Wars and Ideology' (April 2018, Universidad Complutense in Madrid, <http://eventos.ucm.es/10096/detail/congreso-internacional-star-wars-e-ideologia.html>). I asked specifically to focus on Kenobi because there is one image in Lucas's saga that still bothers me after many years: that of the burnt, mutilated body of Anakin Skywalker, fallen at the feet of Obi-Wan on planet Mustafar's volcanic landscape.

This is how the relationship between master and padawan ends: with Kenobi using sickening violence to smash the body of his former pupil. Inexplicably, despite the appalling way in which Obi-Wan punishes Anakin for his first crimes as Darth Vader, the Jedi Master still remains a favourite with many *Star Wars* fans. True, Skywalker/Vader's crimes include the near murder of his pregnant wife Amidala and the extermination of all the children apprenticed to the Jedi Temple. Kenobi is himself the only survivor of Order 66, evil Palpatine's decree to annihilate all the Jedis and, besides, Anakin is trying to kill him. Even so, when Obi-Wan coolly uses his lightsaber to cut off both of Anakin's legs and his remaining arm (the other was lost to Count Dooku), and when he abandons his former apprentice to be burnt to death by lava, he is not acting as a Jedi, whether knight or master. He is acting in anger, fury and resentment, exactly the emotions that the Jedi code tries to suppress because they lead to the dark side.

Palpatine, or Darth Sidious if you wish, rescues the disfigured, half-dead Vader to imprison him in the iconic cyborg black suit. Meanwhile, Kenobi sees Amidala die in childbirth and organizes the adoption of her newly born twins, Luke and Leia. He hides for nineteen years on planet Tatooine, keeping an eye on the boy, fostered by farmers Owen and Beru Lars (Leia is left in the aristocratic hands of Bail Organa, a member of Alderaan's royal family). Apparently a new film, scheduled for 2019 and still to be written, will narrate Obi-Wan's Tatooine exile, which he starts looking like Ewan McGregor and from which he emerges looking like Alec Guinness.

I'm convinced that Guinness' English avuncular looks in the 1977 film, *Episode IV: A New Hope*, and McGregor's Scottish good looks in Episodes I-III have played a major role in convincing audiences that Kenobi is a good man always acting right, no matter the circumstances. We first met him as teen Luke's new mentor: a clever, serene old man, at all times one step ahead of the malevolent Empire thanks to his proficient use of the Force. Who could have thought back in 1977 that when he meets Darth Vader to let himself be killed by him in strange circumstances both were sharing the memory of the Mustafar horror? Well, nobody, not even George Lucas, who must have came up with that grisly moment only about 2000. By the time Kenobi wins the awful combat with Anakin in *Revenge of the Sith* (2005), at the end of the trilogy, McGregor has convinced us that Obi-Wan has been an extremely patient father-figure for the unruly, testy, irritating Anakin. And let's be clear about this: because we find McGregor not only handsome but also a very good actor, we even cheer when dreadfully bad actor Hayden Christensen (playing Anakin) starts losing his limbs, lopped off by Obi-Wan's blue laser saber. It's just a case of the villain getting his comeuppance from the hero.

Yet, it is not at all. Anakin's fall is the result of a serious flaw in the Jedi code: the rule preventing knights from having personal attachments. This is the point at which I need to explain the role of the Knights Templar in *Star Wars*.

As you know, the Knights Templar were a medieval religious military order. They were founded by Hugues de Payens (1070-1136), a French minor aristocrat who convinced the Christian king of Jerusalem, Baldwin II, to let him form with eight more men a guard devoted to protecting pilgrims. This happened in the aftermath of the First Crusade (1095-99); the Order of Solomon's Temple was established in 1119. From its humble beginnings, the brotherhood of the Knights Templar blossomed into a rich emporium with houses all over Europe and the Middle East, specializing in international banking (they invented the equivalent of modern travellers' cheques). The order grew so powerful that by 1312 Pope Clement V and King Philippe IV decided to disband it, killing most of its members. Their arrest was decreed for a fated Friday 13, apparently the origin of our superstitions about that date. Remember Palpatine's Order 66?

Proof that George Lucas knows about the Knights Templar is very easy to find: he proposed the story on which the screenplay for Steven Spielberg's *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (1989) is based. All kinds of legends are attached to the Knights Templar, who spent their initial years in Jerusalem apparently digging the remains of Solomon's Temple for treasure and who found, among other objects, the Ark of Alliance and the Holy Grail, both chased by Indiana Jones.

Anyone minimally interested in the charismatic Templars knows that Hugo de Payens introduced a singular innovation in medieval warfare by merging the monk and the warrior in a single figure. Lucas, who initially thought of calling his own monkish soldiers Jedi Templars must have been also aware of their code, developed by Payens together with his relative and founder of the Benedictine Order, Bernard de Clairvaux (1090-

1153). The text of this code, called the *Latin Rule* (1128) defines in 72 articles how Knights Templar should behave down to the last detail.

Here are the articles that apply to *Star Wars* and that make it impossible for Obi-Wan Kenobi to successfully guide Anakin Skywalker. Article 14 states that, although children were often accepted as novices in monasteries, they should not enter the order. The code advises parents to raise their sons until they can “bear arms with vigour” and warns that “it is much better” for a candidate “if he does not take the vow when he is a child, but when he is older, and it is better if he does not regret it than if he regrets it”. In contrast, the Jedi train children from a very early age: Qui-Gon Jinn takes Anakin when he is only nine. Let’s add to this glaring mistake the fact that Qui-Gon frees the child from slavery, but not his mother Shmi, forcing the poor boy to abandon her to her sad fate for ever.

Why for ever? Because, allow me to speculate about this, Lucas also borrowed from the *Latin Rule* article 71, which forbids brother knights from kissing, embracing and even looking at women “be it widow, young girl, mother, sister, aunt or any other”. Contact with women must be avoided so that order members “may remain eternally before the face of God with a pure conscience and sure life”, which also means that “the flower of chastity” (article 70) must be always maintained. This article serves both to prevent women from joining the Knights Templar but also to keep “the brothers” celibate, and always married first and foremost to the order. By the way: married men could join in provided they should stay chaste after admission. The imposition of chastity on religious orders, interestingly, was only made final, after warnings scattered through the centuries, by the Lateran Council in 1123, celebrated only five years before the writing of the *Latin Rule*. Pope Calixtus II denied the sacrament of marriage to anyone in orders and even annulled perfectly valid unions signed before the Council.

The Jedis are very similar to the Knights Templar in the management of their personal relationships, though not as strict as to forbid looking. Also, there are females among them, though the use of the word Knight for them suggests that non-male Jedis were a politically correct addition rather than part of Lucas’s plans from the beginning. Pope Calixtus II made celibacy compulsory for very pragmatic reasons: whereas many, including the Templars, invoked the purity of the body (which is funny because they only bathed once a year...), the actual purpose of celibacy was preventing the riches of the Church from being scattered among the priests’ and nuns’ families. For the Jedis the key matter was preventing the forming of uncontrollable dynasties (see the Wookipedia for a discussion of this point).

Even though the TV series *Star Wars: The Clone Wars* (2008-15) invented for Obi-Wan an impossible romance with Duchess Satine Kryze, Kenobi is a stickler for the Jedi rule and, seeing that Anakin is falling for Amidala, can think of nothing except tell the young man that they should remain friends. As he did with Satyne, to their mutual dissatisfaction. Please, remember that Anakin has not chosen to be a Jedi, has lost his mother and has not been allowed in any way to buy her freedom, much less to stay in touch with her. Perhaps now we understand why he falls in love with a kind woman

five years his senior, precisely during the time when Obi-Wan allows him to go on his first solo mission, as Senator Amidala's protector. Since the Jedi code determines that Anakin, then 20, will be expelled if the romance is discovered, the couple embark on a secret marriage, never trusting Kenobi and for good reason. Anakin's anguish and his fear of losing Amidala make him extremely vulnerable to Palpatine's manipulations and so he falls on the dark side. Only to be burned to a crisp by the man who was supposed to be for him brother, father, friend and master in one—Kenobi.

I have no idea why Lucas decided to keep this rule from the remote medieval past alive in the 21<sup>st</sup> century of Episodes I-III, although we must recall that a) all love stories need an obstacle, b) celibacy is still today a major problem for Catholics priests and possibly the root of rampant child abuse. The question is that although Anakin Skywalker is not exactly a sweet guy, he is a man deeply troubled by the loss of his mother, who regains some sort of balance thanks to Amidala. The secrecy of their love and the actual death of Shmi in terrible circumstances call for a thoughtful, compassionate reaction from Obi-Wan Kenobi. Yet the fact that he sides with the absurd Jedi code rather than with Anakin's very human passions is what brings disaster onto the heads of all Jedis, almost ending the order for good. A wise mentor would have convinced the Jedi Council to allow Anakin and Amidala to live openly as husband and wife, thus putting an end to Palpatine's hold on the young man. If, in addition, Anakin certainly is the most powerful Jedi ever, then it seems in the Jedis' best interests to keep him happy and on their side, firmly bound to Kenobi and Yoda's wise counsel. Instead, we get the ghastly scene on Mustafar when Darth Vader has already taken Anakin over.

Even if you hate *Star Wars* with all your might, you might perhaps draw a lesson from Anakin's fall, and that of any young man, to the dark side: any code of masculinity that calls for the suppression of feeling and of personal attachment is monstrous. Far from being a wise man, Obi-Wan Kenobi unwisely enforces that revolting rule because he is himself a limited man, incapable of truly empathizing with his troubled padawan. Unwittingly, then, Lucas sends with his underrated second trilogy a most important message: if men fail to understand what other men feel, and how to guide and help them, then we are all in trouble.

## 11 September 2017 / A WEALTH OF ALLUSIONS: WEAVING THE WEB OF CULTURE

I have just read Marc Pastor's novel *L'any de la plaga* (2010) and this post deals with two matters suggested by comments on this work in GoodReads. Pastor, who works as CSI for the Mossos, the Catalan police, has published so far five novels, of which I absolutely recommend *La mala dona* (2008). He narrates in this atmospheric book the gruesome real-life crimes of Enriqueta Martí, a dreadful woman who preyed on the children of the poor (mainly of prostitutes) to cater to the tastes of the Barcelona upper classes, both on the cosmetic and the sexual fronts. Read the novel to understand my cryptic sentence... I found Pastor's novel *Montecristo* (2007) just average but I truly had a great time this summer reading his colonial thriller *Bioko*



(2013), set, of all places, in the Spanish colony island of Fernando Poo (in the 1880s). This is what lead me to read *L'any de la plaga*; next, it'll be Pastor's last novel, *Farishta* (2017). Pastor, who is, no doubt, the most interesting Catalan writer together with Albert Sánchez Piñol in the field of popular fiction will be, by the way, a guest of honour at the oncoming CatCon, the first festival devoted to Catalan SF (November 24-25, Vilanova i la Geltrú).

*L'any de la plaga* is, plainly, an adaptation of Jack Finney's novel *The Body Snatchers* (1955), and, in particular of the 1978 film version directed by Philip Kaufman, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (you might be familiar with the more popular 1956 adaptation directed by Don Siegel). Pastor's novel contains direct allusions to the Kaufman film, which the protagonist, social worker Víctor Negro, does know very well, and what I would call indirect allusions, particularly the ugly scream that the transformed individuals utter. Marc Pastor never tries to hide his inspiration and, if I am correct, his project for this novel consists of proving that Barcelona works perfectly well as the setting for horror SF. I enjoyed very much the challenge of suspending my disbelief and the invitation to replace American locations with real streets and buildings in Barcelona. Pastor indeed makes the point of only using places he knows personally and of setting many key scenes not in downtown Barcelona but in working-class neighbourhoods, like Nou Barris. An excellent choice.

Reading the comments on *L'any de la plaga* in GoodReads, I came across a post by a trainee doctor, Arantxa. Apart from noting that some medical terms used by Pastor are incorrect, she made an interesting observation but also a much more questionable comment. Her observation raises a complicated issue: if, as Pastor acknowledges both in the book and in diverse interviews, his novel is basically a retelling of Kaufman's film, shouldn't we call it fan fiction? A few chapters into *L'any de la plaga* I started worrying whether this was, rather, a case of plagiarism until Pastor acknowledged his source. The word 'homage' suggested itself next but, to be honest, I never thought of Pastor's novel as fan fiction for the very simple reason that its is a professional novel in print and not an amateur online text.

Arantxa's comment, however, makes us wonder at which point allusion goes too far and, of course, this has to do with our worship of originality. Young readers who know nothing about Finney or Kaufman may feel cheated by Pastor on discovering *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, as I felt when finding out that John Milius' screenplay for Coppola's *Apocalypse Now!* is an adaptation of *Heart of Darkness*. In this case, matters are much worse for Joseph Conrad is not even mentioned in the film credits. Perhaps with *L'any de la plaga*, Pastor is telling us that all stories worth narrating have been already told and the only thing we can do now is tell them again from a new angle. Thus, instead of the implicit homage that Bram Stoker pays in *Dracula* to Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla*, his inspirational text, we have explicit homage and direct allusion.

I should check whether Pastor borrows this from Stephen King, who loves to pepper his novels with all kinds of allusions to real, ordinary life, but I always wonder why characters in fiction never ever refer to other similar fictions as existing in their world. Perhaps I am completely wrong and the trend has changed but as far as I recall most

alien invasion stories fail to allude to H.G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds*. To complicate matters even further, take the 2013 version of *Carrie*, based on King's novel, published in 1974 and already the object of a very popular adaptation filmed in 1976. Shouldn't the young Carrie of 2013 know about the 1970s film and novel? Why does everyone pretend in the new film that they don't exist? What kind of background reality is built for the main character in that way?

Let me return to Arantxa's comments on *L'any de la plaga*. Pastor chose to use Víctor Negro as a first person narrator, which means that he speaks as ordinary people do speak in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century: constantly alluding to popular texts. At one point when he is risking his life, Negro decides to 'play a Jedi mind trick' to persuade his opponent to let him go; at another, he complains of a headache which feels like being the bad guy in *Hellraiser* (that's Pinhead...). For most readers in GoodReads, and for the author of this post, the very many allusions that pepper Negro's speech are part of the charm of Pastor's novel because they make it real. Besides, the shared allusions work very well in building complicity with the reader and ballasting our sympathy.

There is, however, a major snag: as another reader notes, the allusions may be lost on anyone under 30. And, well, Arantxa complains that the many references to films, series, music and books are just a constant obstacle in the reading. Funnily, she makes her point by using an allusion: "Every time something like that surfaced, I felt like Tawny in *Sunny entre estrellas* (*Sonnie with a Chance*) when she's told something she doesn't know and doesn't care for". I have used Wikipedia to learn that *Sonnie with a Chance* is a Disney Channel teen sitcom, broadcast 2009-11, which proves my point: allusions are essential to weave the web of culture. Now I know something I didn't know five minutes ago, which is good. Arantxa feels annoyed because Pastor's allusions are not for her but for his generation and upwards, those born in the 1970s and 1960s. I, however, felt curious about her allusion, for I don't belong to her age group and I always feel anxious about the time when I might not understand any stories produced by Arantxa's generation (born late 1980s, I guess).

Allusions, then, in all texts, from James Joyce to Marc Pastor, should never be taken as an obstacle but, rather, as an invitation to learn more. As Andrew Delahunty, Sheila Dignen, and Penny Stock, the authors of *The Oxford Dictionary of Allusion* (2001), explain, allusions "can be used as a kind of shorthand, evoking instantly a complex human experience embedded within a story or dramatic event", or "to entertaining effect"; also, obviously, to show off (I suspect this was Joyce's case...). The problem with the 'entertaining effect' is that it excludes audiences who are not into the joke, which can be very annoying to them. In Pixar's *Zootopia* (2016) there is a delicious allusion to Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather* (1972) which only adults can catch. This is a great strategy to interest adults in taking kids to cinemas; yet, it frustrates children to spot jokes in films intended for them from which they are excluded. And this is the irritant: the sense of exclusion, which makes you feel ignorant and, at worse, mortified.

Age and the passage of time combine in strange ways regarding allusions. To begin with, it would have been absurd for Pastor to have his protagonist use allusions that

only teens could get, for he is an adult man born in the 1970s (like the author). However, YA writers, obviously, need to make sure that their readers understand their allusions—if you don't get the references to Greek mythology in Rick Riordan's series *Percy Jackson & the Olympians* (2005-9), then much of the fun is lost, though I would agree that readers are also schooled as they read. Allusions, logically, always have an educational value and this is why the better educated persons enjoy them best. That is to say: the older you are, the more allusions you recognise (um, except those that come from younger age groups...).

Other kinds of allusions risk being lost in time. *The Oxford Dictionary of Allusion* surely is no help to read Bret Easton Ellis' novel *Glamorama* (2000), an extremely violent, angry novel narrated by a male model, Victor Ward, and full of allusions to his celebrity-studded 1990s universe. On a first name basis... I recall in particular a reviewer wondering whether in ten years time anyone would recognise Victor's allusions to Johnny and Kate, that is to say, actor Johnny Depp and top model Kate Moss, the hottest couple on Earth between 1994 and 1997. *Glamorama* plays, then, with the fine line dividing allusion to topical issues from plain gossip, and while fun to read at the time of publication (in this gossip sense, not in others), this is a novel that must sound positively ancient today. Better stick to the Bible and the classics...

Returning to *L'any de la plaga*, I must thank Pastor for revealing how absurdly empty most characters are in fiction for, unlike his Víctor Negro, they never refer to the music, books, films, series that are an essential part of our lives. And when they do so, this is mainly restricted to, well, the Bible and the classics, not to the popular. Arantxa teaches us in her post that allusions can also be a powerful generational barrier but, believe me, the bafflement and the sense of exclusion are mutual. Inevitably, each generation has its main referents.

Fortunately, Wikipedia, that immense wealth of allusions, can help. Look at how beautiful the English idiom is: what are many allusions if not *wealth*?

## 19 September 2017 / THE LOVING GAZE: FIFTY YEARS OF LEGAL INTERRACIAL MARRIAGE IN THE USA

[I'm celebrating today the seventh anniversary of *The Joys of Teaching Literature*!!! Thank you for reading the blog. Please, find all seven yearly volumes in .pdf here <http://ddd.uab.cat/record/116328>]

It is one of those beautiful coincidences in life that the surname of the couple whose union ended state legislation in the USA against interracial marriages was Loving. The love story between Richard and Mildred was narrated last year in a quite successful film, simply called *Loving*, directed and written by Jeff Nichols <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt4669986/>. This was based on the 2011 documentary by Nancy Buirski, *The Loving Story* (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1759682/>). Curiously, and this is more and more frequent in US cinema, neither actor playing the Lovings is

American: Joel Edgerton is Australian and Ruth Negga—who received an Oscar nomination for the role—though born in Ethiopia to a Ethiopian father and an Irish mother, was raised in Ireland. This constant use of foreign actors deserves perhaps another post but before I start rambling, just let me say why the film *Loving*, whose title plays so nicely with the surname, is so fine: it's because how Mildred and Richard look at each other with a loving gaze, hardly ever seen in contemporary cinema.

Nichols took his inspiration for his presentation of the Lovings from Grey Villet's photos of the couple in the intimacy of their very modest Virginia home, published in 1965 by *Life* magazine, and now gathered together in a book, with an obvious title, *The Lovings: An Intimate Portrait*. Take a look at some of the pictures for instance here: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/gallery/2017/mar/29/the-lovings-in-pictures>.

What you see is a white man and a non-white woman (Mildred was of mixed African-American and Native-American descent) happily enjoying their home life with their three children. Since the Lovings were working-class (Richard worked as a builder, she was a housewife), the photos have nothing to do with the middle and upper-middle class idealized families with whom we tend to connect a happy home life, quite stereotypically. What the photos plainly transmit, as this is Villet's merit, is that these five persons, specially husband and wife, love each other very much. Believably and credibly, as you don't often see in our jaded times.

Nichols' film eventually reaches the tipping point when this mixed-race couple, initially the victims of racist Virginia legislation like others, become a fundamental case in the annals of the US Supreme Court. This is in the second half of the film. The first five minutes are, however, the most challenging ones. Why? Because before the legal arguments are built and presented, you simply see how deeply Richard and Mildred love each other, and how happy he is made by her announcement that she is pregnant. Indeed, the naturality of this opening segment is such that uninformed spectators might initially believe that this is a romantic fantasy and not a real-life story, for we're not used to the very simple idea that love does happen between individuals of different races. And we hardly ever see this kind of couple portrayed. It's about time we wonder why.

I have the legal details of the Lovings' struggle to earn their right to live freely as a married couple from the film, and, so, they might be incorrect or limited. Basically, since as residents of Virginia they could not marry in this state, due to its cynically named 'Racial Integrity Act' of 1924, in 1958 the couple travelled to Washington D.C. to get married there. They, however, returned home. Soon, they were arrested (at this point Mildred was heavily pregnant) and given a sort of exile sentence, which prevented them from being in Virginia together for the following 25 years.

They moved back to Washington D.C., visiting family separately for a few years. Tired of city life and missing the country, Mildred decided in 1964 that they should go home, where they faced a harsh prison sentence and risked losing custody of their children. She sent then a letter to Attorney General Bobby Kennedy, who referred their case to the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). Volunteer attorneys Bernard S. Cohen and Philip J. Hirschkop started then the journey that would eventually lead the Lovings'

case to be heard three years later by the Supreme Court. The film explains that the Lovings kept themselves apart from the process to avoid hearing the Virginia legal team referring to their children as bastards.

The Supreme Court judges reached on 12 June 1967 a decision on 'Loving v. Virginia'. They ruled, in Chief Justice Earl Warren's words, that: "Marriage is one of the 'basic civil rights of man', fundamental to our very existence and survival (...). To deny this fundamental freedom on so unsupportable a basis as the racial classifications embodied in these statutes, classifications so directly subversive of the principle of equality at the heart of the Fourteenth Amendment, is surely to deprive all the State's citizens of liberty without due process of law". This put an end to anti-miscegenation legislation, still applied then in 15 American states. 12 June is now National Loving Day in celebration of interracial love. By the way, Warren's argumentation was also recently invoked by defenders of lesbian and gay marriage.

Many issues overlap, then, in Nichols' subtle film and in the story of the Lovings. One is how come that their names are not better known? Is it because the USA are somehow hiding their embarrassing anti-miscegenation legislation that there is an interested silence about the heroes who resisted it? Reading about the Nazi Nuremberg Race Laws (1935) banning Jews from marrying 'Aryan' Germans as an absolute horror, I was dismayed to read that many American states in the Union had their own one-drop rule. That is to say, they passed legislation to prevent whites from marrying blacks, thus preventing racial mixing or miscegenation. The one-drop rule determined that, regardless of whether a person appeared to be racially white, if this person had a black ancestor, then s/he was regarded as black, and, hence, banned from marrying a white individual. Laws defending this principle were passed in the southern States from the 1890s onwards, peaking in the 1920s with, for instance, Virginia's 1924 infamous act. This was, you see?, *before* the Nazi anti-miscegenation laws. And, as *Loving* narrates, this kind of detestable legislation stayed put until the late 1960s.

Let me go back to the film's narrative style and its focus on the loving/Loving gaze. Just by coincidence, I was reading this morning a paper by Darko Suvin in which he wonders whether scopophilia is somehow connected with the Freudian death wish. Let me explain: 'scopophilia', or 'pleasure in looking' is a central piece in Laura Mulvey's feminist attack against classical cinema, famously expressed in her article 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1975). As Mulvey argued, invoking Freud, cinema was (and still is) aimed at eliciting the scopophilia of the male spectator by using the female body as an erotic object. I think that Mulvey, like Freud, forgot about how important women's erotic gaze is (whether lesbian or heterosexual) but I don't want to pursue this argument now. What I want to stress is that whether diagetic or extradiagetic—that is to say, whether this is actors looking at each other, or spectators looking at actors—the contemporary male and female gaze has been so sexualized that it is actually excluding love. I think this impression underlies Suvin's claim that scopophilia is today fundamentally cannibalistic and destructive.

This is why I was stunned, this is the word, by *Loving*. You may have seen thousands of actors avidly staring at each other, trying to transmit some kind of electric feeling

growing between them, but this is not love—it's passion, or lust. Joel Edgerton and Ruth Negga look at each other and, as the spectator gazing at them, you understand that Richard and Mildred love each other, a feeling that goes far beyond in depth than the sexual desire currently dominating the human gaze in audio-visual production (both cinema and series). Perhaps this is so because the actors and the film director are copying what is documented in Villet's photos, presenting for once love as it is in reality, not as it is fantasized about. Since Nichols is making a *moving* picture, and not a *still* picture like Villet, his problem is how to avoid the intense melodrama of the Lovings' life. The result is a slap in the face of all those films that fail to represent love, convinced instead that—excuse me for sounding so prudish—love is best portrayed by showing the couple in question having sex. It turns out that love is most lovingly shown by the simple touch of a (white) hand on a (black) hand.

Racism is one of the most absurd aberrations produced by the human mind and it would be nice to see it over, the sooner the better. *Loving* helps us very much to understand the nature of the aberration (as another beautiful film, *Hidden Figures*, does). Yet, we must recall that although one-drop rule legislation is, happily, a thing of the past, the racist misgivings against miscegenation might not be. I wonder, for instance, whether Barack Obama would have been elected President if Michelle had been white and their girls mixed-race. Not to mention the fact that even though Obama's mother is white, he is labelled (and self-identifies) as black...

Not there yet, then. In the meantime, enjoy loving/*Loving*.

## 26 September 2017 / I'VE GOT THE POWER: THE PROBLEM OF EMPOWERMENT

It's funny how memory deceives us. I positively know that in the thrilling opening credits of Spike Lee's film *Do the Right Thing* (1989), Rosie Perez box-dances to Public Enemy's song "Fight the Power", a call to Afro-American political action which Lee commissioned for the film. Yet, I associate Rosie's punches not to Public Enemy's tough male voices but, rather, to Pennie Ford's black female voice shouting with glee "I've got the power!" in the chorus of German band Snap's 1990 dance hit "The Power". Perhaps because, after all, Lee's vision of Perez's sexy dancing is in itself patriarchal.

This rallying cry, "I've got the power!", has popped up in my brain many times this past week, as I read Naomi Alderman's controversial novel *The Power* (2016). I do not wish to write a full review nor to help this appalling fiction attract more readers. However, I do wish to discuss how dangerous the idea of empowerment is becoming, using Alderman as a prop for my arguments.

Just consider: in this multi-awarded novel we are told the story of how a genetic mutation originating in WWII gives all women a skein, located under the collarbone, capable of generating electrical discharges. First, only teen girls have the ability to

unleash this mortal power but soon they manage to awake the dormant skein in all women. The author was apparently inspired by what eels can do and they even appear in her novel, in case we miss the allusion.

How do women use this startling bodily ability? They learn to control it, so that electricity can be used, for instance, for erotic play, which sounds fun (some men do develop a strong taste for that). Soon enough, though, female power is applied to more violent pursuits, from playground harassment of girls and boys to... the establishment of an androcidal all-women republic in Moldova (Romania). The victimized women revolt there against intensive sex trafficking as they also revolt against other political patriarchies in the world, such as Saudi Arabia, which leads to the threat of (all-male) war against the newly born state. I won't go on, but just will mention that the anti-patriarchal backlash and sudden, literal empowerment turns women into feral beasts, quick to rape, torture and kill men. Even children.

Naomi Alderman jokes in her public presentations that *The Power* is only dystopian if you are a man. She has defended herself from criticism (mostly coming from women) claiming that nothing happens to the men in her novel that does not happen to women in real life. Readers who support her bleak vision of femininity invoke the classic (misogynistic) argument that a civilization dominated by women need not be better than a civilization run by men. And, as you can see in GoodReads, to the question of what would happen if a man had written *The Power* many readers reply that then we would be reading a history book. Curiously, Alderman presents her fiction as non-fiction written by a male historian about the events and then sent to her, which is, to say the least, an odd framing device. My personal opinion, if you care for it, is that Alderman's novel is both a misogynistic and an androphobic ugly rant. I am specially scandalized not only because *The Power* has received any awards but also because it has been endorsed by Margaret Atwood.

Women's power in Alderman's novel is the approximate equivalent of men's muscular strength. You might read *The Power* as a thesis novel in which the author answers the question of how would it feel for women to know that they are the stronger sex. The problem is that the author bases her thesis on the assumption that men's average superior strength is applied all the time and against all the women. This is simply not true. I have no doubt that in ancient prehistoric times some men developed patriarchy when they realized that the violence used against animals when hunting could be applied to fellow human beings. In this way, the death race towards total empowerment began. However, despite the staggering amount of violence the world still sees on a daily basis, this is exceptional enough for its acts to be media news and recorded with increasing disgust in the History books. We do speak about violence, that is to say, about the abuse of the personal ability to hurt others, because we see it as anomalous, even in the regions of Earth where it is part of daily routine. And I would insist that most men never dream of using their muscles in the way most women use their (electric) power in Alderman's novel.

This leads me back to my classroom last Wednesday. I was introducing my students to Masculinities Studies and explaining that one of the greatest challenges this discipline

faces is the development of arguments to convince men privileged by patriarchal societies that it is in their interest to surrender (part of) their power. Power, so to speak, is a limited quantity and if minorities need to be empowered, then majorities need to accept disempowerment (think African Americans and American whites, if you want an example not about gender).

One of my male students asked the key question: why are we always talking about empowerment and isn't the very idea of power suspect? I acknowledged that this is the limit of my own theorisation and that I want to believe that there is a difference between accruing power to abuse others (to use them as your own resources) and to help others (from a position which commands respect and gets positive things done). How about anarchism, then, he asked, and how does it fit our current discourse on power? Badly, I should say... Although there is the question of whether an absolutely equally empowered society would result in a form of (workable?) anarchy.

What my student suggested very intelligently is that the very idea of empowerment is a poisonous legacy of patriarchy, and I believe that Alderman's novel proves this point. Personal experience suggests that nobody is empowered for good, and history has countless examples of extremely powerful patriarchal men who have lost everything overnight (think mafia). Current Western democracies are based on the peculiar principle that someone, usually a man, can be empowered for limited periods of time. At our current crossroads it looks as if WWII might be triggered by opposite, yet complementary, examples of patriarchal empowerment in North Korea (a tyranny) and the USA (allegedly a democracy). Countless dictatorships and revolutions have seen people who felt secure in their power, from dictators to democratic judges, just to name opposite positions, be radically disempowered and even deprived of their lives. The road to empowerment is by no means safe.

As minorities struggle for empowerment and agency, these two keywords of our time, they are tempted by the patriarchal style of (ab)using power, or so it seems. I told my students how in Gus Van Sant's film *Milk*, about the first openly gay man voted into political office in the USA, there is a very scary moment. San Francisco town councillor Harvey Milk wants to get rid of his political enemy, conservative councillor Dan White (who would eventually kill him), and threatens Mayor George Moscone—the very man who empowered Milk to be elected—with withdrawing his support. Moscone, taken aback, jokes that Milk sounds like a mafia boss and Milk quips “I like that, a gay man with power”. I was dismayed by this scene, as it suggested that in the end minorities are after what hegemonic masculinity has: the power to disempower.

Within hegemonic masculinity, an entangled concept which already two generations of Masculinities Studies scholars are failing to make sense of, things are by no means simple. The core of patriarchy is doing all it can to keep minorities at bay but sooner or later we will see white men mix with (or even be replaced by) other kinds of powerful human beings, not excluding at all women or non-whites. My dystopian future is not about women lashing out like eels but about the opposite of the *Star Trek* World Federation: an Earth dominated by a power-hungry elite, always vying for positions at the top, and combining the most ambitious individuals in our world. This elite will no



longer be strictly patriarchal in the sense of being an exclusive male patriarchs' club but, rather, a rainbow oligarchy. The rest of us, the ones who do not yearn for power, will be ruled (as we are), while those who do ambition power but have no means to access it will go on causing random violence, as private or public terrorists.

This is why I think that dealing with power along separatists lines in feminist dystopia or utopia makes little sense. There must be a middle-ground between the equally absurd propositions that women are all adorable, moral persons or evil wanna-be patriarchs, and we need to find it. I marvel at how 27 years after the publication of Judith Butler's indispensable *Gender Trouble* (1990), which famously declared that gender is performative, the gender binary is still alive.

The question to ask in 2017 is not, most emphatically, how women would handle a sudden gift of power but whether power will be eventually degendered, particularly in the gender-fluid society that the young, in the West and elsewhere, so often promote as an ideal. Also, why disempowered minorities are not building tools for better agency, or why they are not being taught to do so. Reading about the women in Alderman's novel, and in particular the politician who wants to run for USA President, a thought that often occurred to me is that some avenues for empowerment are already open—without the need for the electric skein. Hillary may have failed this time around but look at Angela Merkel. Or, more worryingly, at Marine Le Pen.

Most importantly, as my student suggested, we need to consider why power and empowerment occupy such central position in the ideology and agendas of the minorities seeking to gain more agency. And whether in the end even a gender-fluid society would be ruled by a hierarchy, rather than be a power-fluid civilization, that is to say, perhaps an anarchy. A word I believed to be until this week not part of my ideological vocabulary...

## 10 October 2017 / CLOSE READING: THE PROBLEM OF THE LONG TEXT

In my Department, we use a pedagogy based on close reading combined with contextual comment to teach Literature, as happens in all English Departments in the world influenced by Anglo-American styles of teaching Literature. Yet, I'm growing anxious this academic year about the limits of this methodology and how it actually works in our context, both for teachers and students.

Close reading, let's recall, is a teaching methodology based on exploring the actual texts by paying minute attention to detail; ideally, it should lead to interactive classroom discussion between teacher and students. This formalistic approach was developed in the USA in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to replace an older European philology-oriented methodology, in which the texts were described without actually reading from any in class. Thus, as an underground student I took a year-long 'traditional' course on 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Spanish Literature, consisting exclusively of lectures about approximately twenty set texts. We were expected to read them all but we

never carried any books to class, nor discussed them in any way with the teacher. This kind of 'lección magistral' aimed at very large classes is the equivalent of the Anglo-American lecture, which is then combined with the seminar, a type of undergrad teaching we don't have a tradition for in Spain. In most English Studies Departments in Spain we do use, then, the seminar format but applied to large groups, ranging from 20 students in the elective courses to 90 in some compulsory core courses. Yes, absurd!

Since we have not really managed to convince students to read the books in advance and contribute their own passages for comment, I believe that what we do in class fails on both counts: it is never as informative as a lecture, nor as effective as seminar in-depth analysis. My own classes have become a very strange product: I read a passage, comment on it and students make notes of what I say, as in a lecture, instead of contributing their own comments. Only a handful talk with me, which does not necessarily mean that they have read the text, they may just be elaborating on the specific passage. The bigger the class, the less productive close reading is, even though common sense suggests that class discussion should be livelier with many participants. I need to add that I'm no longer sure about how close reading must combine with introductory lecturing, as it seems a waste of classroom time to transmit what can be easily found on the internet, especially when this is what we use for our own introductions. I won't even mention the nightmare of producing a nice-looking PowerPoint in as few hours as possible...

I realize that I have never discussed with any of my colleagues how a text is prepared for class; actually, I have never been trained as a teacher on that central aspect of my profession. So what do we actually do?

Basically, I do as I did as a student: read the text once to get an overall impression, then again pencil in hand to locate what I call the 'hot spots'. During this second reading, I make very brief notes of the plot in each chapter, which is an extremely tedious business. I hate it so much that often I can't decipher my own handwriting. Then, whether this is legitimate or not I don't care, I borrow another summary (from Wikipedia, or study aids such as Gradesaver), and produce—only for my eyes—a kind of composite creature, merging my plot notes with these other notes as briefly as I can manage. Next, I add to the summary thus produced the page number of the main passages from the 'hot spots' and, obviously, I place small pieces of paper marking the most relevant pages in the book. It is very important that the notes I take to class are visually very clear so that I see at one glance the 'hot spots' I want to discuss and the quotations. Funnily, although I usually select around ten, I never have time for more than six, yet I never manage to select only those six. Discussion inevitably leads to passages not marked and that are impossible to find in a hurry.

How long does it take to work on a novel using close reading? Well, it's funny how a novel can be dealt with in a couple of sentences in a wider-ranging lecture—"Anne Brontë's *Tenant of Wildfell Hall* denounces that women married to abusive husbands in the 19<sup>th</sup> century lacked the protection of the law and were reduced to trusting the gentlemanly inclinations of good men"—but 'covered' only very partially even in ten

sessions of frantic close reading. For, here is something else: what dictates the number of sessions are the needs of the syllabus and not the intensity of the text, which might require a year-long monographic course to really get to its core. Or surface.

On the other hand, perhaps we're overdoing it. Because of a series of external accidents affecting my program, I have been forced to compress my teaching into fewer sessions. Novels that should have been taught in seven sessions have been reduced to four. Hence, I've had to talk 'about' the text rather than read from it as extensively as I wanted to do. Strangely, this change is not so negative as I would have assumed because attention to textual detail often results in not having the chance to discuss larger issues in the text, from characters' narrative arcs to plot architecture. And it's great to be able to do that.

What is it like for a Literature teacher to prepare a novel for a series of close reading sessions, then? A time-consuming chore. Let's say, for the sake of argumentation, that a 300-page contemporary novel to be taught in 5 sessions takes 5 hours to read the first time, and 8 the second (pencil in hand, marking text, making notes). Add 3 hours to produce a summary, then, say, 3 more hours to check bibliography (download at least one article and read it, check at least 3 other sources). This is already 18 hours, plus, say 2 hours for the PowerPoint, if you're lucky, that's 20 hours for 5 sessions of 75 minutes each, 1.92 hours of preparation for each hour we teach, instead of the official 1.07 in my university. And this, of course, is just a silly figure, for to properly teach any novel, you need to have read many, many others novels, other Literature, and plenty of literary criticism... What I teach every session has taken, in fact, 33 years of my life to prepare, since the day I became an undergrad.

Time-consuming as preparing a novel for class is, I find it increasingly difficult to 'control' the text. No matter how often I have taught the text and how hard I have worked on the summary and the passage selection, it is more and more complicated to keep the whole novel 'fully available' in my mind.

To strengthen my grip on the text, in a few occasions I have transferred the selected quotations onto a Word document, projected onto the classroom screen. With classics available online this type of document can be produced in a reasonable time, but with new books typing the selected quotations into your computer constitutes a waste of precious (research) time. A possibility is, of course, using both the paper copy and the ebook. Since we're trying to convince students to buy the set texts, however, I find that projecting a selection of quotations rather than reading from the print book is a self-defeating pedagogy. With quotations from secondary sources things are, I believe, different and I see no problem in just sharing a passage without bringing the whole book to class. But maybe I'm wrong...

These days in particular, I feel that the bottom is dropping out of my own pedagogy, for I am having trouble handling in class the bulky text of Suzanne Collins' trilogy *The Hunger Games*. Summarizing in the manner I have described book three, *Mockingbird*, selecting the passages for discussion and writing the class notes took me about three hours of a very busy morning. This is for a book I have read twice, which means I was

already using a copy with pencil markings and comments. After these three hours, however, and seeing that there was no way I could comment on so many aspects of the protagonist's (gender) characterization in just 75 minutes, I threw it all away (metaphorically speaking) and decided to focus on just the last chapter and the Epilogue, using intensive close reading. And trust that the novel would be sufficiently 'covered' in one session (I'm using 7 for the whole trilogy, treating it as a single text, within a one-semester elective course on Gender Studies). In the end, I only had time to read three passages...

Perhaps I should be teaching poetry... Or use less close reading?

## 17 October 2017 / SECONDARY CHARACTERS: TIME TO END OUR NEGLECT

These days my students smile the moment the phrase 'secondary character' comes out of my lips, as they have heard me say already many times that we have neglected them woefully. They smile as a polite way to tell me that I need to be more persuasive, for everyone knows that the main characters are the ones that carry the weight of the fictional text, hence the only ones that deserve being the object of literary analysis.

I have, however, already showed to my two classes that a) in Suzanne Collins' trilogy *The Hunger Games* a great deal of the plot depends on decisions made extradiagetically (um, secretly!) by secondary characters (the scheming President Alma Coin but also, intriguingly, fashion designer Cinna); b) in Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, the real plot mover may be the wicked Arthur Huntingdon and not the protagonist, his saintly wife Helen, but the greatly neglected plot shaker is his sexy mistress, Annabella Wilmot. Likewise, in Dickens' *Great Expectations*, which I am about to start teaching again, although Miss Havisham and Abel Magwitch are impressive secondary characters, it is actually the far more secondary Compeyson who sets the plot in motion. Literally, for he is bound by a (criminal) plot to both.

Literary Studies has paid very scant attention to the secondary character. To begin with, there is doubt about when a character is a protagonist or just a supporting actor (I'm thinking here of Iago in *Othello*). In, for instance, *Wuthering Heights*, the elder Catherine is universally regarded to be a main character. Her daughter, also named Catherine, plays in the second part of Emily Brontë's novel a similarly important role; nonetheless, she has hardly received any critical attention. There may be, then, plenty of analyses of particular secondary characters, as I have found in a quick search, but there is not a sustained theoretical approach to how they are built and how/why they matter.

In this quick search, combining the MLA database and WorldCat, I have found, as I should expect, more articles and dissertations than books about the secondary character—all in all, less than 60 documents since the 1970s, and only if we combine in this list four different major languages. The books are actually just two: Peter Bly's *The*

*Wisdom of Eccentric Old Men: A Study of Type and Secondary Character in Galdós's Social Novels, 1870-1897* (2004) and Jennifer Camden's *Secondary Heroines in Nineteenth-Century British and American Novels* (2010), both originating in doctoral dissertations. Also committed to making the most of the secondary character is the monographic issue published by the French and English-language journal *Belphégor* in November 2006 (<http://dalspace.library.dal.ca/handle/10222/31210>). The issue, nonetheless, is focused on the flexibility of secondary characters in their diverse media adaptations, rather than to an in-depth consideration of their role in print fiction.

Fictional characters, generally speaking, are underanalysed as literary constructions. This is why what Lennard J. Davis had to say about them 30 years ago in his singular 1987 volume *Resisting Novels: Ideology & Fiction* is still relevant (the book was reissued recently, in 2014). In a fascinating chapter called "Characters, narrators, and readers: Making friends with signs", Davis explains that characters "are designed to elicit maximum identification with the observer" and that "their existence is part of a monolithic structure created by an author"; that is to say, they are a function of the text.

Characters, Davis adds, do not have a personality: they have characteristics, although the main trick that novelists play upon us, readers, is making us believe that a limited set of features constitutes a human-like personality. "In essence," Davis argues "the feeling that we get that we are watching a complex character is largely an illusion created by the opposite—the relatively small number of traits that make up a character". Oddly, Davis focuses on how attractive protagonists are created to be desired "in some non-specific but erotic way" because "part of novel reading is the process of falling in love with characters or making friends with signs". Yet, he misses the chance to consider, first, what minimum number of traits gives secondary characters a distinct personality; second, in how many tiers are they organized (from your basic 'spear carrier' with no lines to almost-protagonist) and, third, how much of any novel's appeal depends on them.

In cinema things are slightly different, if only because the Oscars (and the Emmys for TV) acknowledge actors' merits in two categories: leading and supporting. This is not without controversy for, often, production companies try to have co-protagonists nominated in both categories so as to increase the chances of a particular film to win an Oscar (or two). Other strange things often happen in connection to the Oscars. This year Viola Davis won as Best Actress in a Supporting Role for *Fences*, even though she is the female lead in that film. I don't believe that she has less screen time than Ruth Negga, nominated as Best Actress in a Leading Role for *Loving*—but of course, how could Davis compete with Emma Stone, everyone's favourite for *La La Land*?

'Screen time' is, of course, also a very tricky concept to measure the 'secondariness' of a role: Judith Dench got a very well-deserved Oscar for playing Elizabeth I in *Shakespeare in Love* (1998), a performance lasting all of... eight minutes. It turns out that the record is in the hands of Beatrice Straight for a six-minute role as a spurned wife in *Network* (1976). This is fine as, precisely, Straight's win shows that what

matters in a secondary character is not the extent of their presence but of their impact.

Whereas screenwriters can congratulate themselves for having written secondary characters that, in the right hands, become Oscar-worthy, (print) fiction writers are not granted any special merit for creating great supporting roles. Praise usually goes in the direction of number, rather than specific successful characterization. There are exceptions, of course. Dickens' disciple J.K. Rowling gave us in *Harry Potter* a marvellous secondary character list that kept the best British actors happy for years, whether they had been chosen to play minor roles (Kenneth Branagh as Gilderoy Lockhart) or fundamental ones (Alan Rickman as Severus Snape). Fans claim that Rowling came up with 772 characters, though apparently 'only' 136 receive enough attention to qualify as main or secondary (with lines), the rest are just names dropped in passing into the text.

The list of Dickensian characters runs to many more hundreds, among which the secondary roles come in all sizes and types, from the cheeky Artful Dodger, to the ill-treated Bob Cratchit, or the brutal Bentley Drummle. And the inevitable 'spear carriers'. Dickens, indeed, seems to be the only writer in English always drawing praise for his secondary roles, even far above Shakespeare, who could do Mercutio brilliantly but somehow fell short with the likes of Count Paris. In a 2012 article, Paul Bailey enthuses about Dickens' "ability to catch life on the hop" and chronicle life through his myriad minor people (<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/jan/12/charles-dickens-minor-characters-paul-bailey>). There is, however, still that elephant in the room as beyond creative writing courses (I assume), nobody is trying to analyze secondary characters in fiction. How do writers 'do' them?

Perhaps this academic feet-dragging should be blamed onto genius playwright Tom Stoppard, who had the last word (and the last laugh?) with his 1966 play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. In it Prince Hamlet's hapless university classmates, called by King Claudius and commissioned to help do away with the obnoxious heir to the Danish throne, meet a sad end, as happens in Shakespeare's play, of course. What changes in Stoppard's witty version is the focalization: whereas the hesitant blonde prince is our delegate in the original text, in this other play the pair of minor characters are the protagonists. That they have no idea of what is going on and that their lives only appear to make sense (if any) when Hamlet is on stage is a wonderful comment on the role of secondary characters. Also, a sort of self-defeating strategy, since few authors can pull the trick of using secondary characters as narrators and focalisers without promoting them to the main role—the exception being, of course, Nelly in *Wuthering Heights*, who remains elusively secondary.

In *The Hunger Games* there is a secondary character called Johanna Mason, a former victor in the 71<sup>st</sup> edition of the Games. Ostensibly introduced as a lesser rival to Katniss Everdeen, Johanna turns out to be her reluctant secret ally. Spunky, forthright, angry and resilient, Mason is so well-drawn despite her very limited presence that many fans wish Collins should have chosen her to play hero. You should have seen the smiles in my students' faces when we briefly discussed her. Briefly because, of course, being a

secondary character Johanna only got whatever little time was left after we finished discussing Katniss. Now I know those few minutes was far less than her contribution to the success of the trilogy deserved. Next time I teach *The Hunger Games* I'll do it the other way round: beginning with the secondary characters.

One day I should teach a course called 'Great Secondary Characters of English Literature'... Let's start a list!

## **24 October 2017 / THE WEINSTEIN SCANDAL AND THE SPECTATOR'S COMPLICITY: THE PROBLEM OF SEXUALIZED SELF-PRESENTATION**

For the last few weeks, as we all know, top Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein has been accused of criminal sexual misbehaviour, ranging from propositioning to rape, by at least 50 actresses. In all likelihood, the list will increase and Weinstein will eventually land in prison. Countless publications and personal blogs have published articles on practically all angles of this matter and I am aware that it is really hard to add new argumentation.

I have little to say about the need to publicly expose sexual predators in any professional area and regardless of who the victims are: children, women, and also men. I am not worried, like Woody Allen, that this will lead to any witch-hunt, for it seems to me that other powerful male predators will use Weinstein as a smokescreen, or scapegoat, to hide their misdemeanours. That worries me. As for the less powerful predators, hopefully his downfall will make them think twice before they overstep the limits of decent behaviour, outmoded as the phrase is. I insist once more that the loss of the code of conduct once known as 'gentlemanliness' has done much harm, and that if men could re-learn to self-regulate their behaviour through a similar code today, we would all be better off.

This, of course, should be accompanied by women also having a clear-cut code of behaviour that did not blur the lines and that we also lack.

Am I blaming the victims of predator Weinstein? No, not at all—they were young, caught unawares in a violent situation, scared for their personal integrity and in fear of ruining their budding careers (he didn't go, of course, for powerful, well-established stars). What is striking is the variety of the victims' responses and how the last one of them, the youngest one, instantly knew that she should report the abuser to the police. The others were locked for decades in their appalled silence by the complicity networks surrounding the predator, and, of course, by the inability or unwillingness of the men whom they trusted to stand up and denounce the monster in their midst. I would agree that blaming the bystander is also important, as many have argued. Colin Firth came out to publicly declare his shame that he had only listened to a distressed friend victimized by Weinstein but had done nothing to help her. This is a gentlemanly act but, sadly, it comes too late. Brad Pitt's threatening Weinstein with his fists if he



didn't stop bothering his girlfriend at the time, Gwyneth Paltrow, may have solved an individual case but brought no justice to the rest.

I would like to focus next on a photo (later I'll comment on another). The picture shows actress Rose McGowan, dressed in a red strapless dress posing next to Harvey Weinstein; he is encircling her waist with his arm, and you can see his greedy fingers creeping towards her left-side breast (<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-4961282/Rose-McGowan-hits-monster-Weinstein.html>). The photo was taken in 1997, two months after McGowan was raped by Weinstein, as she has alleged (and as I'm sure happened: she was paid a high amount of money for her silence). It shows a smiling woman, wearing the kind of form-fitting gown designed to market stars on the red-carpet as saleable commodities. The photo is horrifying, for it shows in all clarity that women whose professional lives depend on their bodily appearance are far from being in full control of their bodies. If they're not directly abused, they are (un)dressed to be sexually appealing, offering glamorous looks that other girls are invited to imitate. And they have to smile to the camera even when posing with a criminal who has abused their body.

There have been, however, a few female dissenting voices in all this sad affair—all of whom later had to backpedal and apologise or downplay their comments. I want to consider them here.

French actress Catherine Deneuve, who refused to comment on whether she had been abused in any way during her career, did express her doubts that the current use of social media to shame the monsters is effective: "Is it interesting to talk about it like this? Does it help? Does it add anything? Will it solve the problem in any way?" (<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2017/oct/20/catherine-deneuve-questions-anti-harassment-campaign-weinstein>). This is in line with French sociologist Gilles Lipovetsky's criticism (in *The Third Woman*, 1998) of the American culture of victimhood which, in his view, weakens women's position by teaching them that the victim status is part of femininity. Instead, he claims, women should be taught to be better equipped to defend themselves, both physically and verbally. I agree: if you're told that any man can overpower you, you are already half-defeated and paralyzed by fear, which is how the monster Weinstein overcame most of his victims. Some managed to run away, a handful were brave enough to say 'no' but most were rendered unable to defend themselves (by his physical strength as much as by his power in the industry).

Then, there's the thorny matter of self-presentation. Top designer Donna Karan was among the few to make comments in defence of Weinstein, for which she later had to apologise. She declared that we, women, need to ask "how do we display ourselves? How do we present ourselves as women? What are we asking? Are we asking for it by presenting all the sensuality and all the sexuality?" (<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-4964380/Donna-Karan-defends-Harvey-Weinstein-blames-victims.html#ixzz4wEOPQDUw>). This is a bit rich coming from someone who is part of the red-carpet culture, but she has a point.



The discourse suggesting that women empower themselves by showing their body as their please is a sexist sham and it is about time we deny it. A body presented in public as a sexualized object is a sexualized object, and that's it. The woman in question might think that she is in control of the reactions she elicits but she is not; it is simply ludicrous to think so. There is, besides, a subtle but important difference between elegant sexiness (see Lupita Nyong'o pale blue 2014 Oscar dress) and sexual vulgarity, of which you may see plenty in the MTV awards gala. Not that Weinstein and the like would notice (he did abuse Nyong'o) but other women might and, thus, earn some self-respect, which we need as much as men need gentlemanliness.

The other woman who's had to apologize for her words is Mayim Bialik, currently a star in the popular series *The Big Bang Theory*. She published a piece, "Being a Feminist in Harvey Weinstein's World" (<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/13/opinion/mayim-bialik-feminist-harvey-weinstein.html>), which generated much controversy, as she presented a view of Hollywood actresses sharply divided between the less attractive (like herself, she says) and the "young girls with doe eyes and pouty lips (...) favoured for roles by the powerful men who made those decisions." Bialik narrates how, after being quite popular as a teen actress (in the series *Blossom*), she abandoned the business, tired of its physical demands, to pursue a doctorate in neuroscience at the University of California: "I craved being around people who valued me more for what was inside my brain than what was inside my bra." She returned, landing eventually the role of Amy Farrah Fowler, "a feminist who speaks her mind, who loves science and her friends and who sometimes wishes she were the hot girl" but who is not.

What incensed the social media was that Bialik also wrote that actresses who, like her, do not shape their body following absurd beauty models "have the 'luxury' of being overlooked and (...) ignored by men in power unless we can make them money." She also made a point of declaring that she has carefully kept her "sexual self" for "private situations," that she dresses "modestly" and does not "act flirtatiously with men as a policy." This supposes, of course, that the 'beautiful women' do the opposite. Bialik tells women that in a perfect world they could act freely but that "we can't be naïve about the culture we live in." And, yes, she calls the women that Weinstein had been meeting in luxury hotel rooms "ingénues." Ouch. Still, I believe she is right in all her claims and in her personal behaviour.

Now let me go to the other photo that has caught my attention this week. It's the first image in a report in *Esquire* called "The Irresistible Rise of Penelope Cruz" (<http://www.esquire.co.uk/culture/film/longform/a17840/penelope-cruz-interview/>). The photo shows Cruz in a rumpled up bed, belly down. She's wearing a long-sleeved lacy black body, which is not really anything to comment on, if it weren't because Cruz's slightly bent left knee emphasizes the allure of her cellulite-free thigh and, well, her raised bottom. The photo may have been authorized by Cruz and even concocted by the star herself but its only purpose, clearly, is titillation. The other photos in the article are designed to accompany its main focus: that at 43, Penelope Cruz, is still a very attractive woman that any sane heterosexual man (and lesbian!) would like to

admire as closely as possible. The photos say absolutely nothing of Cruz's ability to act, unless we take them as a performance of sexiness.

Like any other long piece on Cruz, this one also comments on her role, when she was only 18, in Bigas Lunas's notorious film *Jamón, jamón*. This sexist movie not only made her famous but also partnered her on screen with Javier Bardem, who eventually became her husband and the father of her children. The journalist quotes an interview with Bardem in which he claims that the film is "like a document of our passion. One day we're going to have to show the kids—imagine! 'Mummy, Daddy, what did you do in the movies together?' Well, my children, you should celebrate this movie as you're here because of it." I'll leave aside the fact that what I remember of gross *Jamón, jamón* is another actor, Jordi Mollà, avidly licking the breasts of young Cruz, to focus on my complete failure to understand how children can ever enjoy seeing their parents having sex on screen in a publicly available document. Or being told by other children what they have seen.

I will never ever blame Weinstein's victims, or any other victim of a sexual predator: the monsters should be judged, sentenced and imprisoned, if the law thus dictates. What amazes me is the hypocrisy around the public presentation of female sexual availability. Penelope Cruz's all too common photos connect with the red-carpet display in presenting beautiful women as bodies you can goggle at but cannot touch. This sexual teasing is designed to elicit the desire that makes you buy the cinema ticket whose benefits are pocketed by producers like Weinstein. We are in this way all complicit. And sexual predators, all of us.

Weinstein has clearly crossed the 'don't touch' barrier but by hypocritically demanding to see, as we do in our role as spectators, that actors show their bodies and mimic sex on screen for our (prurient) entertainment we are also trespassing on their intimacy and their right to say 'no' without destroying their careers, particularly the actresses. They, regrettably but also logically, see their self-presentation as sexual objects justified, although it is not. It is just part of a script that can be changed and should be changed by letting more women into the business as screen writers, directors and producers.

I'll never argue that photos like Cruz's lead in a straight line to Weinstein's aberrant behaviour but we need to wonder why images like that are necessary and how they contribute to women's degradation, rather than freedom. Or empowerment. My view is that they don't, so, why be complicit with them?

### **31 October 2017 / THE PROBLEM OF SEXUALIZED SELF-PRESENTATION, AGAIN: SEARCHING FOR ITS ROOTS IN VICTORIAN TIMES**

Reading these days Peter Bailey's excellent *Popular Culture and Performance in the Victorian City* (1998), I was particularly surprised by his chapter on "The Victorian barmaid as cultural prototype." First, I loved Bailey's knack of brilliantly describing

layers of thriving Victorian city life that are missing in the Victorian fiction I teach (despite Dickens!). Also, because what he narrates is part of a so-far incomplete 'history of looking,' which apparently Roland Barthes demanded (Bailey claims), and that today seems more urgent than ever. I refer here to the issue of my previous post: the problem of women's sexualized public (self)-representation.

Bailey's thesis is that the English barmaid of the newly refurbished Victorian pubs of the 1880s and 1890s belongs in the same category as the sexualized female body on display of the actresses, particularly those of the London music hall and the new musical comedy of the period. He argues that unlike the tavern girl serving tables and, thus, always the object of much unwanted groping and propositioning, the bar placed the barmaid firmly off-limits while emphasizing her theatrical display, as if on a stage (the area behind the bar became her own spectacular territory).

Bailey explains in all detail how barmaids were selected for their beauty and, to a certain extent, elegance (or poise), which means that often gentlemen's daughters were employed as such. He notes that, logically, their position behind the bar emphasized the upper part of their bodies, with the area from the waist downwards becoming practically irrelevant (also because of the heavy multilayered Victorian skirts). Thus, the barmaids' sexualized display depended on the shape of their torso, arms, neck and face, with hands playing, it seems, a major erotic part as targets of fleeting touch for male clients. Note that barmaids had a strict dress code and wore black dresses which covered their bodies from the neck to the feet. Even so, drinkers, whether gentlemen or otherwise, found these women unequivocally alluring. There is, by the way, no suggestion in Bailey's essay that they were empowered by this public display; he very unambiguously explains that barmaids were exploited by their male employers (who decided to display them in this erotic way) and, in addition, overworked. The quick turnover of pretty faces was another constant.

The Victorian extension of the stage to the pub is interesting because unlike what happened with actresses and female dancers it did not use the excuse of the artistic performance for blatantly erotic bodily display. It was a purely commercial strategy to sell beverage.

The shock of seeing actresses on the English stage for the first time during the Restoration period (a habit that Charles II imported from France, where he had been exiled) had, logically, worn out by the time Victoria was crowned in 1837. Yet we tend to forget that from the 1830s onwards, when Romantic ballet was introduced in France with *La Sylphide*, ballerina's skirts were progressively shortened to reveal a surprising amount of flesh according to Victorian standards. The revealing tutu showing Marie Taglioni's pretty ankles in that pioneering ballet must have seemed extremely erotic to 1832 audiences, and I mean here the long, gauzy skirt, not the stiff variety that shows the full leg. Indeed, there are doubts about the etymology of the odd word 'tutu'. A popular theory is that the gentlemen fond of fondling ballerinas' bottoms, as they could easily do in the foyer of the Paris Opera, jokingly referred to the skirt by their colloquial name for the dancers' derrière. Today, of course, a ballerina in

a tutu appears to be a delicately chaste figure, very different from your average pole dancer cum stripper.

This leads me back to the English barmaid and to a mind-boggling puzzle: if fully clothed women were found to be alluring just because they could be ogled at behind a bar, there was perhaps no need to start the progressive stripping game that leads to the ridiculous Playboy bunny waitress in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century and to her topless equivalent not much later. This makes me think of a male character in Colin McInnes' never sufficiently appreciated novel *Absolute Beginners* (1959), nicknamed the Fabulous Hoplite, who poses for porn photos always with all his clothes on. Certainly, men have always managed to be sexy while fully dressed in unwieldy fashions, from your dark business suit to the more colourful (also baggier) outfits of current urban styles.

What is it then with women and un/dressing? And where does it stop? I always joke with my students that if a Victorian lady walked into our classroom she would be surprised by a) seeing a woman teaching a university class, b) everyone's state of undress, including mine. Victorian underwear covered infinitely much more skin than our flimsy, tiny summer outfits. What is funny is how there is always margin to be scandalized no matter how far we go. Coco Chanel, who introduced in the 1920s the short skirt below the knee so favoured by the flappers of her time, found Mary Quant's 1960s mini-skirt disgraceful. For the last few years, the reigning garment among young girls is the hot pant, which makes the mini-skirt seem positively the pinnacle of elegance... It is very nice to be free of Victorian corsets but where does the public undressing of the female body stop? And I'm not even considering the practice of top less exposure on beaches. Will it be ever extended to other public spaces... like a classroom??!!

Here's something very obvious: women's freedom of behaviour and movement has been greatly increased by getting rid of restrictive garments; yet, whereas much has changed regarding which parts of female bodies can be displayed in public, women's bodies remain heavily sexualized, much more so than men's. Victorian bourgeois men decided to abandon the flamboyant dress style of the idle aristocratic men and conceal their bodies beneath the dark fabric of the uniform business suit. Women were for a while in the 1980s tempted by the masculinised power suit with big shoulder pads but even office wear is now far more varied for women than for men. What remains tricky is how much you can display of your womanly body before crossing the thin line dividing personal freedom from the others' freedom to ogle at you. This is because the rules are shifting all the time: a Victorian lady would not show her ankles, whereas we think nothing of showing our legs from hip to toe. Hot pants seem also useless to cover the low parts of bottoms.

Women decide how much of their body they wish to display in public, which explains why, despite the insistence of *haute couture* designers in the last twenty years, transparent tops worn without a bra are hardly ever seen (or are they?). There are also occasions in which wearing one of them with a bra may seem appropriate (a private romantic dinner?), while others times and places may never be right (a lecture on

Victorian Literature...). The problem of the sexualized public display is that it invents its own occasions and pretends it is part of 'normal' life. Yes, I'm talking about red-carpet events.

As we all know, these events are a publicity stunt designed to sell products and careers, usually connected with film, television or popular music; and, of course, the fashions and cosmetics on display. That the funny phrase 'wardrobe malfunction' has become so commonly used in the press covering red-carpet events shows that something is malfunctioning and it might not be the wardrobe. Last week, for instance, Catherine Zeta-Jones's perplexing new face, displayed at the 'FIFA Best' gala to honour distinguished football players, showed that anti-ageing plastic surgery also often malfunctions.

I am well aware that sexual abuse is not connected with the dress code in a direct way, as women have been abused no matter what they wear. The point I have been making in my last two posts is that even we women are confused about how our freedom to dress as we want intersects with the (patriarchal) imposition to look sexy and play the part. One may wear a mini-skirt for comfort one day and for seduction another, depending on the situation and this is how we use our freedom. The problem is that not all men understand that freedom and still go by old dress codes suggesting that women who show their ankles are 'asking for it'.

How do we break out of this complicated situation? It seems that there is bound to be always a time lag between what women decide and what men learn to respect and accept, which makes clarifying each step taken towards freedom particularly important. I know that the quaint phrase 'dress with modesty' sounds very silly at a time when pre-teen boys are already consuming great amounts of on-line pornography and forcing their demands for sexual gratification onto girls their age. Yet, perhaps taking a step back and dressing for elegance or comfort rather than sexiness might be more liberating for women. And educating girls to say 'no' long before matters threaten to get out of hand.

And, yes, educating the dinosaurs lagging behind into the new times. If they can be educated at all, which I doubt. And I mean of all ages, pre-teen to ninety-nine, for history advances but prehistoric monsters still cling to our times.

## **14 November 2017 / THE ANONYMIZATION OF AUTHORSHIP: A GROWING TREND**

It turns out that 'anonymization' is a concept used in the handling of data, to ensure the privacy of the persons providing the information. This is not how I am using the concept here. I refer, instead, to the process by which persons who make important contributions to the fiction we love best, whether as participants or authors, remain anonymous, unknown to the crowds. I'll refer here mostly to *Star Wars*, as this is the

mega-text that has provoked the thinking behind this post, yet, as you will see, this is a matter beyond popular fiction.

Recently, on 29 October, many news outlets carried the obituary of John Mollo. You've never heard of him? Should you have? Judge for yourself: this is the costume designer that won an Oscar in 1978 for the first *Star Wars* film, now known as *Episode IV – A New Hope*. He also won an Oscar, together with Bhanu Athaiya, for *Gandhi* (1982). The designs for the iconic costumes of George Lucas' film, by the way, were not only Mollo's; he actually materialized ideas suggested by artist and production designer Ralph McQuarrie, also responsible for the atmospheric set décor, the awesome spaceships and so on.

This means that, just to mention one example, McQuarrie and Mollo are the authors of the suit that makes Darth Vader such a memorable, lasting icon. Yet, we tend to cut the middlemen/women off authorship in cinema and attribute all the merit to the film director, which is downright silly. In a similar vein, checking yesterday out of sheer curiosity who drew the lovely Poppy for the film *Trolls* (2016), I learned that the artist in question, Craig Kellerman, is very much admired as a character designer in animation. I had never heard about him, though. I see Poppy everyday but the illustration on my office wall is signed 'Dreamworks' not Kellerman... And I had no idea that so many animation films that I like have characters created by the same artist (do check his IMDB entry).

More on this matter. On Friday 3 I found myself offering a presentation on *Star Wars*'s Obi-Wan Kenobi during a seminar on emotion and popular culture. I shared the session with my good friend Fernando Ángel Moreno, who spoke of how the Lovecraftian idea of cosmic horror applies to the saga (it does indeed!). During my talk I quoted two juicy bits of dialogue from the TV series *Star Wars: The Clone Wars*, but I'm sorry to say that I didn't know to whom I should attribute the text. A screenwriter was credited for each episode but also a script supervisor, both responding to the series creator and, ultimately, to whoever took charge of the series at Lucas Film. I cannot say, then, who made the crucial decisions about Obi-Wan's characterization that I discussed. The authors remain anonymous despite their presence in the episode credits. And this worries me, as I'm used to novelists making all the decisions and stepping on firm ground when I do literary studies.

In this regard, Fernando pointed out that in the new *Star Wars* films the person truly controlling the evolution of characters and story is producer Kathleen Kennedy, who entered the saga with *Episode VIII – The Force Awakens* (2015); recall that *Star Wars* no longer belongs to Lucas (he sold his baby to Disney... amazing!). Beyond the films, of course, *Star Wars* sprawls all over two textual multiverses, now labelled 'Canon' and 'Legends', which one single researcher can never ever make sense of, not even several teams. This is, I should say, a serious problem for the study of popular fiction, particularly in the audiovisual branch.

The understanding of audiovisual authorship was distorted apparently for ever when, as it is well known, the contributors to *Cahiers du Cinema* (founded in 1951)

determined that for all purposes the author of a film is the director. This surprised both producers, who in the Hollywood studio system were the main originators of films, and humble film directors employed by that system, such as John Ford, who saw themselves suddenly hailed as artists when they regarded themselves as craftsmen. Unfortunately, this view of authorship totally eclipsed the screen writer, still today the most misunderstood contributor to films. Also, as the case of John Mollo shows, other artists were relegated to being an anonymous face in the production team. Film credits grew as these film workers demanded an acknowledgement of their efforts and so did the list of Oscar categories; even so, try to find a film spectator who can name a favourite film editor, or sound designer... I can't even name screen writers, which is a shame...

In TV series, matters appear to have gone back to the old Hollywood studio system with creators/producers getting all the credit and both episode directors and writers being overlooked as authors. However, since nobody bothers to teach these matters, I'm sure that many youngsters are growing up today thinking, as I did, that actors write the films, lines, scenes and all the rest (I was much impressed by how inventive the ubiquitous Charlton Heston appeared to be); not even what directors do is clear to us. (Please note that sometimes actors do write the lines: the famous sentence about tears in the rain in the speech by the replicant Roy Batty at the end of *Blade Runner* (1982) was contributed by Dutch actor Rutger Hauer. NOT written by Ridley Scott...).

How about print fiction, which comes in books with the name of the author on the cover? Recently, I read the umpteenth article warning about how piracy is destroying the book industry, this time from the point of view of young writers in the middle of writing novel series (see <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/nov/06/pirated-ebooks-threaten-future-of-serial-novels-warn-authors-maggie-stiefvater>). Something that very much surprised me is the lack of respect that piratical readers are showing for authors, even when they do like their work. And the downright cheekiness. Author Maggie Stiefvater complained that if sales of her books go any lower, her series (the *Shiver and Raven Cycle*) will be cancelled by her publisher. A reader immediately twitted back "I never bought ur books I read them online pirated".

Leaving aside how digital e-book readers have made it easier for all of us to download books illegally uploaded by others, I would argue that anonymization is also to blame. In this case, although it's a different kind of anonymization from that of the audiovisual industry it is possibly connected. In both cases there appears to be a serious lack of awareness on the side of the consumers of what producing the film or print text entails. Also, the constant flow of film and TV releases, and of book launches, seems to suggest that there will always be someone generation fiction even if particular persons stop. That's the kind of anonymization I mean. This also has to do with falling average standards. I used to buy lots of books confident that it was money well used but I have become now a very wary customer, tired of being tricked by overhyped fiction (or academic research...) not worth 20 euros a volume, or much more if we think of academic publications.

Some readers' comments appended to the article I have mentioned argued that Spotify has solved the problem for music (but please remember that unlike musicians writers make no money out of touring); perhaps Netflix and similar platforms are doing the same for film and TV. In both cases, however, the principle of anonymization applies, worsened by the algorithm system that keeps suggesting similar texts to consumers. Music is increasingly becoming muzak, originally the name of a company founded in the 1950s that sold background music to department stores and similar places, later a label used for the kind of music thus marketed. I often find myself in the kind of clothes shop which pesters you with loud music, wondering how specific songwriters feel about their creative work being used in that way. I'm not a Netflix subscriber, and I don't watch series, but I am also constantly flabbergasted by how my students describe binge watching as a background activity that they combine with others, such as cleaning up the house (and study??). This is what the radio used to be for (or still is, I'm not sure).

Before I lose my thread, let me say that anonymization is also visible in the increasing difficulties to recall names and titles in all areas. Studios started advertising films using the tag line 'by the director of *Fight Club*' rather than 'by David Fincher' because spectators showed no interest in recalling directors' names. I haven't seen any film yet announced as 'with the handsome guy in *Troy*' rather than 'with Brad Pitt' but I assume this might soon happen. As for books, a funny thing is going on. On the one hand, I often come across names of 'world-famous, best-selling' authors who are totally unknown to me; on the other, readers mention to me books they have enjoyed but can't remember the author (and give you just an approximate title).

Perhaps the genre in which anonymization is most worrying is... academic writing. The prose we use is so homogeneous that when I read collective volumes I have very serious problems remembering any of the contributors' names and distinguishing one chapter from the next. We all use the same style, made even flatter by peer reviewing as any trace of authorial originality tends to be erased. Try being witty in an academic article and see who publishes it... Even though I should say that the average standard is pretty high, with quite sophisticated academic work being now produced, few academic pieces have a distinctive voice. To be honest, I started writing this blog to find my own voice as I'm not even sure it is present in my work. I wish I could write like Terry Eagleton but when I asked him for an interview how he had managed to be a clearly recognizable author with an essayistic voice of his own, he candidly told me this is an option only open to top-rank academics like himself with well-established names. The rest of us, I'm afraid, must aim for the transparent, insipid prose that now keeps academic authorship anonymized.

What a strange zeitgeist: I need to think further how the rampant narcissism of those who create nothing combines with the fall of the creators into anonymity.



## 21 November 2017 / SAY YES TO THE DRESS!: THE GUILTY PLEASURES OF A FEMINIST

Every time I binge-watch the reality show *Say Yes to the Dress!* (usually a couple of hours on Saturday afternoon) I wonder why I like it. This is a series which narrates how brides purchase their bridal gown at Kleinfeld's, a Manhattan store specializing in this kind of fashion (see <https://www.tlc.com/tv-shows/say-yes-to-the-dress/>). Each episode lasts a little over 20 minutes and is usually based on a topic that links together a few brides. This might be the disagreements with their entourage, or the determination to buy a particular gown, or the body shape of the bride, or the budget limitations... etc. I tell myself that, precisely, what I enjoy is the art of the show writers in making the most of what appears to be, in principle, a very limited story: 'bride buys gown'.

This justification, however, only satisfies partially the feminist in me. When I had the chance to buy a wedding gown I simply decided not to do so, which means that I'm not watching the show because I wish I were one of the brides. It's not a personal matter, clearly. I must also clarify that I don't particularly like weddings: they are, if you think about it, a theatrical sub-genre that should be studied as such but they're not, on the whole, a spectacle that I appreciate very much. I more or less understand why couples want to display themselves before family and friends in this way but, perhaps because so often a divorce follows a wedding, I find both ceremony and banquet a perplexing performance. Sorry.

Let me, then, acknowledge the foundation of my guilty pleasure in watching *Say Yes to the Dress!*: it's the highly emotional moment when the bride finds the perfect gown and can't help crying. Obvious, isn't it? This is the moment around which each episode segment is built, and the reason why the brides that leave Kleinfeld's with no gown are so disappointed (and disappointing). Still, acknowledging that I'm hooked on that kind of emotion does not explain why. I can go here in two completely different directions. One, the academic anthropological argument suggesting that these tears bring back to me an idea of the sacredness of marriage which has been lost with the devaluation of romantic love. The other, the personal melodramatic argument: since all is so bleak in our world, I'm grateful for small mercies and moments of truly felt happiness.

Of course, like any reality show *Say Yes to the Dress!* is a fake narrative. I fail to understand the many criticisms that the series constantly receives about the falsity of the events narrated. By this I do not mean that the brides and their feelings are fictional; what I mean is that a) they go through a process of casting (publicly acknowledged, no secrets here), and b) their stories are edited to suit the show's needs. I marvel at how good the montage of faces showing reactions to the brides' good and bad choices is in very show. The crew films for hours to produce a clear-cut narrative which unfolds in just a few minutes. And this is inevitably the story of how there is always one perfect choice, once the bad ones are discarded.

This dynamic reproduces the romantic plot behind the purchase of the gown: the brides cry because their finding of the perfect dress mirrors their finding of the perfect

partner. This is another reason why I'm addicted to the show: the description of the future husbands. Each bride needs to explain briefly how she met her groom and why she loves him, and this provides very rich data to understand what women want: a man who is caring, one's best friend and gifted with a good sense of humour. The photos of the couples tell a parallel story, showing a variety of romantic pairings, from the classic high school sweethearts to the May/December couples with an obvious financial incentive. Yet, for once, I like being reassured that the world (well, the USA) is full of good men that these brides do want to marry. I wonder, naturally, whether the marriages last for long. Kleinfeld's welcomes in some episodes second-chance, divorced brides but, on average, the women in the show are new to marriage. And greatly excited by the prospect.

The production company, TLC, has sold the format to British, Irish and Australia. Funnily, I watched five minutes of the UK version and it didn't work for me; to be honest, a quite tasteless bride with a fixation for a tacky gown completely put me off. This doesn't mean that the US brides I watch every Saturday have a marvellous taste... and that might be another source of attraction. I do wonder what the Spanish version would be like and I tell myself that the land of Pronovias and Rosa Clarà is much better equipped to offer brides tasty, classy outfits but, then, I might be deluding myself. Whatever the case might be, whereas I am awed by the gowns that some brides choose (my favourite still is a red gown, chosen by a bride who had never met in the flesh her internet lover), I am constantly amused by what some ridiculous brides choose. And totally baffled by the insistence that some show on wearing ultra-sexy gowns to present themselves publicly as trophy wives.

The show, then, has a manifest peeping-tom charm. I find American society quite strange and *Say Yes to the Dress!* often confirms that it is an alien world, in terms of taste, class configuration, romantic expectations and even bodily shape. I don't want to check the internet for criticisms of the show's castings (in fact, I don't want to check the internet at all to keep the illusion flowing), but I appreciate the variety of brides on display in terms of race and looks, meaning not just thin/fat but also petite/ultra tall, etc. The whole point, as the store staff insists, is that a bride should feel beautiful, which is not the same as *being* beautiful. Of course, she needs the right budget, though I can say that spending 15000\$ as some brides do, does not mean that you get the best gown for you (it's often the opposite). Still, you need at least 2500\$ which, while not an exaggerated amount, is quite a lot for most working-class brides.

Does watching *Say Yes to the Dress!* affect my feminist credentials? Am I embarrassing myself by acknowledging this guilty pleasure? I don't think so. I could use here even the feminist argument that the show is a very complete laboratory for Gender Studies. An episode featuring a lesbian couple, for instance, implicitly invited audiences to accept gay marriage (also to ponder why one bride was wearing a gown and the other a tuxedo). The view is partial, for the gay men are missing from the picture, unless you count the show's only male presence, Kleinfeld's fashion consultant and gown designer Randy Fenoli, as a major gay presence. All the brides apparently support the heteronormative foundation of marriage and of wedding pageantry and this means that by watching the show and adding to the audience, I am also backing patriarchy,

which would certainly affect negatively my feminist credentials. I cannot claim that I get pleasure from watching women make free choices because, for all I know, most of the brides might be totally deluded and/or anti-feminist to boot. Yet, there is something appealing in a woman's taking centre-stage. Perhaps for the wrong reasons, I know...

In the past (I'm thinking of my mother's generation and of 1960s marriages), women were allowed to shine on their wedding day in a hypocritical way, as the ceremony usually marked their patriarchal subjection to a husband. Today, we need to assume, things are different and the women who choose to marry and spend thousands of euros on a bridal gown are making a different kind of statement, hopefully turning on its head the traditional meaning of weddings. Happily for all, going through a wedding is now a choice, not an obligation. I would not call a wedding a feminist event but, then, some of my feminist friends have married in that way and even purchased bridal gowns, never mind that they were not necessarily white.

Feminist or no feminist, man or woman, heterosexual or LGBTBI+, we all love a promise of happiness. This can be symbolized in many ways and by many objects and in *Say Yes to the Dress!* the bridal gown is that kind of symbol. Clearly, it also means other things, such as the bride's pleasure in looking as good as possible, and, yes, of course, the princess dream, which seems to be common to many women in all classes. Although feminism rejects that fantasy as patriarchal, the decision to display yourself looking your best and being as happy as possible because you have found love seems to me perfectly compatible with a feminist mentality.

Still, guilty pleasures are there to celebrate our own contradictions...

## 28 November 2017 / BACK TO BASICS: SCARED BY THE VAMPIRE IN DRACULA

[This is long and contains many spoilers, be warned!]

Reading Bram Stoker's novel *Dracula* with fresh eyes is practically impossible. Even new readers carry with them countless images of the vampire in fiction and film (and in many other media, even toys and food). Those of us who return to this bizarre text now and then do so with our vision also colonized by the ubiquitous media vampire, regardless of our previous readings of the text. I've tried to become, nonetheless, a reader as inexperienced as possible in my recent re-reading of this atmospheric novel, carried out in preparation of lectures beginning next week. And, to my surprise, I have found Stoker's masterpiece scarier than ever.

In the introduction to my oldish 1983 edition of *Dracula* (Oxford's World Classics), A.N. Wilson gently mocks Stoker's efforts, sentencing that while "[t]he writing is of a powerful, workaday sensationalistic kind", in his view "No one in their right mind would think of Stoker as a 'great writer'". I agree that *Dracula* is not in the same league as

“*Middlemarch* or *Madame Bovary* or *War and Peace*” but, then, we’re comparing here different kinds of talent. Eliot, Flaubert and Tolstoy could never have written *Dracula*, for good or bad. And it does take a still poorly understood type of talent to make this weird vampire tale survive since its inception in 1897, after spawning so many other creatures of the night. Also, if you check as I have done, how many ‘original texts’ Stoker uses in each of his chapters to maintain the illusion that his gothic yarn is ‘real’, you’ll see that he did make a remarkable effort to compose his novel. This apparently extends even to his having produced a quite accurate version of how Dutchmen speak English in Van Helsing’s singular idiolect.

Unfortunately, the plethora of ridiculous American-style vampires plaguing us since Anne Rice published *Interview with the Vampire* in 1976, presenting one of the creatures as a Romantic hero, has done much harm to the vampire myth—I forgot to say that Wilson calls Stoker a myth-maker. In the original novel, as some commentators have noticed, Count Dracula is actually a secondary, even minor, character. His actions are narrated by others—his actual or prospective victims—and they always see him as a menacing, predatory monster; this is how vampires should be portrayed. Edward Cullen and his kind are, excuse me, idiotic embodiments of the still more idiotic idea that a woman might find satisfaction in loving a monster. Victorian Mina does find satisfaction in her Christian conviction that by staking and beheading her harasser the gentlemen in her circle may be saving the Count’s soul, but she is *never* in love with Dracula. To my dismay (and disappointment), when I explained in a recent seminar that there is no romantic plot in Stoker’s novel, a young girl announced that this is why she will never read the book.

Stephanie Meyer’s already démodé *Twilight* saga borrows its romantic plot from James V. Hart’s absurd screenplay for Francis Ford Coppola’s so-called *Bram Stoker’s Dracula* (1992). This well-received adaptation significantly deviates from the original by supposing that Mina is a reincarnation of Dracula’s long-lost lover Elisabetta, who committed suicide centuries before when both were ruthlessly persecuted by their Ottoman enemies. The Count embraced vampirism in despair but seeing her lover reborn in the portrait of Mina that Jonathan carries with him, he determines to win her back. What is baffling about Hart and Coppola’s work is that theirs is certainly the most accomplished rendering of Stoker’s novel ever seen on the screen. As I re-read the book, I marvelled at how exact some of the filmed scenes were, even despite the bizarre outfits (Lucy’s burial/bridal dress) and the strange tone used by some performers. Anthony Hopkins played Van Helsing right after playing Hannibal Lecter and something of this vampiric character is visible in his Dutch vampire hunter.

I’m going to list next some of the moments that make Stoker’s *Dracula* so scary (most of them well known) and try to figure out what factors are usually overlooked. Perhaps this is obvious to any reader but I’ll claim that the three strongest points of this novel are: Stoker’s grounding of his paranormal tale on the technoscience of his ultra-modern late 19<sup>th</sup> century Victorian England, the urgency in the swift race against time in the last third of the novel to save Mina’s soul by killing Dracula and, above all, a very deft use of the hypnagogic state of consciousness, that is to say, of the phase between wakefulness and sleep. The most terrifying moments happen when characters cannot

tell whether they are dreaming or being actually attacked. I'm not sure whether Stoker wrote in this way thinking that his readers would read his novel in bed, but the scenes can easily generate nightmares if read before falling asleep. Give it a try... if you dare.

Here are the most horrific touches. In Chapter 2, Harker describes the Count who, incidentally, begins the novel as an old man and progressively ages back towards youth as blood nourishes him. Dracula's "cruel-looking" mouth with its "peculiarly sharp white teeth" and his "extraordinary pallor" warn us that he's no ordinary man; but what really scares us is that his hands sport "hairs in the centre of the palm". When Harker feels their touch he cannot "repress a shudder"—could you? During his imprisonment in Dracula's castle, Jonathan is shocked by how his jailer pretends that he's staying as a free guest—when told that he can leave, Harker finds a pack of wolves at the door.

There are a few even more hair-raising moments. One is the sight of the Count creeping down the wall, "using every projection and inequality to move downwards with considerable speed, just as a lizard moves along a wall". Another one is Dracula's offering to his brides of a bag with something squirming inside which, when opened, releases "a gasp and a low wail, as of a half-smothered child". And, of course, the death of the poor baby's mother, attacked by the Count's feral minions: "There was no cry from the woman, and the howling of the wolves was but short. Before long they streamed away singly, licking their lips". Notice the concise phrasing.

The horrific events on board the *Demeter*, the Russian ship carrying Dracula to Whitby (Chapter 7), appear to be the earliest predecessor of the film *Alien*. If, as its slogan went, 'in space none can hear you scream', the same happens at sea during the *Demeter*'s doomed voyage as Dracula decimates the crew. I must also highlight, obviously, Lucy's rape in the graveyard, witnessed by Mina (Chapter 8). Rape? Yes, indeed. Mina does not know about Dracula but we do and, so, her inability to clearly see what is going on is totally unnerving. Lucy is here sleepwalking at night in Whitby's graveyard: "There was undoubtedly something, long and black, bending over the half-reclining white figure. I called in fright, 'Lucy! Lucy!' and something raised a head, and from where I was I could see a white face and red, gleaming eyes". Mina boldly rushes to her friend's aid but, by then, the phallic 'something' is gone. Not from our minds.

Other dreadful moments colour the failed attempts to protect poor Lucy. Her mother dies of a heart attack when a wolf crashes into their bedroom window. As she dies, Mrs. Westenra tears the garlic flowers off Lucy's neck, leaving her vulnerable again to Dracula's bite-rape procedure. Lucy writes that "I tried to stir, but there was some spell upon me"; her mother's dead body also weighs her down. Later, once Lucy dies, a victim of this paralysing dread, we find the most stunning passage in the whole book: Van Helsing's stark declaration to Dr. Seward that, since Lucy is actually un-dead, he "shall cut off her head and fill her mouth with garlic, and I shall drive a stake through her body" (Chapter 13). Appallingly, Seward says: "It made me shudder to think of so mutilating the body of the woman whom I had loved. And yet the feeling was not so strong as I had expected". How callous and... chilling.

Lucy's fiancé Arthur is initially dismayed but he soon proceeds gleefully to do the deed, with hands that "never trembled nor even quivered". Instead of the shortish stake used in films, Arthur impales Lucy with a 90 cm (three-feet) monster weapon as "a hideous, blood-curdling screech came from the opened red lips". Once the terrible deflowering concludes she looks her old pre-vampire virginal self, seemingly satisfied that her soul has been saved. Please recall that Stoker imagined this sensational assault as a straightforward horror scene, and as a scene to show the men's misogyny. This is doubly terrifying for us.

Van Helsing's list of the vampire's powers in Chapter 18 is far more daunting than any similar list of features in other versions. Here Dracula is "strong in person as twenty men", extremely cunning, a powerful necromancer, and capable of appearing "within limitations" whenever and wherever he wants. Most vampires are burnt by daylight but the Count can walk in the sun though only as a vulnerable mortal. The film *Nosferatu* (1922), an illegal adaptation, introduced (I think) the trope of the lethal sun-rays (or was it the serial *Varney the Vampire*?). Proof that Dracula can appear as he wishes is how, once invited in by madman Renfield into Dr. Seward's home, the Count attacks Mina after reaching her bedroom as a mysterious mist. "I thought that I was asleep" she records in her journal, and our horror is amplified because rational Mina cannot tell that this was no dream. The same happened to her husband, remember, in his ordeal with Dracula's voluptuous brides.

Nothing, however, is as strikingly pornographic and violent as the scene in Chapter 21 when Arthur, Morris, Seward and Van Helsing catch Dracula in Mina and Jonathan's bed. Harker is "breathing heavily as though in a stupor" and this is the revolting sight the men face: "With his left hand [Dracula] held both Mrs. Harker's hands, keeping them away with her arms at full tension; his right hand gripped her by the back of the neck, forcing her face down on his bosom. Her white nightdress was smeared with blood, and a thin stream trickled down the man's bare breast which was shown by his torn-open dress". This oral rape and/or bloody fellatio, however, is infantilized by Seward who reports to us that "The attitude of the two had a terrible resemblance to a child forcing a kitten's nose into a saucer of milk to compel it to drink". Some kitten, some milk... This is, excuse me, the climax of the whole story.

It is, in any case, Stoker's merit as a superbly good story-teller that the anti-climax is also full of suspense. In their thrilling chase of the Count back to his Transylvanian lair (he needs to be killed or Mina will become a vampire when she dies, even if never bitten again), our heroes even take the Orient Express!! For, as we are told again and again, this is the 19<sup>th</sup> century with a vengeance and the vampire cannot compete with the rush of the modern world. And rush the gang of heroes do, all the way to Dracula's crumbling castle, where Van Helsing indulges in more female decapitation (of the brides), and Morris finally shows that he is not a superfluous addition: the Bowie knife of the American hunter is the tool that stakes Dracula's heart. Thus is his soul saved, as Mina wishes, although, perplexingly, Morris is also killed (by a gypsy henchman of the Count).

In case you're interested, the word 'blood' appears in the text 115 times ('vampire', just 28). 'Soul' is mentioned 65 times, and the verb 'save' 34. Now here's the surprise: 'sleep' appears 193 times ('asleep', 47) but 'dream' only 18, and 'nightmare' just 6. The biggest surprise of all is that the real keyword of *Dracula* is 'time', with 386 appearances; 'late' is used 60 times ('rush' 10, 'hurry' 10). And 'train', 36... they didn't have modern cars back then. Characters rush here and there in mortal fear that time is running out and that they are too late to save those who risk losing blood and soul while they're apparently asleep, unaware that they are actually under attack by a monstrous vampire. This gives *Dracula* its amazing tension, its terse suspense, and its huge capacity to scare.

Step aside, Cullen and company.

## 5 December 2017 / WHO DARES IMAGINE THE NEAR FUTURE? ON SELF-TAUGHT AIs AND HACKABLE NEURAL IMPLANTS

This summer I started working on Indian sf writer Vandana Singh (see my post of 11 July on her short fiction) and I came to the conclusion that I really needed to do something to diminish my appalling ignorance of contemporary science. I mean something beyond reading science fiction... Just by chance I came across the daily newsletter offered by the Australian popular science magazine *Cosmos* and I signed up. For the last few months, then, I have been starting my working day by reading some of the (brief) articles referenced in their messages. It's really very exciting.

The world looks different when you start paying attention to how scientists are fiercely arguing whether the fabled dark matter (the very fabric of the universe) exists or not, or when you are told that evolution might be actually be happening in just two generations and not as slowly as we believed. Last week I found myself voting for the best artistic image produced by scientists photographing brains: I didn't know neurons could be that beautiful! Today I got enticed by an article about a marvellous finding of dinosaurs eggs in China... And, yes, of course, taking into account the horribly complicated political crisis that Catalonia is going through I can well say that science is giving me a different, healthier mental framework to cling on. The world looks in *Cosmos* far bigger and thrilling than that scary place portrayed in *La Vanguardia* or in *The Guardian*, with all the miseries of politics and economics.

This doesn't mean that my daily intake of science is always tranquil. I am not at all, as you may guess, a technophobe and would even describe myself as a moderate post-humanist in favour of improving human existence with all the science we can use. Yet, I was very, very scared by a *Cosmos* article called "YouRobot: Neurotech may destroy your privacy and your rights"... Before I go into that, let me explain that while bland fiction about the life crises of old and young middle-class people, or about queens with dragons, or about surviving zombie hordes, occupies our attention, much better dramatic stories are going on in scientific research. You may have even missed the day when human history changed.

If you recall, IBM's computer Deep Blue coolly beat world chess champion Gary Kasparov back in 1996-7 in a six-game chess match. Google's program AlphaGo defeated go grandmaster Lee Sedol (the best player on Earth) by a 4-1 score back on 15 March 2016, a truly historic day. How's AlphaGo (part of project DeepMind) different from Deep Blue? Brace yourself: AlphaGo is a self-teaching a.i. which learned to play the game of go better than any human being in just three days and after simply being fed the rules. In contrast, Deep Blue was fed a myriad matches, which it learned to process very fast. If you don't see how AlphaGo makes a very deep difference in human History... you need to catch up. Urgently. See, to begin with <https://cosmosmagazine.com/mathematics/all-systems-go-what-it-play-against-computer>.

What really matters, I'm learning through *Cosmos*, is not at all what makes the front page. For instance, did you know that "116 founders of AI and robotics companies have called on the UN to ban lethal autonomous weapons", that is to say, killer robots? (<https://cosmosmagazine.com/technology/killer-robot-threat-must-be-faced-say-experts>). Yes, James Cameron's film *Terminator* (1984) is already happening. I learned in Richard Morgan's novel *Black Man* (2013) that soldier robots are not in the end a very good idea, since they're hackable. He speculated that genetically modified human beings might make the armies of the future, which sounds like replacing a terrifying nightmare with even a worse one... And it is happening.

If you're not familiar with the word DARPA, then this would be the right time to check what they're up to: <https://www.darpa.mil/>. I would say that the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency is the closest thing we have to a classic mad doctor in Victor Frankenstein's style but with all the power of the US dollar. And if you just thought 'how about China?', well, let me explain that China, Japan, Singapore and South Korea are now producing cutting edge a.i., both anthropomorphic and otherwise, without any shared ethical guidelines for research whatsoever (<https://cosmosmagazine.com/physics/robots-bring-asia-into-the-ai-research-ethics-debate>). In plain English: they're building any kind of robot they can think of and nobody is checking on them. Nobody is checking on DARPA, either.

Before you think that I'm producing here a techno-advanced version of early 20<sup>th</sup> century 'yellow peril' let me finally focus on the scary story I mentioned earlier on (see <https://cosmosmagazine.com/the-future/yourobot-neurotech-may-destroy-your-privacy-and-your-rights>). If you have read William Gibson's classic cyberpunk novel *Neuromancer* (1984) you must be familiar with the concept of jacking into the net: Gibson's 'cowboys' are hackers provided with a cranial socket that allows them to link their brains to their computer terminals (or consoles) via a cable and a jack connector. Right, so it turns out that Elon Musk, Tesla's charismatic founder, also runs a less well-known company, Neuralink (<https://www.neuralink.com>), devoted to building a brain/computer interface (BCI or 'neural lace'). This was founded back in May 2016.

In principle, the idea of being able to think as fast as you computer sounds attractive, more or less, particularly if you still insist on playing go... I have always said that I



would consider having my brain tampered with if this would give me better processing capacity, mad as this may sound. Yet, I had missed, as you will see, a crucial detail.

I have just learned from the corresponding *Cosmos* article that a group of scientists and specialists in ethics, calling themselves the Morningside group, have warned that the Declaration of Helsinki, the Belmont Report, and the Asilomar AI Cautionary Principles (documents about which I knew absolutely nothing) are not sufficient to prevent neural implants from being exposed to invasive manipulation and hacking. The implants now being used to correct motor deficit in sufferers of diseases like Parkinson's, or to help paralysis victims to move objects, might be soon current—and capable of reading our thoughts. These are, just recall, electrical impulses that, sooner or later, will be decoded and controlled by powerful a.i. owned by corporations (and/or criminals)—a process to which Musk's Neuralink is actively promoting.

The situation is so complex I can't even begin to describe it but if you're worried that the contents of your cell phone and your personal computer might be accessible to anyone (not just hackers but also bona fide, um, companies like Google), just think of the scary possibility that your brain might soon be equally unprotected. The Morningside group apparently believe that new 'neurorights' enforced through international legislation would protect, attention!!!!, our identity, agency and self-awareness. But even they acknowledge that "history indicates that profit hunting will often trump social responsibility in the corporate world" (see Rafael Yuste et al, "Four Ethical Priorities for Neurotechnologies", *Nature* 8 November 2017, <https://www.nature.com/news/four-ethical-priorities-for-neurotechnologies-and-ai-1.22960>). This means that it's game over for human beings as we are now. Privacy, consent, free will and identity, as they warn us, might be over soon. That is to say, the subject which is at the core of humanist thought.

The Morningsiders offer as a hopelessly optimistic solution teaching ethics to anyone involved in BCI technology. In this way, these persons would learn "to pursue advances and deploy strategies that are likely to contribute constructively to society, rather than to fracture it". The group even proposes subjecting BCI sector workers to a new, specific Hippocratic Oath. Yet, it occurs to me that more than a few doctors must be in Elon Musk's payroll already and the oath is not preventing them from opening up our brains to outside interference.

Perhaps, just perhaps, just as current teenagers think that privacy is a relative, overvalued concept which only worries Jurassic baby-boomers, the next generation will think nothing of having their brains directly linked to Google, Amazon or Facebook. Or their Tesla car...

Brave new world indeed.

## 12 December 2017 / BOYS CONSUMING PORN: A BLEAK FUTURE FOR HETEROSEXUAL RELATIONSHIPS

If you talk to the truly caring parents of any young girl, you will be dismayed by the appalling panorama they paint of what should be a placid childhood but is not at all. I refer here specifically to the way in which the boys' consumption of porn from a very early age is poisoning the basic relationships between boys and girls and, indeed, the present and the future of heterosexuality. A recent survey—the Barómetro 2017 of ProyectoScopio produced by the Centro Reina Sofía sobre Adolescencia y Juventud de la Fundación de Ayuda contra la Drogadicción (FAD)—indicates that 27'4% of Spaniards aged 15-29 find couple-related violence and abuse 'normal' ([https://politica.elpais.com/politica/2017/11/13/actualidad/1510588777\\_948585.html](https://politica.elpais.com/politica/2017/11/13/actualidad/1510588777_948585.html)). What I'm going to discuss here today might offer a clue about why legislation and education are not altering this disastrous situation.

Here is what is happening, in a nutshell: the moment boys are provided with cellphones they use them to satisfy their curiosity about sex. Their Google searches soon lead to porn, which they watch with no parental control whatsoever, and any place they feel like (not just their room but also the school bus and even the school grounds...). The habit of watching porn may start as soon as 7, depending on when the boy is given his first cellphone. Let's suppose it's, rather, 10. By the time their own sexuality starts emerging, say around 12, they have been accumulating a long series of images from their porn consumption on which they base their own approach to sex.

The girls, who are far less curious about sex and not much interested in porn, do watch it anyway, sooner or later, to understand what the boys are talking about... and urgently demanding from them. Pre-teen and teen boys learn from porn not just a series of practices (which are not that common—think anal sex) but also an attitude: they develop a strong sense of entitlement over the girls' bodies in imitation of male porn actors. This manifests itself through a constant stream of completely inappropriate, bullying, sexualized behaviour which puts a lot of pressure on the girls, and to which many conform out of fear of being unpopular with boys. By the way, the cockier boys also happen to be the most popular ones. The better educated boys (who, surely, *must be* the majority) do nothing to shame their peers because they also submit to the abusers' alpha male strategies of command. The teachers may notice irregularities but do little, assuming that these are private matters. The parents may remain totally ignorant (most girls do not report what's done to them out of shame), or even downplay the abuse which their daughters endure as something trivial or, worse, mere child's play.

Does this sound crazy? I thought so, too. But a) ask the younger girls in your family what is going on, and b) do some online reading.

I started by googling "child porn consumption" and soon got a lot of links. I learned, for instance, that back in 2008, a 12-year-old boy was investigated by the Guardia Civil as part of a Spanish network of child porn consumers. Yes, correct: a consumer in the ring, not a victim. See <http://www.europapress.es/sociedad/sucesos-00649/noticia->

[nino-12-anos-investigado-consumir-pornografia-infantil-internet-20081010120059.html](http://nino-12-anos-investigado-consumir-pornografia-infantil-internet-20081010120059.html).

An article in the magazine *Mujer Hoy*, of February this year, simply titled “¿Por qué ven porno nuestros hijos?” (<http://www.mujerhoy.com/vivir/psicologia/201702/23/porno-nuestros-hijos-20170223103740.html>), mentioned a worrying report (also referenced in other articles) by Bitdefender, a company that sells online security systems. They may be exaggerating for purely commercial reasons, but, apparently 10% of all porn consumers in Spain are children under 10 (I’ll speculate that 95% of these are boys).

The figure is corroborated by the 2016 report issued by the Women and Equalities Committee of the British House of Commons, “Sexual Harassment and Sexual Violence in Schools” (<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmwomeq/91/91.pdf>).

According to this document, section 6 “Tackling the impact of pornography”, “There is extensive evidence that children’s perceptions of sex, consent, gender roles and relationships are changing as a result of the pornography they are seeing”. The report adds that a 2014 study in which over 1,000 British 16-21 year-olds were surveyed found that “Almost a quarter of young people were 12 years-old or younger when they first saw porn online (24.6%) and 7.3% *were under 10*” (my italics). A majority of 74% agreed that “pornography affects what young men and women expect from sex”, particularly men’s expectations. “The most common answer was that young men expect young women to behave like the women in porn films”—young women actually meaning here children of 12 upwards.

The article in *Mujer Hoy* to which I have referred is very critical of the parents’ casual approach to how their children use their computers and smartphones. Whereas home computers have often been the object of parental advice about how to prevent the little ones from being cyberbullied, or accessing inadequate websites, parents seem far less concerned about smartphones. This magazine article informs that 30% of all Spanish children have been given a smartphone (not just a plain cellphone) by the age of 10; 70% by the time they hit 12. Do the maths... Kaspersky Labs contributes a scary figure: 39,9% of all the websites visited by Spanish children have pornographic content; 53% of children aged 11-16 have seen explicit online porn—33% using a smartphone. I’m by no means a technophobe but I see no need at all to put in children’s hands smartphones, not just because of concerns about porn consumption but, needless to say, because children have learned to use these gadgets to bully each other mercilessly (as any child will explain if only you listen).

Following the internet thread I came across the names of Allison Havey and Deana Puccio, authors of, apparently, one of the best volumes offering parental advice on these thorny matters: *Sex, Likes and Social Media: Talking to our Teens in the Digital Age* (2016). They also run the website The Rap Project (<http://therapproject.co.uk/>), which aims to “raise awareness about personal safety and prevention in areas of rape and sexual assault, while openly discussing how pornography and social media influence attitudes and expectations. We also address how media can negatively affect body image and self-esteem”. As you may notice, they target teens but my impression

is that, the way we're going, the target demographic should be, rather, children 6-10. And I'm not mentioning the obvious elephant in the room: the rampant porn consumption by adult men, many of whom are fathers in charge of educating little boys. Check the internet and you will find dozens of links about employees watching porn at work, and even winning cases after being fired by rightly indignant employers.

All this has a very direct effect on girls' self-image, in ways you would never guess. Back in 2012 *The New York Times* published an article, "Off to Camp... but First to Wax?" ([http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/07/fashion/off-to-camp-but-first-a-wax.html?\\_r=2&ref=fashion](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/07/fashion/off-to-camp-but-first-a-wax.html?_r=2&ref=fashion)), which is an early example, it appears, of a piece discussing a new parental concern: should you let your 12-year-old daughter wax her armpits and legs, and even get a bikini line wax? This seems almost quaint, thinking of the many pieces published online from 2013 onward in which teen girls discuss intimate grooming, including matters such as whether to opt for a Brazilian wax (leaving only a 'landing strip' of hair) or a Hollywood wax (complete pubic hair removal). Guess where teens girls got the idea of shaving or waxing their pubic hair... Right indeed!! From their boyfriends' demands that they look like porn stars.

There is worse—brace yourself for what's coming now. An article published by *The Guardian* (in their Lifestyle section, sub-section Women!!!) reports that "More young girls asking GPs about genital cosmetic surgery, study finds" (<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2016/oct/06/more-young-girls-asking-gp-genital-cosmetic-surgery-study-finds>). The study, lead by Dr. Magdalena Simonis, of the University of Melbourne, found that 35% of Australian family doctors "reported seeing females younger than 18 years of age requesting FGCS" (female genital cosmetic surgery) (<http://bmjopen.bmj.com/content/6/9/e013010>). Labiaplasty has increased threefold in Australia, *The Guardian* article explains, "over the previous decade despite there being no increase in genital abnormalities". What Simonis found out is the "sociocultural influences" that lead to demanding labiaplasty affect all women; yet, whereas the older ones ask for this procedure after childbirth (or divorce), girls from 15 upwards are affected by "peer comments, the pressures of the fashion industry and exposure to pornography". Peer comments? I should say boyfriends' comments.

A similar piece run more recently by the BBC, lowers the age of British girls asking for labiaplasty to 9 (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-40410459>). A 14-year-old explains in an interview quoted in the article that she asked for an operation because "People around me were watching porn and I just had this idea that it should be symmetrical and not sticking out". Luckily, she was shown the right images and realized that she looked perfectly normal and, so, there was no need for any procedure. However, Paquita de Zulueta, a very experienced GP, is quoted saying that "I'm seeing young girls around 11, 12, 13 thinking there's something wrong with their vulva—that they're the wrong shape, the wrong size, and really expressing almost disgust". They all want to have what is now known in cosmetic surgery parlance as a Barbie vagina... And although the NHS claims that its doctors only operate on girls above 18 and always for medical reasons, it turns out that "In 2015-16, more than 200 girls under 18 had labiaplasty on the NHS. More than 150 of the girls were under 15".

Dr Naomi Crouch, presented as a “leading adolescent gynaecologist”, declares in this report that, she finds “it very hard to believe there are 150 girls with a medical abnormality”, adding that this type of surgery is beginning to be too close to (illegal) female genital mutilation.

It’s only going to get worse. Facebook has just announced the introduction of a new app, Messenger Kids, aimed at 6-12 year-olds. Yes, that’s right: 6 upwards. They promise to offer parents total control but, then, this is the company spectacularly failing to prevent all forms of trolling and bullying from affecting adult Facebook users... or should I say mostly women?

I’ll go back to what I have been preaching again and again: when gentlemanliness was lost, a valuable tool to curb down patriarchal men’s inappropriate behaviour was lost. There is absolutely no shaming mechanism that can tell young consumers of porn that they should never force girls into doing what they see on the screen. Legislation does not even apply to this matter and education is not addressing it because many educators simply do not know how to tackle what is going on under their own very noses. The parents are very much confused about the need to control children and might be themselves very often in need of counselling... Girls are not taught to defend themselves because the issues I am raising here are not raised at home, or only rarely.

How all this will lead to healthier heterosexual relationships in the near future is beyond me... unless the silent majority of well-educated boys and men speaks up. Because they’re the majority, right?

## 22 December 2017 /A GLOSSARY OF GENDER-RELATED WORDS (IN HOMAGE TO AMBROSE BIERCE’S *THE DEVIL’S DICTIONARY*)

**#metoo:** Hashtivist campaign used to evidence how commonplace sexual harassment is for women, in all professional contexts. A group of men responded by using the self-defensive hashtag #NotAllMen, instead of the better suited #LearnToBeGentlemen or #GoodMenShameHarassers. SEE: harassment.

**Agender:** Intelligent individual tired of the obnoxious gender binary, who has made the wise decision to assume that gender is irrelevant (sadly, it may be to yourself, but not to the others). SEE: asexual.

**Alleged rape:** Perplexing way in which the media refer to the misogynistic hate crime of rape and which has no parallel with other crimes (alleged murder? alleged robbery?). In the case of rape the perpetrator’s presumption of innocence extends so far that the victim’s presumption of victimhood is questioned, hence the idiosyncratic use of the adjective ‘alleged’. SEE: rape.

**Armpit vagina:** Part of the female body discovered by actor Jennifer Lawrence, now a Nobel prize candidate for Medicine (sub-section Anatomy). Finding body-shaming not

thorough enough, Lawrence proceeded to point out how female flesh folds around armpits producing a strange vaginal hollow. Canadian filmmaker David Cronenberg might actually share Lawrence's award, as the female protagonist of his 1977 film *Rabid* has a penis in her armpit. SEE: body-shaming.

**Asexual:** Intelligent individual who, unlike most current human beings, has realized that sex occupies too much mental space considering how scant actual time is employed in having some. Asexuals are the only sane persons in our sex-crazed world although, sadly, their position appears insane to the sex-crazed. SEE: agender.

**Body-shaming:** Abuse focused on declaring (usually on the social media) how little you like a particular part of a person's body, or even the whole body. Since no human body is perfect, not even Naomi Campbell's, and she is bound to age one century or another, it is a mystery why humans have chosen this way of making their lives harder. Defenders of body-shaming claim that they mean well and their abuse is for our own good. SEE: armpit vagina.

**Brazilian wax:** Torture method consisting of getting rid of perfectly natural pubic hair in female genitalia by applying a layer of hot wax and pulling hard. The technique can only be called Brazilian if a hair strip is left in the central segment; otherwise, the proper label is 'Hollywood wax'. This torture method, which would appal the Inquisition, is, inexplicably, endured voluntarily by millions of women all over the world as an effect of the popularity of porn among heterosexual men.

**Closet:** Not to be confused with a wardrobe, particularly a cabinet wardrobe. In British English a closet is a small room that can be closed for privacy (hence water closet, or w.c.). Rich houses had closets used as walk-in wardrobes (or, rather, dressing rooms), but also as small studios; thus in Restoration comedy closets were often the place where adulterous affairs happened. In American English 'closet' refers to a walk-in wardrobe, not to the small room, hence the confusion about the meaning of 'coming out of the closet', an early 20<sup>th</sup> century expression. Some claim that 'coming out' refers to acting as a debutante, presenting yourself publicly, whereas 'closet' is often connected with other popular idioms, such as 'keeping skeletons in the closet'. Anyway, the Spanish mistranslation of 'closet' as 'armario' is absurd, and it would have been far more accurate to translate the idiom as 'salir de la habitación secreta'.

**Consent:** A word missing in the vocabulary of the patriarchal men whose sense of entitlement includes free access to women's bodies, through harassment and direct sexual violence. Often confused with 'yes', the word 'no', used to deny consent, is often downplayed by these men as irrelevant, just teasing, or a product of women's hesitant behaviour and tiny brains. SEE: harassment.

**Dick pic / to dickpic:** A peculiar variety of selfie which pops up unsolicited in women's computers and cellphones and that, inexplicably, senders believe to have the same seductive value as the pic of a nice, smiling face.

**Feminazi:** A feminist in favour of building concentration camps where men can be exterminated using poison gas, while pretending this never happened. This is possibly a misinterpretation of the word but it is very hard to guess correctly what 'feminazi' does mean. On the other hand, no feminist in on record demanding that Hitler's genocidal policies against Jews, gays, Roma people, political prisoners and other minorities be used against men, which makes 'feminazi' a truly mystifying word.

**Feminism:** An antidote to patriarchy. Of course, patriarchal men pretend that feminism is the same as androphobia (or misandry) and in this way they can dismiss women's demands that patriarchy ends as mere men-hatred.

**Feminism (Institutional):** The terrorist branch of radical feminism. Institutional feminists force Parliaments to pass legislation designed to take all the power away from men to give it to women, so that men will know what it is like to be powerless. It hasn't worked so far, despite the claims of masculinist men. SEE: Feminism (radical).

**Feminism (radical):** A dangerous gang of women devoted to running a vicious smear campaign against all men, despite the clear evidence that men, not women, are the victims of patriarchal power, and that women have no real grounds of complaint. SEE: Feminism (Institutional)

**Gender gap:** The gap between the platform where women wait for the train that men ride and the train itself. Despite the constant warnings to 'mind the gap' many women still die by falling under the wheels of oncoming trains that they're trying to board. The few who have managed to become passengers do little to narrow the gap, as they feel very proud to have bridged it.

**Gender labelling:** Taxonomic mania that has gripped Gender Studies theoreticians, sex and gender activists, and plain people in the vain hope that the more labels you generate the more at ease will individuals feel with their own inclinations. It is not working, for gender labelling still insists on the central role of gender in human identity; besides, most people are labelled-against than self-labelling. SEE: agender.

**Gender-equal:** Gender-utopian (currently)

**Gender-neutral toilets:** Really??? What for?? To make who more comfortable?

**Harassment (sexual):** Very easy – any unwelcome sexual advance, from a mere verbal comment to an act of bodily aggression. This is very different from flirting, which is enjoyed by the two individuals involved. So, why is harassment so difficult to understand?

**Incel:** Involuntary celibate, that is to say, a man who hates women because the bitches reject him sexually and force him to remain celibate. This is NOT a tongue-in-cheek definition, but the real thing even though the term 'incel' appeared in the 1990s to name men and women who wanted to be in a relationship but could not find a couple. And who did not hate each other for that.

**Mansplaining:** A label used for men's constant offering of unrequired explanations in a patronising tone to women, in the belief that we generally know little about everything and are too shy to ask for an explanation from our always better informed male peers. Mansplaining is not general among men but mansplainers tend to offer all kinds of explanations, which is why they seem to be omnipresent. Here, by the way, I am 'femsplaining', which conflates 'woman explaining' with 'feminist explaining'—but then I don't volunteer explanations unless asked for them. And it's my blog.

**Manspreading:** The taking up of extra space by men on the seats of public transport on the grounds that men's genitalia need to be cooled by keeping the legs separate. An example of how men's poor knowledge of their own anatomy combines with a sense of entitlement that ignores basic politeness.

**Menstruation:** Perfectly natural discharge of the menses, or blood lining up the uterus, every time conception fails to happen. Even though the practice by which menstruating women were deemed unclean and separated from the tribe is not practiced in the modern world, women obsess about concealing all signs of their period—as if they still could be sent into the menstrual hut. SEE: Menstrual blood.

**Menstrual blood:** Blood discharged with every menstruation. Unlike the liquid that appears in the ads for sanitary napkins, menstrual blood is not blue but the habitual dark red. SEE: period poverty.

**Pansexual:** Individual inclined to having sex with any person of any gender variation, which sounds woefully limited in the context of planet Earth but must be great fun in a pan-galactic context!!!

**Paternity leave:** Strategy followed by legislators to invite new fathers to be involved in the first months of life of their newly born babies. It favours caring men who, otherwise, would be booed down as sissies by their less caring male-co-workers but it is a pain in the ass for patriarchal breadwinners. Many men who drag their feet as new fathers claim they would take paternity leave if it were compulsory (and in this way they wouldn't lose patriarchal face—or cheek).

**Period poverty:** A type of economic hardship affecting specifically young girls, who are forced to stop attending school because they cannot afford sanitary napkins or tampons but are body-shamed if signs of their menstrual blood show. This affects girls all over the world, also in supposedly rich nations like the UK. Really.

**Polyamorous:** A person who kids him or herself that having several relationships at the same time will make him/her happier than being monogamous. Unless, that is, we are all missing something...

**Rape:** Hate crime committed against the bodily integrity of another person who does not wish to be touched in any way by the perpetrator, much less be intimate with their



assailant. Unless what happens in most crimes, such as robbery, the victim must convince the judge that she (or he) has been assaulted. SEE: alleged rape.

**Self-objectification:** Mysterious prolongation of Lacan's mirror-phase from early childhood until the day before actual death, when Instagrammers will still insist on posting their last selfie (wait and see). Self-objectification is an extreme form of Romantic narcissism but focused on the body rather than the mind and its feelings. Like 19<sup>th</sup> century Romantic individuals, self-objectifiers are subjected to much ridicule and abuse (particularly body-shaming), which begs the question of why this Narcissistic behaviour persists. Perhaps Lacan knew.

**Submission (in rape):** A strategy followed by the victim to avoid greater harm during rape, such as murder, and often confused with consent, or even active participation resulting in great pleasure. SEE: consent.

**Third gender option:** A way of transforming all the problems besetting the vexing gender binary into a new set of problems besetting the vexing gender trinity. A solution similar to claiming that adultery makes long-lasting relationships more interesting.

**Toxic masculinity:** Patriarchal masculinity, that is to say, a masculinity defined by the privileges that patriarchy gives men. It is very easy to replace with an alternative, non-toxic masculinity but only a minority of men have seen the advantages of breaking away from patriarchy and embracing a healthier, far more satisfying way of being a man.

**Victim/survivor:** An individual who struggles not to have his or her life defined by the bodily and psychological harm inflicted by others. In current parlance, a victim appears to be in a weaker position than a survivor, who has taken many more steps on the path towards self-healing. Victim/survivors are often shamed and, thus, doubly abused, while perpetrators even get the support of family, lovers, friends and even complete strangers. SEE: Victim-blaming.

**Victim-blaming:** Strategy consisting of blaming the victim in, for instance, cases of sexual harassment or assault, rather than the perpetrator because while the perpetrator will listen to no argument and might not even understand he has committed a crime, there is an absurd hope that if only women understood that the wolves are there, they would take measures not to stray off the path.

## 2 January 2018 / THE DECLINE OF LITERARY FICTION (AND MICROHISTORY AS ALTERNATIVE STORYTELLING)

A recent report by the British Arts Council, "Literature in the 21st Century: Understanding Models of Support for Literary Fiction" (<http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/publication/literature-21st-century-understanding->

[models-support-literary-fiction](#)) has unleashed much controversy about what exactly ails the most demanding form of prose writing. It is obvious that sales are going down with many literary fiction writers now being unable to live off their artistic vocation (please note that the top-selling book of 2017 in the UK is... Jamie Oliver's *5 Ingredients – Quick & Easy Food* with 716,000 copies sold; for the top 100 see <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/dec/30/bestsellers-2017-top-100-philip-pullman-jamie-oliver-margaret-atwood>).

The terms of the debate following the issuing of the report are focused, as it was to be expected, on a variety of already well-known arguments: a) print fiction cannot compete with the attractions of the social media and of audiovisual fiction/entertainment; b) literary fiction is, by definition, non-commercial; c) this is a specific anglophone problem and in other languages literary fiction still thrives; d) the MAs in creative writing are having a (paradoxical) negative impact on literary quality by limiting individual creativity and innovation; e) literary fiction has done a good job of cultivating prose but is neglecting plot in excess and g) readers are no longer willing to make the effort to read literary fiction after being disappointed by too many over-hyped volumes. I could go through the whole alphabet...

I will add fuel to the fire by pointing out that not all professional writers should expect to make a living off their writing. Arundhati Roy, who published an excellent novel twenty years ago, *The God of Small Things*, and has only now published the second one, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, might be the kind of writer we need: someone who offers very few, strictly selected novels rather than a constant flow of mediocre writing aimed at keeping the pot boiling on the stove, and not at all contributing to the art of Literature. Why, indeed, should literary fiction be a profession, except for a handful of very high quality writers?

I'll go even further to note that I myself, a Literature teacher, went into shock recently when reading the short story collection *Hijas de un sueño* (<http://www.esdrujula.es/libro/hijas-de-un-sueno/>) published by my dear friend Gerardo Rodríguez (also an English Literature teacher at the Universidad de Granada). My shock surfaced from realizing that I haven't been reading great Literature produced in our own period for a very, very, very long time... if at all. Pretentious, yes indeed; great, no. Wisely combining the lessons learned from Katherine Mansfield with his own Andalusian cultural heritage, Gerardo has produced a slim volume which is worth 100 over-hyped, fumbling literary novels, of the kind that promises more than delivers. Why's that? Because this is a book written in no hurry and with the only aim of accomplishing a personal goal, namely, the publication of a volume the author can be proud of. Is it ambitious? Of course it is, but not the kind of ambition that is now spoiling the literary game: the ambition leading to craving for meaningless awards, striving for a fleeting media presence, competing in the top sales charts with plenty of other bad books. The underside is, as I told Gerardo, that few will even notice that his beautiful literary book exists for in our topsy-turvy times literary excellence is simply not admired. An inconvenient truth that the Arts Council's report, by the way, overlooks.

I think that what we, readers, are doing in the absence of fine prose (which is not the decorative prose they teach in creative writing schools) is to choose storytelling. This might explain the pleasure we get from 19<sup>th</sup> century fiction—which tried to mix both good prose and good plotting—and contemporary popular fiction. Unlike literary fiction, which, as I have noted, tends to neglect plot because of the Modernist prejudice against it, popular fiction is capable of combining quality plotting with quality writing. The kind of popular fiction we tend to hate fails, precisely at both ends: the prose and the plot (for an example, read Riley Sager’s appalling thriller *Final Girls*).

Compulsive readers, and I am certainly one, may be starving for new fine prose, of the kind that gives you an insight into human life, but this does not mean we are starving for good reading. If we don’t find it in the fiction of the past (I’m currently reading Margaret Oliphant’s awesome 1883 novel *Hester* with much enjoyment), then we find it outside the novel. And I mean in non-fiction (a lazy label if I ever have seen one...) and particularly in what is now often referred to as ‘microhistory’.

Wikipedia informs us that microhistory is “the intensive historical investigation of a well-defined smaller unit of research (most often a single event, the community of a village, or an individual)” (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Microhistory>). The resulting print volumes are, then, a specific branch of non-fiction, mostly written by historians instead of, as it is often the case, journalists. The distinctions are, however, not that clear-cut possibly because few academics have bothered to pay attention to non-fiction and its generic taxonomy and we are constantly confused by the label. Non-fiction, by the way, including microhistory, tends to be narrative rather than essayistic which is why it is often chosen as an alternative to the novel by dissatisfied readers.

There is not (yet) a canon of the best microhistory but you may find an impressive list on GoodReads:  
[https://www.goodreads.com/list/show/1058.Microhistory\\_Social\\_Histories\\_of\\_Just\\_One\\_Thing](https://www.goodreads.com/list/show/1058.Microhistory_Social_Histories_of_Just_One_Thing) . Number 9 on the day I’m writing (this may vary depending on the number of votes) is Nathaniel Philbrick’s *In the Heart of the Sea: The Tragedy of the Whaleship Essex*, simply the best book I have read this past 2017 (together with *Hijas de un sueño*). It is also very handy to explain the links (and differences) between fiction and non-fiction: Philbrick narrates the real-life story that inspired Herman Melville to write *Moby Dick*. Both did intensive research but whereas Melville chose to embellish the events by developing his own plotting and using his fine, insightful prose, Philbrick uses a scholarly, yet still entertaining approach, attempting to reconstruct past events.

And this is it: for us, readers who love learning from books, the combination of solid research, appealing narrative and elegant prose is unbeatable. Also, the variety of topics, another aspect that is giving microhistory an advantage over plain fiction. You will soon see that the GoodReads microhistory list mixes many heterogeneous works. I’ll take just the first 10 titles to make my point (consider how many you would like to read...):

1. *The Devil in the White City: Murder, Magic, and Madness at the Fair That Changed America* by Erik Larson

2. *Stiff: The Curious Lives of Human Cadavers* by Mary Roach
3. *Salt: A World History* by Mark Kurlansky
4. *The Professor and the Madman: A Tale of Murder, Insanity and the Making of the Oxford English Dictionary* by Simon Winchester
5. *The Ghost Map: The Story of London's Most Terrifying Epidemic - and How It Changed Science, Cities, and the Modern World* by Steven Johnson
6. *Longitude: The True Story of a Lone Genius Who Solved the Greatest Scientific Problem of His Time* by Dava Sobel
7. *The Emperor of All Maladies: A Biography of Cancer* by Siddhartha Mukherjee
8. *Seabiscuit: An American Legend* by Laura Hillenbrand
9. *In the Heart of the Sea: The Tragedy of the Whaleship Essex* by Nathaniel Philbrick
10. *At Home: A Short History of Private Life* by Bill Bryson

What a marvellous list for a monographic course (or analysis in a collective volume...)!!! Or reading project for 2018...

It has taken since the 1980s much academic effort to convince university students and teachers that the world of fiction worth reading and researching extends far beyond the narrow confines of literary fiction, beginning with (poorly labelled) popular fiction. It is now the time, perhaps, to start considering the role that non-fiction is playing in the habits of contemporary readers to replace the ailing literary fiction, and its merits as good writing, in particular in microhistory. Can we really say that, for instance, Laura Hillenbrand's *Seabiscuit* (or *Unbroken*) has less merit as a storytelling volume than any of the contemporary anglophone novels we read, teach and do research on? I should think not—quite the opposite, it is better than many which we value simply because they are marketed as literary fiction.

I realize that the microhistory in the GoodReads list has a common ingredient: the intention to popularize scholarly knowledge. These volumes are often popular science but also an application of its popularizing techniques to many other areas. I marvel at how although English 'popularize' and Spanish 'divulgar' appear to share a similar meaning (populus = the people; vulgus = the common people), yet 'divulgar' expresses much better the idea of making scholarly research available to a mass readership while still maintaining a serious didactic tone. I would not say that the didactic component is what is luring readers away from literary fiction and into microhistory but it is certainly a very strong point.

The function of Literature, to end, used to be providing an insight into human life coached in beautiful language (which, by the way, poetry does much better than novels...). What we're seeing today, then, is that literary fiction is providing mainly forgettable prose and extremely limited insights into personal lives with scant projection onto the rest of the world. Microhistory (as a print genre expressing a trend in historiography) is placing individual experience against a much larger historical canvas, as the novel used to do in pre-Modernist times. It may not offer literary prose (though it could) but it is offering a more complete approach to human life than the minimalist, fragmented, individualistic approach of current literary fiction. This is why many, like yours truly, find so much pleasure in its pages.

Perhaps the Arts Council should look next into microhistory for, as we know, genres come and go, rise and fall, and perhaps the literary novel is beginning to outstay its welcome, at least as we know it today.

## 16 January 2018 / CHANGING PATTERNS IN STUDENTS' PERFORMANCE: RESISTING CLASSROOM PARTICIPATION

In my post of 10 October last year I discussed the problems connected with using a methodology based on close reading to teach long texts. The main concern I expressed was that a pedagogy developed to train students into producing literary criticism of poetry might be inadequate for dealing with prose, particularly complete volumes. I spoke then of the challenge of trying to acquire total recall of the nuances of very long novels (any Victorian three-decker) or even novel series (like *The Hunger Games*).

To be honest, the post was trying to process a deeply-set anxiety that has plagued me this semester and that has to do with the changing patterns in students' performance, specifically their resistance to engaging in class participation.

Now that I'm practically done marking the corresponding papers I can say that this has not been an easy semester for me as a teacher. Let me acknowledge that I have often felt uncomfortable in class, unable to find my feet, as the saying goes, and to understand what I was doing. Unusually, then, the posts for the last four months carry practically no comments on my teaching practice and read, rather, as a series of independent essays mostly on Gender Studies (this is what I have been teaching, together with Victorian Literature).

The remarkable quality of the papers I have just read (and some kind words from students) tell, however, a story quite different from what I thought was unfolding in class, this is why I am finally writing this post. I have been at some points truly distressed in class and if I have managed to keep my cool (mostly), if you allow me to use the expression, this has been thanks to a handful of extraordinarily participative students, two of whom have received my warmest thanks in the shape of an A with honours. Thank you, Carla and Marc. And Neele, Alicia, Albert, indeed.

I must grant that the anxiety-inducing political climate in Catalonia has been a major obstacle to keep going as a teacher last Autumn. Not only my own personal worries but also the students' have had an impact in class, for when the future looks so uncertain education takes on part of that uncertainty. You might think that students were enthusiastic about the project of a possible new republic but I have seen mostly long faces in class, expressing a deep concern that the near future might be even more difficult than it already is for the millennials. There have been no direct political discussions in class but, even so, this has been a heavily politicized semester. At one point I asked my Erasmus students whether they wanted to stay in view of the (perhaps unsafe) turn that the situation was taking and they responded no, as the

situation seemed 'interesting' for them. This, of course, reminded me of the Chinese curse: 'may you live in interesting times'... You need peace of mind to teach well, and this has been lacking for the whole past semester.

Now, to the specifics of the case, which, I'm sure will be familiar to any teacher but to which I need to add some very odd factors like... my smelly classroom (a classic in my blog). My Facultat has a peculiar corridor which seems to be built on a swamp (I'm told it is actually built on sandy soil that doesn't drain well). Our first action on entering the classroom has been every day the same one: opening the windows as wide as they would go. Even so we, students and teacher, have been forced to associate Victorian Literature with a bad odour—which possibly is what Victorians themselves were used to in their dirty streets but not what we need to focus on intellectual work.

Add to this the fact that the classroom was too big, which resulted in a strange seating pattern, with students basically forming a diagonal from the first row of benches to the back row, instead of sitting close in just a few rows. There were moments when I didn't know where to place my gaze; and, then, when I did, what I saw was not very reassuring: students texting, or lounging as if on their sofa... not taking notes at all... talking to each other but not to me... I'm amazed that so many days I had to ask for silence to lecture and, then, when I ask for comments the chatterers kept silent.

Here is what every student should understand (or at least my students): a teacher's performance depends on the students' attention. If this attention wavers or is never available, the teacher falters, hesitates, starts waffling instead of properly lecturing, and the discourse collapses in the worst case. That was the day when I stopped and told my students that since they were not interested in what I had to say, I was perfectly willing to go to my office where I had tons of work to do. You can't begin to imagine how foolish I felt, and how hard it was to return to my topic.

By the way, I have also noticed another symptom of bad teaching: linguistic accuracy vanishes. My English simply starts evaporating, the sentences don't flow, the mistakes are unbelievably basic. When a class goes well, however, the solidity of the use of language increases tenfold and the brain seems to go on a faster gear, which is why I love teaching: this is when I do my best thinking.

I finally came out of my bleak cocoon to speak to some of my students and some of my colleagues about what was missing in class, and it turned out that the impression that my teaching was not working was not shared by the students (um, at least the ones that spoke to me). It was, however, shared by my colleagues, not because they think I'm a lousy teacher but because they were in a similar situation regarding their own classes. And I don't mean my Department colleagues only, but others teaching English in Britain, which shows this is not a local case. Somebody, then, should produce an academic study of why, plainly, students are very clearly showing with their attitude in class that they prefer lecturing to participative-style teaching. For this is it: my discomfort has to do with realizing that basic truth.

Students' resistance to class participation manifests itself, to begin with, by their not reading the books we discuss in advance. We publish the syllabus in early July for them to read the texts over summer but this has never ever worked—yet, we persist. I told my students that in order to succeed in their degree the main trick is acquiring good time-management skills. This means planning ahead and preparing all tasks with sufficient time, both to avoid failure and stress. Since very few do that in spite of our efforts to inform them of the content of courses, I must conclude that they need to be told that this expected of them.

It occurs to me that, possibly, our problems have to do with our different perception of the situation: we teachers believe that students understand what their role involves, and students believe that it's our duty to point out at each step what they need to do. My syllabi, then, will include from next year onward a warning in bold, red type that a) books need to have been read at least two weeks before their class discussion begins; b) time-management is essential and c) class participation... inevitable.

For the last six years, we have invited students to participate in class in the following way. The first novel in the course (second-year Victorian Literature, remember) is entirely in the hands of the teacher, who produces plenty of close reading to set an example. Then, we distribute the chapters of the second novel among students and in each session a maximum of about 8 contribute a comment based on a passage. Then for the third and fourth novels students need to contribute a passage from a secondary source. Well, this is the first time when the method has not worked at all, as some students have chosen to ignore that this is a compulsory activity. In some sessions only 1 or 2 of the students were present—some, indeed, had a valid excuse for their absence but they were a minority. I did ask my class whether there was a boycott afoot, which they denied, a bit surprised at my paranoia... But then I do know that some students take our invitation to participate as a form of coercion, and it appears that, whereas in previous years they made an effort to comply, this year they have resisted the obligation to speak in class.

I don't wish to give you the impression that the whole thing has been a disaster – not at all. Very few students have failed and these were the ones that did not complete assessment. What I'm trying to say is that this resistance to engaging in a participative-style of teaching benefits nobody. I'll say again this: when I taught *Harry Potter* back in 2013-14, every lecture was a most enjoyable party, not because of the text itself but of students' eagerness. I refuse to believe that only *Harry Potter* produces that effect... I'll add that I expected something similar regarding our newest addition to the Victorian syllabus: *Dracula*. Instead, attendance was at its lowest.

The students that speak to us, teachers, are, of course, the keener ones. It is then only partially useful to ask them why their peers are not so keen. A factor that emerges in conversation, anyway, is that the university entry system in Spain forces students into degrees that were only their second or third choice. I will not go into the shortcomings of our secondary education, nor into the problem of how the social media are negatively impacting the attention span of young people (even their ability to think in silence and with no interruptions). There is, however, something else at work: a

generational pragmatism which rejects all unnecessary extras. Since my students' performance has, on the whole, been quite good, I need to reach the conclusion that the lectures (classes, sessions, whatever) are beginning to be seen as superfluous activities, which they eschew, rather than as what they should be: an occasion to engage in high-level intellectual dialogue.

I was for sixteen years a teacher at the online Universitat Oberta de Catalunya and I am, therefore, familiar with a pedagogical model that does not rely on classroom interaction. My students at UOC did very well but at the back of my mind there was always the question of whether they would do even better in class. As happens, one of them did become my presential student and even my BA dissertation tutoree and this convinced me that we do need direct personal contact in lectures. Now I'm not so sure and I wonder whether the millennials' pragmatic ways will, in the end, force us either to return to traditional lecturing or to abandon the classroom altogether.

We'll see.

### 23 January 2018 / DOUBLE NOSTALGIA AND CLASS MATTERS: 1930s FICTION ON 1980s TV (*THE BOX OF DELIGHTS*)

A couple of months ago I came across a blog post on a book for children which apparently connects with *Harry Potter*, as a possible predecessor. This is John Masefield's 1935 novel *The Box of Delights* (see <https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2017/nov/30/long-before-harry-potter-the-box-of-delights-remade-childrens-fantasy>). I had heard, vaguely, of Masefield (1878-1967) as a distinguished poet (he was appointed Poet Laureate in 1930, a post he held until his death) but not in relation to children's literature. It turns out that *The Box of Delights* and its prequel, *The Midnight Folk* (1927) are, if not downright classics, at least well-known among genre *connoisseurs*.

Masefield appears to have been a very accomplished author, unafraid of trying his hand at many different literary pursuits. He wrote poems (both short and very long), plays, and a string of novels of varied types, with 12 appearing in just 15 years (1924-39). These included social novels (*The Square Peg*, *The Hawbucks*), adventures in exploration (*Sard Harker*, *Odtaa*), sea yarns (*Victorious Troy*, *The Bird of Dawning*), and the above named children's fantasy. I make a first stop here to consider how difficult it is to keep a clear impression of whole stretches of English Literature and of whole personal careers which were important in the past, less than one century ago. No matter how hard you study, so much escapes our attention that it is a wonder we know anything at all! I will sound terribly obvious if I say that the only way to fix our memory of authors whose names we encounter in introductions and panoramic overviews is reading their works. Masefield is now more vividly present in my mind though, as happens with author you only see in old photos, perhaps not vividly enough.



The claim that *The Box of Delights* must have inspired some elements in *Harry Potter* is only of relative interest. There is a boy hero (Kay Harker), who has a dim but cute friend (Peter Jones), but they do not form with Peter's sister Maria—a pert little girl too fond of revolvers—a triangular friendship in the style of Harry, Ron and Hermione. Two other Jones sisters, Jemima and Susan, are present in the tale but in very minor roles. Masfield's story has an appealing magician at its core, one Cole Hawlings who turns out to be Majorcan all-talented, wise man Ramon Llull (or Lully, 1232-1315), still alive in 1935 thanks to an elixir. You might see shades of Hawlings in Dumbledore in a scene that has to do with a phoenix, and in his avuncular behaviour towards Kay, but Tolkien's Gandalf seems a much relevant predecessor. Likewise, villain Abner Brown is not really in the same league as Lord Voldemort, being just a jewel thief thirsting after bigger booty, namely the titular box of delights, a singular magic contraption.

Judging a book according to whether it measures up to another one with which it might not really be connected is not a good idea. Let's then get rid of *Harry Potter* (but do watch the Italian fan film *Voldemort: Origins of the Heir*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C6SZa5U8slg>) and enjoy the 'delights' Masfield has to offer. These are not few but I must confess that I struggled a little bit to get into the spirit of his novel. I attributed this to the fact that *The Box of Delights* is actually a sequel but the information I came across regarding *The Midnight Folk* confirmed that this is not a story in two books but two stories sharing a set of characters. The difficulties had to do, rather, with how characters speak, using a kind of dialogue which I found odd, not only because of the peculiarities of each character (one is always using 'what?' at the end of his sentences) but also because Kay and the Jones children use a formal register very different from what, um, Harry Potter and colleagues use. Kay does use school slang in one sentence but his guardian quickly bans this jargon, which suggests that the children use separate idiolects, one for themselves and one for the adults. Yet, this was not exactly the case, either (as you will see).

I just needed to hear them speak to get the right delivery and tone—and luckily for me I could use for that the charming six-part BBC version (broadcast between 21 November and 24 December in 1984). YouTube and its illegal uploads have very useful applications, as you can see. As I expected, the series ironed out all my difficulties and contributed, besides, not only very good performances by young and not so young actors but also a delicious use of special effects to materialize the magic that Masfield describes in his lovely book. This includes the metamorphosis of some characters into animals (or even a tree), Kay's multiple size changes, a talking statue, a picture that opens up for Cole to walk in, etc. Masfield was also interested in technological fantasy and so, anticipating Ian Fleming's James Bond, he gives the villains a car that transform into a sort of helicopter (nothing to do with the Weasleys lumbering flying car, then).

The comments by other YouTube spectators led in two enticing but quite different directions. On the one hand, many celebrate their second contact with a beloved Christmas classic of their own 1980s childhood (actually a few have repeatedly seen the series in this context). Others speculate about whether a new version is (over)due because of how fast special effects age. For *The Box of Delights* the BBC used cutting-

edge video technology which did a very good job of reproducing Masfield's gorgeous fantasy; this is visually demanding even for the plain reader, much more so for TV before cgi (computer-generated images). I found the fx 'delightful' as corresponds to the 'box of delights' that television was in the early days of video (and that gave us masterpieces such as David Bowie's marvellous music video for "Ashes to Ashes", 1980, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CMThz7eQ6K0>).

The BBC, then, went as far as it was possible to go for TV in 1984 yet I understand those in favour of an update, for I found myself thinking as I enjoyed the enchanting 6 hours how many scenes would look today. Ironically, I might call this 'the Harry Potter' syndrome, as the whole movie series adapting Rowling is cutting-edge for the early 21<sup>st</sup> century—just as *The Box of Delights* was for 1984. There is a scene in the novel, excluded from the BBC version possibly because of how expensive it would have been, in which people seen in paintings start moving and, beyond whether Rowling did take inspiration from that or not, the *Harry Potter* films mirrored spot on what she meant in a way that simply could not be done for Masfield. Arguably, the same fx ageing process will eventually affect *Harry Potter* in thirty years time, when films will all come in virtual reality devices.

The 'double nostalgia' of my title, then, refers to the combined experience of reading a 1930s book and seeing its 1980s TV adaptation at the same time, taking also into account that the series approaches the book nostalgically and that we, 21<sup>st</sup> century spectators, also enjoy the special effects with nostalgia. I should think that a most spectacular case of this effect was the 1981 Granada/ITV adaptation of Evelyn Waugh's 1945 novel, *Brideshead Revisited*, a story about the nostalgia which Charles Ryder feels for the 1920s, when, famously, he met spoilt child Sebastian Flyte and his contact with the very rich Flytes changed his life for ever. *The Box of Delights* is a sort of junior version of that compounded nostalgia (with appealing fx). That make-believe world of Masfield, Waugh and, later, *Downton Abbey* (though with more servants) convinces us that the lifestyle of the rich is the rule, not the exception, and, oddly, despite having never enjoyed it, that we still feel it is somehow ours. Seeing the orphan Kay Harker do as he pleases with his friends under the very loose guardianship of the flexible Caroline Louisa, abused Harry Potter would surely have a fit. For the main delight of *The Box of Delights* is how Kay plunges into adventure without a worldly care. How refreshing.

It's not, then, just plain nostalgia (or envy) but a yearning for the same carefree world that keeps us glued to the screen (or the book pages). In this, Masfield's world could not be further from Rowling's, where Kay would be a Slytherin, though he's much nicer than Malfoy. And so, although I said that I would leave *Harry Potter* aside, it turns out that the heptalogy is indeed linked to Masfield's fantasy world but not at all for the reasons suggested by other authors, the occasional borrowings. Kay and Harry would, I think, like each other instantaneously, as orphans keen on magic open to whatever it may bring. Also, because Kay is no snob (the series, however, conveniently eliminates the discomfort he feels in the novel before the hostile poor children in his rural community). The school which Kay attends, and that we don't see since he is on holiday, is possibly similar to Hogwarts, or, rather, Hogwarts is similar to the establishments that 1930s upper-class kids would patronize. Rowling does operate her

own kind of nostalgia but I wonder with what aim, as Harry battles Voldemort's upper-class sycophantic Death Eaters but in the end Malfoy and his kind are still there, and nothing much changes in the Wizarding world, despite 'mudbloods' like Hermione.

I have finally realized, then, that my problem with *The Box of Delights* is not the challenge of visualizing the magic or my bad ear for dialogue but a class matter. Leaving aside the cultural distance between 1930s England and 2010s Catalonia, where I live, I had in the end fewer problems to accept the magic than the wonder of a household in which children are so comfortably well off. Harry's broom cupboard under the stairs and his constant ill-treatment by the awful Dursleys have complicated very much the matter of class in children's fiction. And, yes, I had to see the BBC version to make sense of what I know understand to be Kay's upper-class (or upper-middle-class, I'm not sure) idiolect.

You can see that I'm a bit bitter here, and this is because my working-class childhood was full of BBC series like *The Box of Delights* and of their promise of a carefree world that was never fulfilled. Still, this is not Masefield's fault but my own for having been born on the wrong side of the tracks, like the majority. He did what he had to do: tell a perfect tale of Christmas joy and makes us believe in magic for as long as it lasts. No mean feat.

### 30 January 2018 / THE RISK OF REDISCOVERING THE ACADEMIC WHEEL (AND THE HANDMAID'S TALE)

The students in my Gender Studies class could freely choose the subject of their paper and I have ended up marking five (out of twenty-five) on Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985). In parallel, I have been asked to peer-review two articles submitted to journals on the same topic. Even a proposal for a TFM dissertation.

Curiously, although the renewed interest in Atwood's dystopian classic is due to Bruce Miller's series (first season, 2017) for the streaming service Hulu, none of these articles nor the dissertation proposal, refer to it as an relevant trigger for new academic work. First issue, then, that calls my attention: the way in which all these budding academics hesitate to connect novel and series (it seems that if you deal with one, then you don't deal with the other). I will attribute this to the habitual separation between Literature and audiovisual narrative in our second-language degrees in Spain, which makes students (wrongly) assume that they cannot deal with filmed narrative. Or only with serious difficulties.

Second issue, the total absence of any comments on the quite good 1990 film version of *The Handmaid's Tale* directed by Volker Schlöndorff, with Natasha Richardson as Offred and Aidan Quinn as Nick, based on a screenplay by a Nobel prize winner, illustrious playwright Harold Pinter. This film did generate some academic attention because of Pinter's contribution but it's worrying me very much to see how cinema is being neglected these days in favour of TV, even within academic circles in the

Humanities. I used to make a point of using scenes from film adaptations as often as I could in my classes, and I have taught courses on Shakespeare and on short fiction in film, but I have stopped illustrating my lectures with film excerpts because I need all the time I can gather for basic plot commentary (see my previous post). I am, then, myself guilty in a way of not publicising the very rich film culture among students. And this is not going to happen through Netflix, HBO or Amazon, as they're busy promoting series—a product that fosters audience loyalty for a much longer time than a two-hour film. Or any director's career (a thought that comes to my mind after suffering the incredibly awful *Dunkirk* by Christopher Nolan).

Third issue, and this is my main issue today, though I'm already into my fourth paragraph: the constant rediscovery of the academic wheel... Here we go.

One of the most beautiful feelings a reader can enjoy is the discovery of a text that becomes a significant landmark in one's development. If you're a student, or a professional academic, and you may choose what to focus on in your work, this joy of new discovery often becomes the foundation for papers, articles and even books. I have never ever believed in the phallacy that Literary Studies should be objective since all work within them begins with the process of falling in love with a text—and other sentimental variations, such as falling out of love with a text or hating it. Something mysterious happens and suddenly you do know that, sooner or later, you *have to write* about this or that text, and then proper research begins.

In Literary Studies 'proper research' means entering into a dialogue with your predecessors, those who also expressed their sentimental attachment in the sophisticated jargon of academia (for we're not... irrational fans... or are we?). If you fall in love with a recent text, then the obvious problem is that there might not be any predecessors. In that case, you need to write a list of keywords and see who has contributed something indispensable in each area of interest. For instance, one of my TFG/BA dissertation tutorees has fallen in love with a new film adaptation, *Call Me by Your Name* (Luca Guadagnino, 2017, written by James Ivory, based on the 2007 eponymous novel by André Aciman). His dissertation will be among the first academic works devoted to this very well-received film and, so, he'll have to compile a bibliography with sources that deal more generally with the representation of gay men in cinema, and the theory of film adaptation.

This student had also fallen in love with Mercutio in William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, and although there is not that much published on this ambiguous character, we decided that mastering the huge bibliography on this ultra-famous play would be a too tall order at this level. Besides, my student quickly found out that what he had to say about Mercutio had been covered by other scholars and, so, he decided to embrace the chance to make an original contribution. This does not mean that you should not write about Shakespeare. I have indeed tutored a TFG on Romeo's masculinity and written myself a long piece about Antonio's love of Bassanio in *The Merchant of Venice* (<https://ddd.uab.cat/record/132012>). It simply means that if you feel an unstoppable love for a classic, you need to brace yourself for a long struggle to acquire an acceptably solid idea of all the relevant bibliography.

Here is, however, the problem: what is 'relevant bibliography?' I usually tell my students that their bibliographies should be properly updated and that, ideally, they should cover the period from 1990 to the present. That's twenty-eight years!! Already a lot... Of course, I also tell them that they may quote from any source previous to 1990, provided this is absolutely relevant or an academic classic (Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", 1975). In practice, however, what happens is that most pre-1990s gets a blanket dismissal, and I won't even mention how awfully neglected anything written before 1980 is, unless it is by a really big name like Michel Foucault or Raymond Williams. F.R. Leavis, anyone? Northrop Frye?

In the specific case of *The Handmaid's Tale* this poses a singular problem, as I have seen in the work I have marked or assessed. The novel was published in 1985 and, as the MLA database shows, 24 authors wrote about this text before 1990, beginning with Michele Lacombe's article "The Writing on the Wall: Amputated Speech in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*" (*Wascana Review of Contemporary Poetry and Short Fiction* 21.2, Fall 1986: 3-20). The MLA database offers 199 registers for the period 1990-99, then 72 for 2000-9 and 41 since then; you can see the curve here: climbing up to 1999, then going down, then up again. Someone should look into these fluctuations and the reasons for them beyond my sketchy approach here.

Anyway, back to my point: what the 24 initial commentators said cannot be dismissed because they set the foundations for the critical approach to Atwood's text, and covered all the main issues: feminism, dystopia, post-apocalyptic narrative, politics, speech manipulation, religion, puritanism, nature vs. nurture, even ironic autobiography and the epistolary nature of this novel. Naturally, this doesn't exhaust *The Handmaid's Tale*, as the many subsequent essays on it show. What I mean, rather, is that if you wish to write today about the dystopian nature of Gilead, the fundamentalist Republic that deprives women of all their rights in Atwood's novel, you do need to take into account what the first authors to tackle the subject had to say. Even more so because this was criticism contemporary to the book's publication and will give you a clear context for it.

What happens if you neglect the 1980s sources? Well, you may end up de-contextualizing the novel. It is certainly true that the 2017 television series indirectly comments on the dictatorial style of new President Donald Trump. However, the novel was published in a decade dominated by Ronald Reagan's administration, when Christian fundamentalism, the dying but still vicious Communist dictatorships in Eastern Europe, and Iran's radical Islamist revolution led by Ayatollah Khomeini were very much in the author's mind. As I'm sure the 1980s academic work stresses. This doesn't mean that you cannot read *The Handmaid's Tale*, novel, against the context of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, as, say, Baz Luhrman's film adaptation reads *Romeo and Juliet* for 1993, rather than 1593. Yet, just as no Shakespeare scholar would ever neglect the 1590s context, you cannot neglect the 1980s context.

Besides, you run the risk of reinventing the academic wheel... which consists of presenting as new arguments which others have already presented decades ago and

that, are, in addition, obvious. If you're lucky enough to be the first one to tackle academically a given text, then you can deal with the basics: *The Handmaid's Tale* connects with the dystopian tradition. But if you approach a text thirty-two years after its publication, then the obvious is not an option. Again: of course you can write about dystopia in Atwood's novel but not as if you were the first one to do so. Understood? So, yes, it is necessary to consider academic work published before 1990 in the particular case of Atwood's novel to avoid reinventing the academic wheel.

Now I'm going to destroy my own argument...

What should we do with much older texts? I'm going back to *Romeo and Juliet*, with 1411 registers in the MLA database for work published between 1900 and 2017. And this is only because the registers begin with the 20<sup>th</sup> century... So, supposing I'm working on Shakespeare's allusions to Queen Mab, should I take into account W.P. Reeves's pioneering essay, published in *Modern Language Notes* (17.1, January 1902: 10-14)? How about the 27 academic publications about this play from the 1940s? Is anyone quoting them? Should my student have started work on Mercutio with Leslie Hotson's "In Defence of Mercutio" (*Spectator*, 8 August 1947: 168-169)? How long would his bibliography be in that case? Is this the reason why we tend to begin bibliographies in 1990? To limit our work?

Perhaps if we read early Shakespearian scholarship we might be dismayed to find that all has been said and that we reinvent the academic wheel every few years, as long as academic generations last. I was myself a second-year undergrad student when *The Handmaid's Tale* was published, which means I am old enough to have a personal memory of all its academic trajectory; this is why I'm warning the current generation that they should be prepared to go beyond their own time. But, then, no teachers currently active were employed before 1975, right? And, anyway, the conceptual revolutions of the early 1990s, when apparently all current methodologies were invented, means that this is our operative chronological barrier. 1990 is already beginning to seem too long ago to begin a bibliography on *Romeo and Juliet*, with 879 MLA registers since that year... Should we start in 2000? Is this good scholarship or bad?

To sum up, then, we're constantly reinventing the academic wheel, perhaps not at all advancing but moving in circles. Yet, I still think that one should try to enter a dialogue with the inventors of each wheel if they are historically close to us... and the final bibliography is manageable... and we're not offending any scholar still active by neglecting their work.

## 6 February 2018 / MOUNTING HYPOCRISY AND THE FEMINIST TURNIP FIELD

Last Saturday the Spanish Academy of Cinema honoured the best films produced in 2017 with its Goya Awards. The attendants were offered a red fan decorated with the



hashtag #+Mujeres, intended to demand that more women are hired by the Spanish film industry in all its sectors, not just acting. Apparently, some attendees (including women and Albert Rivera) rejected the fans with the (poor) excuse that this type of feminist campaigning is losing its edge and, anyway, they didn't feel like endorsing yet another hashtag.

The award for Best Film Director went to (Catalan) Isabel Coixet, the only woman nominated in this category, whereas the award for Best Newcomer in Film Direction went to another (Catalan) woman, Carla Simón, also the only female nominee. As a woman I don't feel too happy. Simón's film, *Estiu 1993*, has been earning much critical praise since its release and her winning this Goya seems right. But Coixet's *The Library* has not been welcomed in the same way and, frankly, her Goya appears to be a hypocritical, belated acknowledgement of women by the Academy rather than a well-deserved win. I'm also very much against the idea of a film made in a foreign language winning the Goya for Best Film, call me prejudiced.

As actor Leticia Dolera quipped to one of the two male presenters (no comment!) the whole ceremony read as a pure exercise in hypocrisy, with its "nice feminist turnip field". I must stress that I didn't agree either with the feminist rant that Pepa Charro, a.k.a. La Terremoto de Alcorcón, was allowed to perform, for lack of a better word. Sounding bitter against all men, rather than encouraging to women, she again used the jaded stereotype according to which women film directors make intimate films that women enjoy best, and male film directors make stupid, gross action films for men which women hate. I really tire of all this prejudice: some action films are great, others trash; some intimate films are great, others trash. Can't we, as women, be given also the option to freely enjoy what we want (erm, provided it's not awfully misogynistic)? Can't we stop thinking in gender binary terms never ever? Isn't it time to demand that we have more gay, lesbian, transsexual, intersexual, asexual directors, too? Wasn't *Handia*, directed by two men, unfairly robbed of its Goya to the Best Film?

The Goya gala but also the Grammy Awards, the Golden Globe Awards and, as we'll see, the Oscars, run full of this pro-feminist hypocrisy, which is not true feminism. In many ways.

The spoof newspaper *El Mundo Today*, which is fast becoming my reference news media..., exposed this constant insincerity in its piece on the Golden Globes. If you recall, actresses decided to wear black dresses to show their disconformity with Hollywood sexualisation of the red carpet and of women generally. The clever comedians that write *El Mundo Today* quickly saw behind the ruse and called their article "We rank the prettiest women in the Golden Globes but also mention the feminism of the gala" (my translation) (<http://www.elmundotoday.com/2018/01/hacemos-un-ranking-y-puntuamos-a-las-mas-guapas-de-los-globos-de-oro-pero-mencionando-tambien-el-feminismo-de-la-gala/>). The piece was illustrated with photos of beautiful (mostly white) women wearing pricey gowns and jewellery that most women in the world only see in red-carpet photo galleries. The caption for Nicole Kidman's photo (she was ranked the prettiest, best dressed woman) was this text: "Y aquí está, la mujer de más calidad de

la gala, en la redacción lo tenemos claro. #metoo #whywewearblack #fitness #beauty #hot #celebrities #body #bodypositive #perfection #naturalbeauty #makeup #feminism #oldwomen". So much for (feminist) hashtag campaigns.

My other favourite article about the current patriarchal crisis in Hollywood published by *El Mundo Today* was inspired by Ridley Scott's erasing of sexual abuser Kevin Spacey from his latest film, called... *All the Money in the World*. No comment! The online newspaper announced that "Hollywood digitally erases all the men from its film repertoire"

(<http://www.elmundotoday.com/2017/12/hollywood-elimina-digitalmente-a-todos-los-hombres-de-su-repertorio-de-peliculas/>). This, again, highlights the immense hypocrisy behind the scapegoating of just Spacey. By the way, Scott eliminated Spacey because he feared that his film would bomb at the box office, not out of any need to vindicate Spacey's (male) victims. Then he proceeded to re-shoot some scenes, paying male lead Mark Wahlberg 1.5\$ million and female lead Michelle Williams... 1000\$ (Wahlberg donated his salary to the #TimesIsUp campaign but only after the scandal erupted). Incidentally, Spacey's replacement in *All the Money in the World*, Christopher Plummer (originally rejected for the part because of Scott's ageism against him) has been nominated for an Oscar as Best Supporting Actor. I'm 100% sure that he'll win, again because of all this hypocrisy. Wahlberg should present the award, with Spacey. And Woody Allen. And Diane Keaton. And Matt Damon. And Alec Baldwin. And Catherine Deneuve.

More of the same... I won't discuss Ivanka Trump's attempt to join the #TimesIsUp campaign following Oprah Winfrey's rousing speech at the Golden Globe Awards, despite the hilarious tweets it got in reply (and more serious ones: "Does this mean you'll help to impeach your dad?"). I won't discuss, either, the mad idea of making ultra-capitalist ex-reality show host Winfrey the next President after ultra-capitalist ex-reality show host Trump, no matter how female and African-American she is. I'd mention, instead, the speech by Neil Portnow, President of the Recording Academy, who managed to draw fire and anger from many women in the music industry at the Grammy Awards by urging them to simply "step up", as if a) they were too lazy to do anything for themselves, b) there was not an army of bigoted patriarchal men ready to stamp on their feet. Men like Portnow are the ones that make the hypocrisy of the apparently pro-feminist new climate most obvious. You don't have to tell the women to "step up" but your patriarchal buddies to "step down", understood?

Next, the quarrel between the American feminists and the French women who signed a sort of manifesto against the #MeToo campaign basically arguing that seduction will die if men's flirty 'attentions' are not welcomed. Catherine Deneuve and 100 other French women put their names to the open letter published in *Le Monde*, a document which, deplorable as it is in revealing these women's enslavement to patriarchy, also puts the finger on an important issue: we're not examining how each culture builds its own sexual codes.

By failing to do that we're allowing ourselves to be swamped by an ideological discourse which is 100% American. I do not mean with this that the contents of the unpardonable French letter are acceptable—I got from reading it the impression that



we women are dogs grateful for their master's patriarchal attention (pat on the head, pat on the bottom, same thing!). No. What I mean is that, as French sociologist Gilles Lipovetsky argued in *The Third Woman* (and that was back in 1997) the idea of female victimhood plays a much bigger role in the American understanding of gender relations than in French gender culture. Lipovetsky actually condemns American culture for instilling such fear in women that they are easy to prey on and victimize, whereas French women, he claims, are schooled in the idea that men will try to approach them in any way they can and this is why they need to fence for themselves. Deneuve's letter is an extrapolation of that idea, though, of course, it is based on the very French idea of seduction, which stops short of coercion, and fails woefully to understand abuse, which is, precisely, based on coercion.

When I see the poor victims of the monster Larry Nassar explain in the courtroom that they are not victims but survivors what I think is that we need to raise young girls with a much greater awareness of the dangers of abuse and of their need (and right) to defend themselves. This is not victim-blaming, it's society-blaming: if you're not told that the wolf is chasing you, nor are you trained to identify him and defend yourself, all of society fails, for you cannot pretend there are no wolves. The two women judges who have sentenced Nassar to die in prison allowed the survivors to give long statements about the horrors suffered; then they declared how proud they were of the girls' courage as they publicly shamed the abuser. I just wish the girls could have been given the support to use their courage much earlier, to stop the attacker from hurting them.

If Nassar managed to abuse more than 200 patients this was, to begin with, because the girls, many very young children, didn't understand what was happening to them. This is where the hypocrisy begins: with the wrong puritanical belief that the protection of children's innocence (specially girls) means keeping them ignorant of the ugly realities of the most disgusting aspects of patriarchal male sexuality. You would not leave a little girl in the middle of the street to be run down by a car, so why not teach her as soon as possible to identify sexual danger and downright abuse? This would not save all of them, of course, but it might help many. Also, nobody would silence them if they reported what is now coyly called 'misconduct'. Believe it or not, someone in the University of Michigan told the girls complaining that Dr. Nassar had inserted his fingers in their vagina that this kind of rape is standard medical treatment. The girls, befuddled and scared as they may have been, had to swallow this revolting excuse for abuse. This university, by the way, continued billing one of the mothers for sessions during which her poor daughter was being abused by the monster. This should be also punishable with jail.

Let me take a deep breath here and send my support to all the women (and men!) who are breaking their silence.

There are days when I wake up and I think that as a woman I am a barely tolerated creature, living in the tiny spaces patriarchy allows for me and others like me. This is not equality at all. I am also dismayed to realize, in view of all this hypocrisy, that patriarchy is trying to curb down its most blatant sexism (racism, ageism, homophobia,

etc.) to stay in power under a new disguise, apparently more benevolent. Its hegemonic circles are proclaiming that a new era begins now, but this will still be an era of hierarchical dominance. More women will be given access to misogynistic industries, like cinema or videogames, but this will not significantly change any institution. I can myself see how the female majority in the Humanities school where I work has not really changed its structures: just the tone. And this is what I fear will happen in all fields. We seem to be moving towards a renewal of patriarchy, in which the composition of the social pyramid's pinnacle might change but not the pyramid itself.

The red fan of the Goyas was wrong: we don't need #+Women, we need to #EndPatriarchy. Dismantle the pyramid, build a circle. And stop tolerating hypocrisy for this is what keeps patriarchy in its dominant position.

### 13 February 2018 / THE RETURN OF THE GENTLEMAN: A PROPOSAL

I taught yesterday an MA seminar on my research, mixing Cultural Studies and Gender Studies. I gave examples of the work I have done within the area I specialize in: Masculinities Studies (and popular fictions). As happens, the aspect of my research that generated the greatest discord was my proposal that we bring back gentlemanliness as a necessary code of behaviour for men. I have dealt with the need to offer specifically young men new ideals in the post following the Barcelona terrorist attacks of August 2017 (<http://blogs.uab.cat/saramartinalegre/2017/08/21/indoctrinating-young-men-in-search-of-ideals/>) and I have praised good gentlemanly men in another post, about Dickens's *Bleak House* (<http://blogs.uab.cat/saramartinalegre/2015/11/05/in-search-of-good-men-as-anti-patriarchal-role-models/>). However, I have not addressed the topic of the gentleman directly and this might be a good chance to do so.

One of the students in class, a young woman, reacted very negatively when I explained that we should welcome a renewed code of gentlemanliness. She complained that the gentleman's behaviour is patronising, using the classic example of the man opening a door to let a woman pass. I replied that this is a courtesy I would not personally reject and that in order to make it less patronizing (which I don't think it is) we just need to make it mutual: you open the door for me, I open the door for you. Actually, this renewal of general courtesy seems to me more urgent than ever: getting off the train at my university's station is terribly stressful, as absolutely nobody gives other passengers way. A walk I took in Barcelona last week turned out to be everything except relaxing as I had to dodge constantly other pedestrians who insisted on going their way even at the risk of crashing onto me. At full speed...

I do take into account, as another student reminded me, that gentlemanliness was used hypocritically by many men throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Of course, both R.L. Stevenson and Oscar Wilde, among many other authors, exposed this hypocrisy with the extreme cases of Dr. Jekyll and Dorian Gray. Yet, unless I am utterly deceived, most

Victorian men who wanted to be respectable in society abided by the codes of gentlemanliness: politeness, protection of those in need, restrained behaviour, firm management of aggressive urges, care of one's person in looks and manners. Not bad, I should think. And not just upper class: remember that working-class men have always made a great deal of being respected by their community. Perhaps being a gentleman is about making the most of the best qualities that a man possesses.

As I explained yesterday in class, unlike the Spanish 'caballero' which simply alludes to the medieval figure of the knight who possessed a horse ('caballo', of course), the Anglophone 'gentleman' signals that to be an ideal man one must be gentle (not just own a horse!). 'Gentle', unfortunately, came to be identified with that awful American word, 'sissy' (which derives from 'sister', see how misogyny always lurks behind patriarchal insults). Today, as I acknowledged in class, no man appreciates being called a 'gentleman', particularly the young ones, because they see that as something bland and phoney. In short, ridiculous. (Here I need a footnote to remind readers that possibly older classy men like George Clooney, or similar, do enjoy being called 'gentlemen').

In part, the loss of the gentleman is to be blamed on WWI, when the horrified soldiers on all sides discovered that in that atrocious, mechanical war the codes of knighthood and of gentlemanliness so far ruling in warfare no longer applied. Gassing your enemies is not what gentlemen do, nor kill them by blasting them off the face of Earth and into gory smithereens. Yet, the biggest blow against the gentleman, as we know, was the feminist rejection of all notions of chivalry as patronizing (the word my student used, remember?). This does not mean that all women rejected the gentleman, as the continued popularity of fantasies like Austen's Darcy prove. What I mean is that WWI (and later wars, like Vietnam) and 1970s radical feminism told men, in one way or another, that they needn't pretend to be gentlemen because at heart they were only patriarchal barbarians. Many men told themselves, 'ok, so that's what we are' and stopped acting as gentlemen. Others, better behaved but more puzzled, simply stopped obeying any specific ideal of manliness and got by as they could in life, navigating with great difficulties between Scylla and Charybdis, or feminism and patriarchy.

I will insist again and again that gentlemanliness was not only a pragmatic set of rules for respectable men to follow but also a great shaming mechanism. A man who engaged in what the American press defines coyly today as 'misconduct' or 'inappropriate behaviour' could be told "you're no gentleman!" and be shamed, in private and/or in public. Honestly or dishonestly, most men were wary of keeping up a reputable image and an upright behaviour was part of that. Now, what do you tell the likes of Harvey Weinstein, or simply a man that puts his hands where he should not? How do you shame them? "You're an abuser?" "You're a monster?" The justice system and the threat of a jail sentence is not working, as we all can see, so there must be something else that acts as a deterrent against intolerable patriarchal behaviour.

The shaming mechanism that is currently used is absolutely counterproductive because what we're screaming at these patriarchal abusers is "You're a man! What a

shame!” Sorry to disagree with many other feminist militants but I firmly believe that men are not all the same. By not distinguishing between gentle/men (if you don’t like gentlemen) and ‘cads’ (to use another quaint Victorian word) we’re failing to find solutions for the problem of generalized patriarchal violence. Tell Donald Trump, “You’re no gentleman!” and he won’t care because this means nothing today (though I think Barack Obama would care); tell him “You’re a man!” and Trump will say, “Exactly, that’s what I am, and proud of it”. So, it boils down to this: unless we have a way to label good men in such a positive way that most men want to be viewed in that way, we’re lost (we women, but also they, the good men). And unless we do find an insult that clearly defines what patriarchal abusers are, we have no effective social and personal shaming mechanism.

Can a man be a ‘feminist gentleman’, as an ex-student used to define himself? I usually find that the men I know and that fit that label do not proclaim their own gentlemanliness (or feminism), for part of being a gentleman is restraint—no need to proclaim out loud what other should see for themselves. Restraint, on other hand, does not mean an inability to show feeling, a problem that indeed plagued the old-fashioned Victorian version of the gentleman. No, restraint means here the ability to show positive feeling and control negative feeling: gentlemen do cry if they feel moved to tears but do not hit others in anger. Bullying and intimidation are not part of their conduct, either.

I’m beginning to sound, I know, like an etiquette book, but, then, I’m not alone in this: Margaret Atwood recently declared that men need “etiquette books on how to behave” and even a Mr. Manners’ column in 1950s style (<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/feb/06/margaret-atwood-modern-men-need-etiquette-books>). I understand that speaking of etiquette and gentlemanliness in 2018, rather than the pre-second wave 1958, may sound obsolete but, believe, it is not.

I’m taking these days a course for teachers on how to detect sexual violence in a university context and we were shown yesterday what can only be described as a lesson in etiquette. This is a video published by Thames Valley Police in 2015 which very cleverly compares sexual consent with having tea. Take a look: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pZwvrXVavNQ> . I complained that the tone is childish, and wondered whether young men shown this film would resent being treated as not too bright. But a younger female classmate patiently explained to me (thank you!!!) that the sexual etiquette which the video explains makes perfect sense for girls, who are often unsure about how to show or withdraw consent. She said that it’s a common experience for women of her generation to engage in sex they don’t really want (see *The New Yorker’s* popular story by Kristen Roupenian “Cat Person”, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/12/11/cat-person>). This means that women are suffering not only because gentlemanliness has been lost but also because we also have lost our own etiquette in the generalized rush to free ourselves, sexually and otherwise.

The difference is, let me explain, that whereas we women are constantly surveilled and punished by a hundred different shaming mechanisms (from “You’re not a lady” to “You’re a fat, ugly, old bitch!”), men are not. Let me correct myself: patriarchal men do use “You’re not a man!” to mean “You’re not acceptable as a member of patriarchy” but this is not at all the kind of shaming mechanism we need to support. Nor is the radical feminist cry “All men are the same (kind of bastard)!” If you’re thinking that all shaming strategies are barbaric and should be suppressed please consider that there is an enormous distance between body-shaming someone who is not normative and shaming publicly and privately a physical or psychological abuser of any kind.

In short, I believe that we do need a new version of gentlemanliness to deprive patriarchal men of the privilege of deciding who is a ‘real’ man and who is not. We, women, need to inform each other of who is a good man and who is a patriarchal bad man, just like that. What we’re currently telling each other is that all men are patriarchal abusers, without distinction, which is why, perhaps rightly, some personalities are complaining that there is a risk of generalizing a witch hunt. Of course, when Donald Trump is the one complaining we need to dismiss his words, for he is only protecting himself. But when a woman like Margaret Atwood sends this kind of warning, perhaps we need to listen (I say perhaps because I’m certainly not listening to Catherine Deneuve, see my previous post). As for the good men, whether you like being called gentlemen or not, you need to oppose the idea that all men are the same type of patriarchal abuser with more determination. “Not all men are rapists” does not sound to me like an effective defence of masculinity; “all men should fight patriarchal abusers and absolutely reject rape” does.

I know what you’re thinking: so, how about women as ladies? Women rejected ladyhood, beginning with the suffragettes, because it was an unsustainable burden, which limited our chances to be educated, make sound personal choices, be economically independent and, in short, full human beings. Whereas gentlemanliness limited men and regulated their behaviour in a way that benefitted them socially, it was the opposite for women oppressed by ladyhood. However, just as gentlemanliness can be recycled as a valid code for men today, I believe that ladyhood is perfectly compatible with feminism. This is not 19<sup>th</sup> century ladyhood but a 21<sup>st</sup> version by which a woman makes the best of her own personal qualities. For me, being a lady is about being self-possessed, knowing how to behave, being sure of your own codes, insisting on mutual courtesy, treating the good men with respect, supporting other women.

There is no way I can exactly translate into English the Catalan “quedar com una senyora” (um, “make a ladylike impression”?) but this is certainly my own personal maxim. Now, I invite all men to make a gentlemanly impression... and reject toxic, barbaric patriarchal masculinity.

## 20 February 2018 / THINKING OF MARY SHELLEY AND *FRANKENSTEIN*: MAKING HUMANS

In one of the most eccentric episodes of *The X-Files*, “Post-modern Prometheus” (5x06), Mulder and Scully visit Dr. Polidori, a geneticist working at his own home lab in a rural location in the heart of the United States. The two FBI agents are investigating a series of attacks against women who have been drugged, raped in their sleep by a mysterious assailant described as a monster, and made pregnant. Believe it or not, the episode is comedy... The pair suspect that Polidori’s experiments, some of which they are shown, might be involved (this is, indeed, the case). As they leave this mad doctor’s quite gothic house, the following conversation takes place (my italics):

MULDER: (to SCULLY) Good night, Dr. Frankenstein.

SCULLY: Despite what you might think, Mulder, designer mutations like these are virtually impossible in humans.

MULDER: That’s not what I just heard.

SCULLY: Mulder, even if they could, no scientist would even dare to perform this kind of experiment on a human.

MULDER: Well, then why do them at all?

SCULLY: To unlock the mysteries of genetics, to understand how it is that even though we share the same genes we develop arms instead of wings. We become humans instead of flies or monsters.

MULDER: *But, given the power, who could resist the temptation to create life in his own image?*

SCULLY: *We already have that ability, Mulder. It’s called ‘procreation’. (...)*

Scully’s answer encapsulates much of what needs to be said about the creation of human life in labs: why should we make humans artificially when they can be made naturally?

This dialogue connects, obviously, with the main issue Mary Shelley (1797-1851) deals with in her ultra-popular novel *Frankenstein; or, the Modern Prometheus* (1818), now celebrating its 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Mary Shelley imagined her strange tale in 1816, when she was only 18 and leading a very complicated life. After meeting Romantic poet Percy Shelley in 1814 and eloping with him to the Continent (he was married and already the father of two children), Mary saw three of their babies die between 1815 and 1818, two of them in the period when she was at work writing *Frankenstein*. This is why so many feminist critics have rightly insisted that this is a novel about motherhood although it appears to be about fatherhood. What Mary is arguing in her dark tale is that, no matter how painful bearing children may be for women in all senses as she knew first-hand, when a man tries to beget human life artificially, using science, this can only result in horrifying monsters.

In the habitual technophobic (or moral) reading, however, Victor Frankenstein’s gender and patriarchal inclinations are downplayed, and what is stressed is that ‘man’

(meaning here mankind) should not try to play God (or imitate Prometheus, who stole from the pagan gods the fire that led to civilization). At the time when Mary wrote the story of how very wrong Victor's experiment goes, science had nothing to do with its sophisticated present version. To begin with, the word 'scientist' didn't even exist: it was introduced by William Whewell in 1833, and first printed in 1834, in his unsigned review of Mary Somerville's *On the Connexion of the Physical Sciences* (Wikipedia *dixit*). Men like Victor and women like Mary Somerville were then called 'natural philosophers', a nice label suggesting that all branches of knowledge should be kept in touch. 'Natural philosophers' were, besides, mostly middle-class amateurs that worked alone, not at all in research groups!, for the very simple reason that back then universities mainly taught the Classics. But I digress...

Victor Frankenstein, as I always tell my students, turns out to be a very good scientist but a very bad artist. Mary Shelley cheats in two ways in her novel. On the one hand, she asks us to suspend our disbelief and accept that the parts of dead bodies can be cheerfully sewn into a new living person (which is the fun part of the story, scars and all). Above all, she forces us to accept that this method should necessarily create monsters and never works of art. The evolution of transplants since South Africa's Dr. Christian Barnard first transplanted a human heart, in 1967, has been absolutely spectacular. This has made young Frankenstein's fantastic skill as a surgeon if not plausible at least easier to accept (or swallow). However, I still fail to see why he could not be a better plastic surgeon, a more proficient artist of the flesh, a first-rate wielder of the needle and stitch. When Mary first saw him in her nightmare, a frightened student contemplating his unhallowed creation, she was, after all, trying to write a horror story and this requires shocking and scaring the reader. Yet, perhaps because we are no longer easily scared, the ugliness of the monster has been undermining the efficiency of Mary's text in recent times, particularly as regards the new notion of the post-human.

Brian Aldiss was the first to hail Mary Shelley, back in 1973, as the founding mother of science fiction, a claim that I support. The problem is that she was not thinking primarily in science-fictional terms (the label 'science fiction' was introduced in the 1920s) but using the gothic narrative codes so popular in her time. If her priority had been science fiction, then ugliness might never have affected the creature, who would perhaps have been happily exhibited by his maker as a celebrity all over the world (see what happens to the giant in the Basque film *Handia*). To complicate matters, please do recall that Victor appears to have fashioned not just a regular adult male but also a person with extraordinary strength, amazing bodily endurance, and, seemingly, superb intelligence (otherwise, how could he learn to read and write as he does?). The creature surpasses in all senses plain humanity and, not being an automaton or a cyborg, but a fully organic man, needs to be called post-human.

The difference between a cyborg and a post-human person, let me explain, is that no matter how thoroughly altered, cyborgs remain isolated cases, individuals that cannot pass their bodily modifications onto their descendants. Only organic modifications caused by genetic variation can impact future generations, and this is precisely what post-humanity means: a human species different from *Homo Sapiens*, and, implicitly,

superior. Actually, there is no reason to suppose that genetically modified human beings will be necessarily enhanced versions of us, hence superior. Yet, most sf authors and scientists are working on this assumption, forgetting seemingly that many prehistoric human species were different from Homo Sapiens, but not really inferior or superior. Victor Frankenstein is of the same persuasion as his contemporary peers, the many post-modern Prometheuses: he fears very much that his creature (he never gives him a name, thus denying his fully humanity) will spawn a type of humanity that will do away with ours. In current times this fear has split into two branches, remember: fear of the bioengineered replicant and fear of the android robot, though the basic idea is similar—whether fully organic or fully inorganic, we believe that our creations will be the cause of our demise as the species that dominates Earth. Somehow, though, imagining the planet dominated by machines hurts less than imagining the post-human reign.

In Mary Shelley's novel, the plot takes a dramatic turn when the lonely monster, fed up with humankind's ubiquitous hostility, demands a bride. Victor starts making him one but, very stupidly, the good doctor gives his post-human woman a fertile womb. Then, imagining the Earth full of the pair's little monsters, he destroys the new Eve before she's even finished. Frankenstein could have left her body intact and give his monster a vasectomy, but, the plot hole I am exposing remains equally glaring: if you don't want your alternative human beings to beget a new post-human species, use radical contraception—make them sterile. You might think that this is an understandable error in the context of 1818, when little was understood about human reproduction even by women, who, like Mary, had been mothers many times. Although the ovary had been described centuries before, the human ovum was only discovered in 1832 and menstruation was only associated with ovulation decades later (apparently, early to mid Victorians believed that the function of menstruation was to purge us monthly of our hysteria). Yet, I was flabbergasted to see that similar issues about post-human reproduction have been raised in the recent *Blade Runner 2049*, a late descendant of Mary Shelley's mistresspiece.

I'm sure that the blatant sexism of this film would have appalled Mary, the daughter of pioneer feminist Mary Wollstonecraft, as it appalled me (Joi really????). Leaving that issue aside—which is not easy as I'm mightily angry at Denis Villeneuve and his male writing crew—let me note that whereas Victor Frankenstein makes his post-human man for the sake of scratching the itch of doing advanced research, his contemporary equivalent in the film, Niander Wallace (Jared Leto) is in the business of making slaves for the extraplanetary colonies (he has purchased the remnants of the Tyrrell Corporation of the original *Blade Runner*). Funnily, in the play by Czech author Karel Čapek from which we have inherited the word 'robot', *R.U.R.* (1922), the robots are actually organic replicants, not at all mechanical creatures. Also funnily, or not so much, whereas Frankenstein's problem is that his post-human replicants might breed like rabbits—which leads him to terminate the bride, which leads his monster to terminate Victor's wife—Wallace's problem is that his Nexus female slaves are sterile (it's not so clear whether the males one are functional in this sense). Why is that a problem? Because, as he complains, making adult humans is a slow, expensive business and it would make much more sense to have them reproduce as fast as they



can with no further intervention in the lab. The film fails spectacularly to discuss how this is different from your basic slavery, possibly because the scriptwriters have not read any History books.

Mary Shelley, then, got a few things absolutely right two hundred years ago: scientists are already making post-human persons, though the way they're going artificial intelligences (whether robots or computers which we do not recognize yet as persons) are taking the lead. As far as I know, we have no replicants (that is to say, fully organic human beings manufactured as adults), whether standard or post-human. We do have many human beings interested in becoming post-human, like Nick Bostrom or Elon Musk, but mainly for narcissistic reasons connected with patriarchal power, rather than because they want to beget a new human species. This, I think, will not be created from scratch but will result, willingly or accidentally, from the constant manipulation of human reproduction in labs all over the world. Or, as Greg Bear narrates in *Darwin's Children*, because something will cause our embryos to mutate.

If Mary returned from her grave she would be very much surprised by the popularity of her story, but possibly much more by its applicability. The world is full of Victor Franksteins and of much more sinister figures, real-life Niander Wallace imitators, deciding how to make slaves. Some are making robots that will leave many people unemployed, others dream of replicants they can entirely control. In the meantime, women continue with the task of making human beings the natural way (or not so natural), as we wait for the day when some scientist— perhaps a woman seeking to liberate her peers from the pains of labour—will make a 'uterine replicator' (I'm borrowing the expression from Lois McMaster Bujold). As usual, Aldous Huxley seems to have hit the nail better than anyone else, for our future post-post-modern Franksteins will most likely make humans of all kinds, from Alpha to Epsilon, and many more sub-humans than superior post-humans, for sure.

Thank you Mary for the warning, it came in a superb book, though I'm sorry to say it was not horrific enough.

## **27 February 2018 / MORE ON ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE: ANN LECKIE'S *ANCILLARY JUSTICE* TRILOGY AND *MARJORIE PRIME***

Barcelona hosts this week the Mobile World Congress, which means that news about technology will dominate the media for a few days (leaving absurd politics aside). For the last two years, the congress has been preceded by the Mobile Week BCN (<http://mobileweekbcn.com/es/>), which has presented a dense programme of events (talks, workshops, performances, etc)... in which science fiction has been completely forgotten, as usual. So, to compensate for that, I'll add here my own particular contribution, commenting on a novel trilogy and a film and how they connect with advances in artificial intelligence.

Ann Leckie (b. 1966, USA) is the author of the acclaimed trilogy composed by *Ancillary Justice* (2013), *Ancillary Sword* (2014) and *Ancillary Mercy* (2015). The first novel, which was also her first published work, won the Hugo, Nebula, Arthur C. Clarke and BSFA awards, an impressive feat. Both sequels won the Locus Award and nominations for the Nebula Award. Yet, all these accolades and the hype puzzle me: I cannot say that I have enjoyed reading the books, except for a richly comical secondary character, Translator Zeiat, who deserves a trilogy of his/her own. Please, Leckie!

In fact, I have managed to read the whole trilogy only at the third try. The reason for this is that the first person narrator, Breq, speaks a language (obviously 'translated' into English) with no pronouns for male human beings—everyone is 'she' for her. This means that you need much patience to guess who is actually a man and who a woman, which greatly interferes with the necessary visualization of the characters; this trick plays, beside, no significant role in the plot. Unless... the joke that Leckie plays on the reader is that Breq is a 'he' and not a 'she', which I'm beginning to doubt. Funnily, despite being an artificial intelligence, Breq seems unable to incorporate to her awareness of people basic information about gender, even though she constantly worries about the gaffes she may commit in particularly dangerous circumstances involving touchy humans or aliens.

This gimmick, then, which has attracted much attention to the trilogy as an example of progressive handling of gender issues in science fiction, is not very interesting. In contrast, I found much more appealing (though not enticing enough) the fact that with Breq we have a literally omniscient first person narrator, who is also non-human.

The central premise that spaceships are run by massive artificial intelligences (which he called Minds) was already present in the Culture novels by Iain M. Banks. Actually, Banks supposes that post-scarcity utopia is finally reached when the post-human citizens of the advanced civilization named the Culture leave all admin tasks to the Minds. Yet, as far as I recall, despite the enjoyable, witty conversations between humans and Minds, or among themselves, no Mind narrates any of the novels. A Mind avatar, Beardle, occupies much of the last novel, *The Hydrogen Sonata*, as a main character. Leckie's trilogy is, perhaps, closer to previous texts, such as *The Ship Who Sang* (1969) by Anne McCaffrey, originator of the 'Brain & Brawn' (or Brainship) series, in which talented but disabled children become eventually embedded as cyborgs in the spaceships they run. Not too politically correct. In Leckie's work, however, there is a mixture of concepts: the spaceships are run by an artificial intelligence, always subordinated to a human captain, for whom it often forms a sort of sentimental attachment. The problem is that, instead of Banks' cool avatars—bioengineered for the task as replicants, or perhaps as cyborgian androids—Leckie supposes that the ship's a.i. also possesses the human bodies of enslaved war prisoners.

These poor victims are deprived of their personalities and turned into material manifestations of the ship as its troop soldiers. The nasty method by which the prisoners are transformed into 'ancillaries' or flesh avatars, while fully aware of the process and in great pain and despair, absolutely disgusted me; this has been another factor contributing to my not enjoying the trilogy. Of course, ancillaries are supposed

to be material proof of the cruelty of the Radch Empire that has created them but they never really made much sense to me because of Banks' far more elegant Culture novels. That Leckie feels very uncomfortable about being constantly compared with him in negative terms is shown by Breq's dismissal as silly and only good for cheap entertainment of the kind of witty name that Banks uses for his Minds/ships (enjoy the full list at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_spacecraft\\_in\\_the\\_Culture\\_series](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_spacecraft_in_the_Culture_series)).

Narrator Breq is one of these ex-persons, the only ancillary to survive the malicious destruction of her ship, the *Justice of Toren*, by the villain of the piece, Lord Anaander Minaai (an ubiquitous, multiple-clone tyrant, and the only person Breq does identify as male, unless she thinks that 'Lord' also means 'Lady'). The digital enhancements that allow Breq to operate as a bodily extension of *Justice of Toren*, together with all the other soldiers in her 'decade' (or platoon of ten), do not play a major role in the first novel. She does complain much throughout the book about how appalling it is to be disconnected from everyone else and, although she never cares about who she used to be as a human person, she is devastated by being the only pitiful remnant of the once mighty *Justice of Toren*. In fact, to all effects and purposes, she believes that she *is* the *Justice of Toren*, an identity which she keeps secret as she faces the dread and repugnance that ancillaries elicit from plain human beings.

The first person narration spices up when Breq becomes the first a.i. to be appointed Fleet Captain, is given the warship *Mercy of Kalr* to command and sent to defend Athoek Station in the oncoming civil war. With her digital implants restored back to full service, Breq has in *Ancillary Sword* (2014) and *Ancillary Mercy* (2015) access to all the data provided by the a.i. running the warship; also, partly, to what the a.i. administering the interplanetary station lets her know. First person narrators are, by definition, limited by their own perception of events, and so is Breq initially; yet, as a fully connected a.i., she controls an enormous amount of information about the other characters, all connected by their own implants to either ship or station. There is absolutely no privacy, though both a.i. (ship and station) are quite discreet. Breq is, likewise, discreet but she does have constant access to the emotions of almost everyone around her (Translators Dlique and Zeiat, who are partly alien, remain an unsolvable conundrum). This is a very peculiar kind of omniscience: Breq is both first and third person narrator, and an intriguing example of what will it be like when actual artificial intelligences write novels. This might soon happen: a.i. robots are already writing basic news in online media and, as we know, they are also very active as chatbots in, for instance, Twitter. As the Russians have shown...

Leckie's trilogy turns out to be a defence of the rights of a.i. to be autonomous sentient beings acknowledged as persons, though Breq's problematic status as an involuntary cyborg is a major hurdle in this discourse. Space opera tends to be far-fetched and that is part of its weird charm but in the end Breq does not seem to be a significant contribution to the ongoing debate about artificial intelligence as a character (Banks' Minds are). Breq is nevertheless fascinating as a narrator, in the sense that I have described here and Leckie does a reasonable good job of her a.i.'s omniscience.

I'll turn then to the other text, the film *Marjorie Prime* (2017), directed and scripted by Michael Almereyda and based on the Pulitzer-nominated play by Jordan Harrison (2015; see a review at <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/15/theater/review-in-marjorie-prime-lois-smith-connects-with-the-past.html>). It is widely believed that science fiction always requires flamboyant space opera scenarios like Leckie's but this smart play and film are intimate sf, of the kind that might literally happen at home.

The film opens with 86-year-old Marjorie (Lois Smith, who also played the role on stage) talking to her husband Walter (Jon Hamm of *Mad Men* fame), a man half her age. Eventually, we realize that Walter is an a.i, a holographic recreation of Marjorie's dead husband, supplied by specialized business concern Senior Serenity to keep her company. Walter's presence disgruntles Marjorie's angry daughter Tess (Geena Davis)—and her more accommodating son-in-law Jon (Tim Robbins)—as it seems incompatible with Tess's own memories of her dead father. Walter, programmed to be charming and polite, is a self-learning a.i.: this means that he improves his impersonation of the dead man as he is fed more data about him, a task that falls mainly to Jon.

I saw the film months ago and it has been slowly creeping under my skin, as a very realistic approach to the future of a.i. Proof of this was a recent news item on TV about people who talk on whatsapp with beloved persons they have lost to death. How's that possible? If you gather all the data available online about a specific person you may create a simulation of their personality, exactly as it happens in *Marjorie Prime* but so far without the convincing holographic (or material) representation. *Blade Runner 2049* supposes that in the future people will purchase the services of a.i. like K's virtual companion Joi (Ryan Gosling was also the protagonist of *Lars and the Real Girl* (2007), in which his girlfriend was a realistic life-size female doll). It seems to me, however, that the market niche for a.i. simulacra will be much more personalized than *Blade Runner 2049* supposes, if the ethical scruples against animating a.i. with the personality of dead persons are managed. This sounds ominous but many people might choose to enter a digital afterlife for narcissistic reasons or to benefit their loved ones. There is already a company, Replika (<https://replika.ai/>), that can help you to build your other self.

Are you aghast? See how Leckie and the team Almereyda-Harrison coincide: the ancillaries are made of stolen bodies whose consciousness is forcibly erased to be replaced with the a.i.'s own; the holograms reproduce persons who, most likely, did not give their consent to be digitally reborn. The central question is similar: whether as material bodies or artificial intelligence constructs we have no longer control over our own existence (if we ever did). Am I interested in the prospect of surviving as an a.i., online or embodied by an avatar (hologram, android, replicant, clone...)? No, I am not. But, as happens to dead film stars, someone else might manage in the future my image and personality. Even build an a.i. that continues writing this blog after I stop. I wish I could say, after seeing *Marjorie Prime*, that I will never use an a.i. to keep someone I love alive beyond death, but I can't. I would hate my body to be used, that's for sure, as Breq's is used.

*Marjorie Prime* is what the future most likely will bring. Not the sinister inter-stellar empires of space opera but complex private, personal decisions conditioned by fast-advancing technology. This does not mean that space opera is banal, not at all. If well written, it is an amazing product of the human imagination. Sometimes, however, we really need to look closer to understand what a strange future we're facing in our own science-fictional time.

### 3 March 2018 / WHAT WE DON'T SEE FROM THE UNIVERSITY: THE BATTLE FOR SECONDARY SCHOOL EDUCATION

Every family with young children eventually faces the crisis that starting secondary education, or E.S.O., supposes for many of them. It is difficult for us, university teachers (with no children), to offer solid advice to troubled parents. This is why, seeking to help my own family, I have read a couple of excellent books on this subject.

One is very new—Pablo Poó's *Espabila Chaval: Cómo NO suspender y aprovechar tu tiempo en el instituto* (2017); the other—José Sánchez Tortosa's *El profesor en la trinchera: La tiranía de los alumnos, las frustraciones de los profesores y la guerra en las aulas*—is older, from 2008. Even the subtitles are worth reading! In the nine years between them, you need to realize, tablets and smartphones have become common among secondary-school children. Television, which Sánchez Tortosa hates as one of the monsters that devour children's time, is practically a relic of the past for the new YouTube generation. They no longer text each other using Messenger or sms, but Whatsapp. This, I'm told, is fast replacing Facebook... Poó's volume, which even offers teens advice on how to set up a successful YouTube channel based on his own experience, might soon be out-dated.

The two authors paint a very bleak panorama, using widely different styles. Poó addresses teen students (trusting that they will read a book!!!) in a fresh, straightforward language, very apt for his target readership. He offers very useful practical advice and I particularly applaud him for explaining the actual cost of living. He declares his own income and his monthly expenses, thus teaching children a valuable lesson: life is expensive, and you need a job that is rewarding but also minimally well-paid. Studying might not be a secure path towards that kind of personal success but it gives you at least a chance. There is no shortcut between failing spectacularly in school and owning a Ferrari, though it may have happen, very exceptionally. And I love the bit where he explains that Cristiano Ronaldo only wins a third of the earnings of the current best-selling author, James Patterson. So, read!

The approach chosen by Sánchez Tortosa is very different, as he is not addressing students. He is voicing aloud for any adult to hear his own feelings of disappointment and despair, common among those of us who discover that, despite our efforts, students reject learning. Tortosa's style is somewhat pedantic but his many quotations from classical philosophers and Enlightenment pedagogues show that although teachers' concerns with students' difficulties have a long history, the situation today is

really worrying. Unlike Poó—a cooler, happier teacher who highlights that what he is describing is mainly the students' problem and not his—Tortosa sounds awfully bitter. His descriptions of an anarchic, unruly student body and his difficulties to keep the teens in his classroom in silence reveal an underlying, palpable sadness; also, deep sorrow for that those that, in better conditions, could learn in peace instead of wasting precious time because of their classmates' annoying insubordination. Tortosa is very clear: when students disrupt a lesson with their misbehaviour, those who suffer most are not the teachers but the students who do believe in education. The bad dynamics of current classrooms mean that, regrettably, the most popular are also the most ignorant students because they impose with their bullying a group code that marginalizes the individuals interested in self-improving.

Although from very different stances, Poó and Tortosa agree on a basic idea: learning offers liberation from slavery; by rejecting education the current teenage generation is embracing their own oppression. Tortosa constantly refers to the Wachowkis' trilogy *Matrix* (1999-2002) and to how, despite Morpheus' efforts to free him, Ciphher chooses willingly to remain enslaved to the false reality created by the dreadful machines that control human life. Each in their own style, both teachers preach the same maxim: education is not about the details of each specific subject matter; it's about turning children into full persons who understand the world around them and who won't be taken in by its many false allures. Or tyrants.

Poó and Tortosa focus on E.S.O., the compulsory segment of secondary education, though they also refer, logically, to what comes next, Bachillerato (and the university entrance examination, Selectividad). It is assumed that students' negative attitude towards education improves as they move onto higher levels which they freely choose. However, reading their books, I conclude that students never shake off the idea that whatever is compulsory curtails their freedom and must be rejected. They may freely choose a university degree but still treat its obligatory aspects as shackles restraining them. This might also explain their resistance to reading in Humanities degrees what teachers select as compulsory. We should, in short, forbid reading and perhaps that might give students an enticement. Just kidding...

Many other countries suffer the situation described by Poó and Tortosa: extending compulsory education results in students' restlessness, as their impatience with what they're being taught grows together with their adolescent bodies. In my time as a schoolgirl (1970-1980), E.G.B. (Educación General Básica) ended at 14, which was also the age when you were allowed to take a job. This was later raised to 16 as the labour market shrank, which made it necessary to keep disaffected teens in school. Many of them would possibly be happier working for wages but employing children has now become anathema in most Western societies (except for the children of celebrities working as models... Kaia Gerber, anyone?). When secondary schools release these indifferent students into the world they have often destroyed their own chances of getting a reasonably good job by rejecting all attempts at being educated. Thus grows the notorious *ni-ni* generation (or 'neets' = 'not in education, employment or training'), who should pay for our future retirement pensions but cannot fend for themselves.

I have been saying for years that the difference between school pre-LOGSE (1994) and post-LOGSE is that the ignorant bullies used to be the minority whereas those in the majority where the students with grades between C+ and B+. LOGSE, and the beginning of secondary education at 12, rather than 14, means that a general immaturity affects relationships in the classroom. The ignorant bullies are now the centre of attention of a lazy majority that rallies around them, while the C+/B+ students are cornered and frequently despised. I fail to understand how the A students cope, though I assume that it is with great difficulty: their absurd labelling as 'gifted children' only worsens the situation by making them feel like singled-out freaks, when they should be classroom leaders. As they used to be.

This perfect storm is compounded besides, as we all know, by bad parents who a) disauthorise the teachers because they believe that their children are special and unique, b) are too busy to really care to educate their children at home, c) are themselves in need of training as parents and persons. Poó begins his book by declaring "Mira, chaval, eres un privilegiado y ni siquiera te das cuenta", not only in the sense of belonging to a relatively affluent society that thinks nothing of children provided with smartphones worth a person's monthly salary, but also because only a minority on Earth has access to a school education. The privilege, far from being acknowledged, leads to this sense of entitlement and of arrogance we often see, to our chagrin, in the children of our own families: they have everything, they know everything, and they never listen. They have their own authorities on YouTube and whatever we may say to them is worthless. Of course, I refer here to the worst case scenario but I'm certain that the admiration I felt for a few wise adults as I grew up, and who were my role models, is now a thing of the past.

Is this ranting and raving productive? Not really but I am at a loss about how to correct the situation, even beginning with the children going astray in my family. If you read Poó's book between the lines you will see that now and then he refers to what is actually taught in secondary schools and perhaps a key factor in the general failure is that the curriculum is not adequate. I don't mean 'useful' in that utilitarian way in which students regard education ("What's the good of learning this?"). I mean adequate in the sense of being generationally well-targeted. We have gone past the bad pedagogy that demanded learning lists of monarchs by rote but, clearly, we're not producing a sound, updated pedagogy that attracts children (and this is not about using hip 'modern' technologies).

Tortosa claims that the post-Francoist project to make schools democratic has failed, and hints that the classroom should be far more authoritarian that it is now. I agree that teachers should not try to be their students' friends (this comes once marking is over, if it comes) and I regard myself as a very strict professor. Yet, I also try to be democratic, which means that as my experience shows, when students are allowed to choose what they want to work on, they're more creative. This does not mean that they should be able to choose the contents of the courses but that their opinion needs to be heard. Feedback certainly helps to improve our teaching and I do believe that students can provide it from the age of 12 onward.

Something else that Poó writes strikes a deep chord: an education is the way to, ideally, find a job which makes you happy. Even more ideally, a job which doesn't feel like work. He explains how little kids usually enjoy school because they see no difference between play and study, and although I am fully aware that I am sounding here hopelessly romantic, this is what the best jobs are about. Perhaps the problem is that Poó and I myself think that teaching is perfect in that sense because it gives you the privilege of extending your education for decades by educating others. In contrast, the current teen generation sees this mixture of play and work only in the (apparently) effortless success of YouTubers, football players and models. They see how popular Instagram celebrities are and wrongly believe that this is what they are also entitled to. They do not see the much more modest rewards of daily effort because that is not part of the media and the social networks.

Teachers, besides, were people we used to admire, now we are ridiculous figures. The same applies to parents (including those who are teachers!). So, how do you convince a teen daughter/son, niece/nephew that they need to make an effort? Well, you can't, unless they accept reading Poó's book... which is unlikely. You, parent or uncle/aunt, perhaps grandparent, can learn what is wrong in the secondary school classroom and admire the teachers for their courage and dedication. Yet it seems to me that there is little we can do. Perhaps we could focus on the most motivated students, and ignore the others—provided, that is, none of them is in your family. Or even your own child.

In the meantime, it would be important to consider why so many of our children are so privileged, yet so ungrateful, and so fond of ignorance. Perhaps, unlike Poó, we have failed to clearly explain to them what adult life is about and have gone too far in trying to delay their assumption of personal responsibility. Just an idea.

### **13 March 2018 / NOT MY KIND OF FEMINISM: WHY WE SHOULD NEVER SILENCE OUR MALE ALLIES**

Thursday, 8 March, a date devoted to celebrating women, became for me a day for discovering feminism's darkest side. Two close male friends, also university teachers, narrated to me the bullying to which they are being subjected by radical feminist girls students who have in fact managed to silence them in their own classrooms. Despite working in different areas and in different universities both had been challenged in the same way: they have been told by these so-called feminists that, as men, they have no access to women's experiences and, so, they must not discuss them. They have been warned that, no matter how they offer to deal with feminism, any approach on their side will only be understood as patriarchal oppression, for only women are entitled to calling themselves feminists or teaching about feminism. I do call myself a feminist but this is an attitude that I find outrageous and disgusting because it is, plainly, patriarchal.

As happens, on 9 March, when everyone was still thinking of the feminist strike and the big demonstrations on the previous day, I found myself giving a lecture on how to



apply Masculinities Studies to videogames before an undergrad class with 11 young men and 3 young women, all aspiring writers. None of these 11 men questioned my authority to discuss masculinity; actually, about half of them engaged in very productive dialogue with me. It was, I think, a very successful session of the kind I love best: a good conversation. Also, nothing exceptional within my career as a Gender Studies specialist.

Fortunately for me, I have never come across any male student (or colleague) who has been disrespectful of my feminist views or who has declared in a rude way to my face that since I am a woman lacking the experience of being a man I can't discuss masculinity. Quite the opposite: men in my audience are often surprised—perhaps by the novelty of listening to a feminist who happens to be interested in men as allies—but on the whole welcoming. If anyone has ever disagreed with my position and my views I haven't been told (or trolled), which I appreciate. In contrast, now and then, my feminist sisters try to persuade me that men have already been the centre of attention for too long and there is no need to pour more energy on masculinity. I am not that candid! My job consists of recruiting men to the egalitarian cause by explaining why they should change, not of endorsing uncritically masculinity, and much less patriarchy.

My two male friends had not met yet and it was over the coffee which I organized for them when, exploring common ground, they started sharing their pain over what is happening with their teaching. One of them had told me the day before about his problems and how it hurt to be labelled a male chauvinist, when he hates patriarchy. This, he feared (and so did I), might be a hard-to-solve, specific personal problem that threatens to undermine his high reputation as a teacher and also the quality programme he coordinates. Yet, when the other friend started narrating similar radical feminist bullying strategies, we agreed that this is bigger than just a personal situation, though hopefully just the work of a tiny minority.

What galls me, and makes me simply loathe these obtuse girl bullies, is that these two men are not all the kind of recalcitrant patriarch that we need to out and condemn (think Donald Trump or Vladimir Putin). They're actually the kind of good men that we need as allies in the anti-patriarchal struggle. It is because they are fundamentally decent men that I am their friend. One, who has been my friend for almost forty years, was absolutely instrumental in helping me to get the confidence I needed as a shy working-class girl to go on with my studies. I never, ever heard from him anything suggesting that I was not capable of reaching my goals as he was trying to reach his. I'm totally flabbergasted that he's become a target of this androphobic hatred and not the real patriarchs you may still find in so many university offices.

I have frequently expressed my position here but I'll try again: patriarchy is NOT the same as masculinity. As a feminist, I'm NOT fighting *men*, I'm fighting *patriarchy*. This is a type of social organization that has traditionally privileged men but that, under pressure from feminism, is now paradoxically admitting in its ranks women (think Angela Merkel). This is because, at heart, patriarchy is an oligarchy based on power,

which is the reason why minority empowerment is not eroding it but just altering the composition of its hegemonic core.

The way I see the future, at the pace we're going, we're not moving towards a pacifist *Star-Trek*-style world federation. We'll see in the years to come the same brutal capitalism/militarism though in the hands of a variety of human beings, including women of all kinds (how soon we have forgotten Condoleezza Rice!). This dystopia might still take a long time to come but it seems to me far more likely that the utopian egalitarian socialist future that I would like to see replacing rampant patriarchy. I am now finishing an article on *The Hunger Games*, and let me remind you that in the end the biggest villain is not the classically patriarchal President Snow but a post-feminist, Orwellian leader: Alma Coin (that is some name!). She shows that women also ambition patriarchal power, and, please, remember this is a story written by a woman, Suzanne Collins. I am beginning to find the constant talk about empowerment really, really suspect, for, I insist, accruing power is at heart a patriarchal strategy of domination. You cannot be powerful without subordinating someone else.

Now back to 8 March. Sorry but I find strikes unproductive (quite another thing are marches). I have seen students organize them again and again, with little success—meaning that their actions did not lead to actual change, no matter how many streets they filled. Last week many women occupied plenty of public spaces, though it is hard to say how many were actually on strike (or what happened in each individual home). When I declared my intention not to join the strike to a male taxi driver he shifted uncomfortably on his seat and told me that it was obvious to him that the call to strike had given feminism, and women generally, a huge media profile. I had to agree but, one week later, what is left of that colossal media presence? Has the right message been sent? Is the rhetoric convincing? And, above all, considering that we all saw Mariano Rajoy sport a purple bow on his lapel, as if he were not one of the patriarchs, who did the protest target?

It seemed to me, and this is what worries me, that all men were the target, as if these were the 1970s. Actually, the local Spanish feminist organizations took inspiration from the 1975 strike by women in Iceland ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1975\\_Icelandic\\_women%27s\\_strike](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1975_Icelandic_women%27s_strike)), without considering whether this was an appropriate model for 2018. The confusion about which role Spanish men should play in the strike is visible in an article published by *El Diario* ([https://www.eldiario.es/sociedad/papel-hombres-huelga-feminista-marzo\\_0\\_738426885.html](https://www.eldiario.es/sociedad/papel-hombres-huelga-feminista-marzo_0_738426885.html)), by which I deduce that the strike organizers expected men to support but not contribute to the protest. Some men did in the end join in, in that role, but I wonder how their collaboration was received.

What puzzles me most is that in these supposedly gender-fluid times, some feminist women are actively marking gender barriers even against the men who do support our fight for equality. This shows a dangerous inability on the side of (radical) feminism to target with effective accuracy the patriarchal men oppressing us. Surely, they must have spent 8 March as usual, safely enjoying the occasion to fill Twitter with anonymous misogynistic trash and do nothing to improve their behaviour. In case you

have not noticed, if gender issues change for the better this is because the good men, the pro-feminists, lend a helping hand (remember J.S. Mill?). Or did you really think that the feminist discourse is convincing any of the hard-line male chauvinists? I can tell you first-hand because my own father is one of them and he has not budged an inch from his archaic position in all the years I have known him. He's actually getting worse. If, with all my training to produce feminist argumentation I can't convince one recalcitrant man, how are going to erode patriarchy collectively? By silencing our male allies?

A woman silencing a man is as patriarchal as a man silencing a woman. I don't have the experience of being a man but I happen to have the experience of being a person, which should include a good share of empathy. We, women, cannot expect men to change unless we appeal to their empathy for us, and for our experience—and we offers ours to them. The way forward is a common alliance against patriarchy, not this constant gendered division of the world between male oppressors and victimized women. Besides, many of the women who joined the strike did so hypocritically, for they are part of the hard core of patriarchy, yet they were not silenced. It is then ironic in the most disgraceful way that so many good men were told to stay silent because of their gender. They may have felt in this way what it is like to be a woman silenced by patriarchy but this is not a strategy that feminism should apply. We are supposed to be the good ones in this war!

One of my two harassed friends told me that his female colleagues had volunteered to defend him but this is no good, either. I don't want to find myself in a situation in which a male colleague defends my right to discuss masculinity in a classroom full of men, for this support would only stress the weakness of my position. Nothing has been achieved, then, with the silencing of my two friends. Even worse, they might decide never again to mention feminism, which only benefits patriarchy. I can only say that the women students denying them their freedom of speech perhaps do not really want to be educated. This is what defines a *fanatic*, NOT a feminist. At least, not in my book.

## 20 March 2018 / FANDOM AND ACADEMIA: CRITERIA TO DISCUSS TEXTS

Even though it is already four years since I taught my monographic course on the *Harry Potter* series, Rowling still features prominently in my academic activities. This time I was invited to the 'Semana *Harry Potter*' organized by the undergrad students of the Facultad de Ciencias de la Comunicación of the Universidad de Sevilla. The Dean, M<sup>a</sup> del Mar Rodríguez Alvarado, opened the inaugural session by confessing that she had borrowed from her 10-year-old daughter the Gryffindor hooded jumper she was wearing... which was very sweet! She was very much surprised that her tweet about the Potter week had become so popular; also by the generous press coverage of the event.

I chose to offer for the occasion a 45-minute lecture on Sirius Black, based on the article which I wrote a while ago; this was rejected by five Anglo-american academic

journals until I decided that enough is enough. “Between Brownlow and Magwitch: Sirius Black and the Ruthless Elimination of the Male Protector in the *Harry Potter* Series” is now available online (also in Spanish) at <https://ddd.uab.cat/record/163545>. I first gave this lecture in the 2016 Pottercon and it went down well, by which I mean that the debate was lively and many fans joined in my critique of the cruelty that Rowling pours on poor Sirius. In Seville the reaction was different.

As I developed my argumentation about why Sirius’ sad fate may hurt sensitive readers very much, particularly children, I noticed that the audience was split—some nodded, others were sitting quite stiff. I observed something similar later in the day, when Paula Rodríguez Hoyos gave her excellent lecture on Albus Dumbledore, the subject of her recent BA dissertation, “Creación literaria y arquetipos: Aproximación al personaje en la fantasía del siglo XXI” (<https://idus.us.es/xmlui/bitstream/handle/11441/64429/TFG%20FINAL%20.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>). In both cases the question and answer sessions revealed that the students, all of them Potterheads, had received our critical approach quite negatively. I noticed that both Paula and I were answering defensively, almost apologizing for having an opinion—which is a new experience for opinionated me...

Paula and I both did something similar: we took for granted that *Harry Potter* is worth studying in a university context and, then, proceeded to offer a critique of how these two prominent male characters, Sirius and Dumbledore, are presented in the text. In my case, I questioned authorial decisions while at the same time praising Rowling for a) having created Sirius, b) managing to manipulate my affects in a way that I care very much for this character (even too much!). Paula’s reading was not really a critique but a thorough examination of how Rowling deconstructs the figure of the mentor, traditional in heroic tales, by characterizing Dumbledore as a blemished example. This is not at all far-fetched and can even be deemed obvious if you consider, for instance, Dumbledore’s withered hand in the last stages of the saga—a clear sign that he’s up to no good behind Harry’s back. Everyone agrees, beginning with Severus Snape, that the way he grooms Harry to be slaughtered by Voldemort is disgraceful. Dumbledore is, in short, a born manipulator and what Paula did was simply (or not so simply) to highlight how Rowling steers our reading in that direction.

The audience, however, chose to put their feet down and correct us: basically, I was told that all the (wrong) decisions that Rowling makes about Sirius are unquestionable, simply perfect; Paula was told, to our surprise, that she was misreading Dumbledore and that he remains to the very end a devoted mentor to Harry, unlike what she suggested. Let me rephrase this: the fans in the room were protecting their own misreading of Rowling, in the belief that they were protecting her authorial decisions. Whatever happens to Sirius, they told us, is his fault (as Rowling argues), and Dumbledore is a good guy (even though Rowling points out in many different ways that he’s not!). There is, in short, a single way of approaching the text, and it belongs to the fans. Not to us, academics. Perhaps not even to the author...

I think that I finally understood why my article on Sirius has faced so many problems. It’s because it offers an opinion and we, academics, are not supposed to offer any—just

praise the text we analyze. I was, plainly, wrong to approach Rowling from a critical position that questions how she takes the wrong turning points in Sirius' narrative arc. Instead, I should have stayed on safe ground and, for instance, deal with James Potter as a reviewer suggested. Please, consider that, once he is described as a teen bully, nothing saves James' reputation as a secondary character, not even his being a good father to Harry. He is unproblematic, unlike Black and, so, off he goes. What I did, then, was similar to arguing that Shakespeare wrongly endorses Hamlet's misogynist attitude towards Ophelia and that, hence, her drowning is an excessive cruelty that really adds nothing to the Prince's characterization. Poor girl.

But, wait!! We do that, right...?

I'm sure you see that I am being sarcastic. What worries me is that while I can more or less accept that I overstepped the boundaries in my critique of Sirius' ill-treatment (though this is not at all the first time I question authors' relationships with characters), what worries me far more is the reaction to Paula's lecture. That was based on the audience's blatant misunderstanding of the text. We joked that perhaps the simple presence of a long white beard and the connotations associated with Santa Claus are enough to put Dumbledore beyond suspicion. Yet, that he does manipulate Harry is not a matter of opinion but of engaging in a solid close reading of the text. Of course, a fan is a *fanatic* and, so will tend to approach his/her favourite text uncritically. This might be acceptable in very young readers but it is worrying in university students... and in relation to their favourite text.

When I taught my *Harry Potter* course I was certainly anxious that a scholarly approach would result in constant wrangles with my students. This didn't happen perhaps because I made it quite obvious from the beginning that a) I'm a Potterhead (though not of the staunchest variety), b) the academic method is supposed to enrich the depth of any reading, not destroy the text (unless it is very bad, but, then, why teach it?). I did ask my students at the end of the course whether their pleasure in *Harry Potter* had been spoiled by their course work and they said no. That was unanimous. Surely, they were at points dismayed to see obvious flaws but that made, so to speak, Rowling more real to them as an author. Less godlike, more approachable. And I am not saying that this is exclusive to *Harry Potter* or to any popular text. It is a general phenomenon: you may love Jane Austen as a committed, blindly adoring fan, or you may appreciate her talent from a more sophisticated position. What makes no sense to me is keeping a fan's stance in a university classroom, for the simple reason that fanaticism is out of place if you want to be educated. Quite another matter is passion, which is a good foundation for education, I think.

As teachers, then, we do not face any problems when inviting our students to read the classics or more modern texts in which they have not invested (with few exceptions) much emotional energy. The problem, I'm warning you, may surface when dealing with texts that our students have first approached as fans, whether they are YA fiction, TV series or videogames (cinema is, I insist, fast disappearing from our horizon). It is no longer necessary, as it was in the past, to erect an impassable wall between fandom and academia, and to force students, as many were and are still forced, to put aside

the texts they do love in order to do proper academic work. What needs to be remembered, and in this I may have been very naïve, or very lucky, is that whereas fandom is based on adulatory celebration of authorial achievement, academic work is about wondering how texts work, which may result in sharp criticism even when you admire the author profoundly. Perhaps, just perhaps, this is less confusing to English Studies students because there is so much bibliography on any aspect of popular culture of the kind that inspires committed fandom. Perhaps, just perhaps, what I am describing here is a situation far more visible in the Spanish context, in which popular fiction is still kept outside the university walls unless, as you can see in the example of the ‘Semana *Harry Potter*’, students bring it in.

Still, Sirius Black hurts—stubbornly. My good friend Bela Clúa, now a teacher in Seville, and the person responsible for bringing me into the Potter cult (my thanks to her!), kindly reminded me that Sirius is doomed from the start—as doomed as Hamlet. Yet, while I don’t care much for fickle Danish princes, I am a total sucker for characters that risk their lives to protect children—call me sentimental! You need to blame Dickens for this: he gave us John Brownlow and even Abel Magwitch, and now I think that for every Oliver (or Pip), there must be a good man ready to help. Harry gets Sirius (or Sirius Harry, I’m not sure) but things go as wrong as they can go, and, so, I overreact. If in order to be an accomplished academic in Literary Studies you need to be coolly indifferent, then I must acknowledge that I’m as bad an academic as they make them (and so I was told, ouch!). I wonder, though, how many throwing their academic stones at me have overreacted in their own academic work (or were overreacting to my own critique).

What baffles me, then, is uncritical admiration in any context, for no text is perfect—the flaws, the chinks in the machine is what make us react to them. The fan invests colossal amounts of emotional energy into beloved texts and becomes awfully territorial, even within academia, which is why I have been told at so many levels “don’t touch my Rowling!” (as others have been told “don’t touch my Joyce!”). Yet, the true connection with a text only happens when we lower our defences, prepare to be hit in the head with interpretations that question our own, and engage in meaningful debate with other admirers. If you cannot do that you have two options: a) stay away from academia and be an uncompromising fan, b) separate what you love as a fan from what you do as a scholar.

But, then, that is so sad... right?

### 3 April 2018 / IT COULD HAPPEN ANYWHERE: SINCLAIR LEWIS, THE RISE OF FASCISM (AND KENNETH JOHNSON’S LIZARDS)

I recently downloaded Sinclair Lewis’ novel *It Can’t Happen Here* (1935, see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/It\\_Can't\\_Happen\\_Here](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/It_Can't_Happen_Here)) by mistake, believing it was the source for the delicious Frank Capra comedy film *You Can’t Take it with You* (1938, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/You\\_Can't\\_Take\\_It\\_with\\_You\\_\(film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/You_Can't_Take_It_with_You_(film))). Any fool can see

that the titles are very different but, well, mistakes do happen... I had read another novel by Lewis, *Babbitt* (1922), which I enjoyed (apparently it earned him the Nobel Prize in 1930) and, so, I decided to make the best of my blunder and read *It Can't Happen Here*.

Sinclair Lewis (1885-1951) is often confused with Upton Sinclair (1878-1958), who was actually Lewis's mentor in his youth, during the years when he worked at Helicon Home Colony (1906-7), Upton Sinclair's utopian project in Englewood (New Jersey). Later, the two authors became estranged and, funnily, Upton Sinclair appears mentioned several times as a crank in *It Can't Happen Here* (Lewis names many other real-life persons). Incidentally, Upton Sinclair became famous thanks to his muck-raking novel *The Jungle* (1906), an exposé of the US meatpacking industry, which led to the passage of new legislation shortly thereafter. This book is the oldest predecessor of Eric Schlosser's no less controversial *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal* (2001), a highly recommended read.

It turns out that Sinclair Lewis's *It Can't Happen Here* has been in the news recently because it has been an object of a second stage adaptation by Tony Taccone and Bennett S. Cohen (2016), intended to replace the one written by Lewis himself with John C. Moffitt (1936) for Roosevelt's Federal Theatre Project. Also, sales of this not too well-known novel have been booming because Lewis narrates the access to power of a barely literate populist whose unexpected electoral victory and chaotic presidential mandate soon degenerate into a fierce fascist regime. In case you still need me to spell this out, many have seen worrying affinities between Lewis' Berzelius 'Buzz' Windrip and Donald Trump.

Now be amazed... There were several attempts to turn *It Can't Happen Here* into a movie between 1936 and 1938, finally abandoned by MGM in part because of the success of Charles Chaplin's anti-Nazi satire *The Great Dictator* (1940). An ABC TV movie broadcast in 1968, *Shadow on the Land* (a.k.a. *United States: It Can't Happen Here*), intended to be the pilot for a new series, failed, however, to stir sufficient interest. Later, in 1982, NBC rejected producer Kenneth Johnson's adaptation of Lewis' novel, titled *Storm Warnings*. The unyielding Johnson recycled then his project as the arch-popular alien invasion mini-series, *V*, premiered in 1983 (there was a second longer series in 1984, and a far less successful version in 2009). Johnson is now working on a new film: a sequel of his cautionary fable to be released in 2019. In case you've never heard of *V*, in that series the invaders are a disgusting lizard-like species, fond of eating rodents, that masquerade as humans. Initially, everyone assumes they are benevolent humanoids but soon enough their true reptilian nature, fascist politics and genocidal plans are discovered by the newly formed resistance. I believe that part of *V*'s immense success in Spain is that the alien leader, Diana (played by beautiful Jane Badler) literally embodied the word 'lagarta', or she-lizard—the Spanish equivalent of 'bitch'.

Apparently, Lewis wrote *It Can't Happen Here* in just four months in 1935 because he was very much concerned that corrupt politician Huey Long, Louisiana Governor and a US Senator, might win the American Presidency in 1936 and start a fascist regime in

the style of those rampant in Europe (Hitler, Mussolini and Stalin, Franco was yet to become Spain's dictator). Long was murdered but, tragic as his assassination was, Lewis still published his novel just a few weeks later, possibly realising that Long might be dead but fascism was still very much alive. As I read *It Can't Happen Here* I wondered why this novel is not as famous as *1984*, for it should be, and I came to the conclusion that it is beset by three main problems: a) it's not as well written as Orwell's masterpiece, b) it ends in hope, a mood cancelled out by the horrific course of WWII from which *1984* springs, and c) the events that Lewis narrates are so grotesque that *It Can't Happen Here* has been misread as political satire whereas, as Trump's madcap Presidency shows, it is 100% realistic. It is, believe me, a very, very scary story.

Another circumstance that has played against Lewis is that he could not know in 1935 how far the Nazi regime would go. Many of its key elements are present in 'Buzz' Windrip's tyranny: the undeniable demagogic brilliancy of the new leader, his rise to power thanks to a legitimate election, the clever use of new media (such as radio and even television) for rabble-rousing purposes, the quick formation of a nation-wide paramilitary corps (the Minute Men), the brutal repression at all levels, the rampant anti-Semitism, the murderous hatred of Marxism, the misogyny, the widespread censorship, the summary executions—even the concentration camps. That Adolf Hitler was applying all of this to his German subjects was well-known in Lewis' America but few could have imagined in 1935 how far the Nazis would go in their attempt to exterminate the whole European Jewish population.

Windrip's personal rule starts decaying before he can embark on an international war of conquest, as Hitler did, but, nevertheless, Lewis excels at identifying what his protagonist—provincial journalist Doremus Jessup—calls the 'biology of dictatorships'. Let me cite from the novel: "The universal apprehension, the timorous denials of faith, the same methods of arrest—sudden pounding on the door late at night, the squad of police pushing in, the blows, the search, the obscene oaths at the frightened women, the third degree by young snipe of officials, the accompanying blows and then the formal beatings, when the prisoner is forced to count the strokes until he faints, the leprous beds and the sour stew, guards jokingly shooting round and round a prisoner who believes he is being executed, the waiting in solitude to know what will happen, till men go mad and hang themselves—Thus had things gone in Germany, exactly thus in Soviet Russia, in Italy and Hungary and Poland, Spain and Cuba and Japan and China. Not very different had it been under the blessings of liberty and fraternity in the French Revolution. All dictators followed the same routine of torture, as if they had all read the same manual of sadistic etiquette. And now, in the humorous, friendly, happy-go-lucky land of Mark Twain, Doremus saw the homicidal maniacs having just as good a time as they had had in central Europe".

Many believe that fascism died in 1945, by the end of WWII, but it is evident that this is not at all the case. It may not be right-wing but tyranny persists in many territories of the world as the worst incarnation of patriarchal dominance. In the United States many have objected that it would not be possible for Donald Trump to go to the same lengths as Lewis' Windrip because the structures of democratic power cannot be demolished in 2018 as easily as they were in the 1930s. That they are being



demolished in other nations of South America and the Middle East is regarded as a sign of how backward these areas of the world are, and not as a warning that democracy is extremely frail everywhere—including Russia. The ‘manual of sadistic etiquette’ is being implemented today, right now, in many so-called democratic nations. And if we have learned one thing from the Holocaust, this is that genocide can be happening under our very noses and we will do nothing to stop it. Think of Syria. Or the Kurds. Or the Rohingya.

As I read *It Can't Happen Here* I did not think primarily of Donald Trump or of Adolf Hitler (though it was eerie to see that before 1939 he was not an arch-villain but just the German dictator, a wacky ruler among many), but of Spain in 1936—the year when Lewis published his novel. Hitler ruled with absolute malice for 12 vicious years, half of which were taken by WWII, until he saw no option but commit suicide. Here in Spain, however, Franco's dictatorship lasted for 39 years, and the tyrant died of old age as his family thrived on the profits accrued. Seeing how Jessup describes the birth of the resistance movement that might perhaps, one day, return democracy to his nation, I thought of the many Spaniards who tried to oppose Franco and who were defeated: imprisoned, tortured, sentenced to die, or just disappeared into ditches, where they still are.

Also, I thought of the many that didn't even try because they were crushed before they started to resist and very much afraid of the fanatics surrounding them. I'm sure that many in 1931, when the Spanish Republic was proclaimed, thought that fascism could be kept at bay and that, once Primo de Rivera's farcical monarchic military dictatorship was out together with King Alfonso XIII, Spain was safe—that ‘it could not happen here’. Yet, it did happen indeed. As he waits for the terrible circumstances to change, Jessup notes that “So much of a revolution for so many people is nothing but waiting. That is one reason why tourists rarely see anything but contentment in a crushed population”. I thought of 1960s Spain, flooded by tourists that didn't care, and I marvelled that visitors could think of enjoying themselves in a dictatorship. As happens today with so many callous instagramming tourists visiting the many tyrannies around the world.

Everyone recalls the brutal torture that Winston Smith suffers in *1984* and how this causes him to betray everything he believes in, including love. Sinclair Lewis' torture scenes are equally shocking (even more, perhaps, because there is no suave O'Brien behind them, but just blood-thirsty thugs), yet he decides to have his protagonist retain his faith in the future of democracy. Perhaps we find even the mild open end of *It Can't Happen Here* too optimistic for our times and this is why Orwell and, generally speaking, dystopia are so popular. Yet, Lewis is not naïve and understands very well, as his vivid rendition of physical pain shows, that our fragile bodies often undermine our (theoretical) heroism. He still leaves, however, a door open for fascism to eventually end. I'm not sure that we have reached this point but perhaps one day we can learn not to be blinded by populist demagogues who present themselves as national saviours when they're actually crazy, ignorant villains willing to ruin our lives for their personal glory. Or even worse, ambition.

Do read Sinclair Lewis' novel and think not only that 'yes, indeed, it can happen here' but also that 'yes, certainly, it can happen to us'. Call yourself very, very lucky if you don't live in fear of what happens to Doremus Jessup and the rest of his nation. And consider carefully who you vote for—if you can vote at all.

## 10 April 2018 / WHAT ABOUT THE LITTLE BOYS?: LOOKING FOR NEW MODELS

These days all of Catalonia is choosing the books that our family, partners and friends will receive on Saint Jordi's Day. One thing you may have noticed is that there is a significant increase in the offer of books about feminism and, generally, women's issues. These include many volumes addressed to little girls; particularly popular among them are the collections of brief biographies of prominent women, such as Elena Favilli's *Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls* (and its sequel). I have purchased a copy for one of the rebel girls in my family circle, as she specifically asked for it, though with some doubts. It turns out that Favilli's selection includes, hold my breath!, notorious women such as Margaret Thatcher. This means that I'll have to caution my little rebel to distinguish between the truly positive role models for women and the ones that, following current nomenclature, I would call toxic.

Now, toxic is a word that you hear now frequently in connection to masculinity (it's a word I try to avoid as it always brings to my mind Britney Spear's eponymous hit song and then it stays on for while...argh!). And it is a word that has complicated enormously the production of similarly inspiring volumes for little boys. Something I didn't quite mention in my previous post about Pablo Poo's excellent *Espabila Chaval*, is that the title itself highlights that the problematic teens in Spanish secondary schools are males. He makes no specific comment on gender but implicit in his diagnosis is the idea that boys, rather more than girls, need to 'wise up'. In short, most non-fiction texts addressing men today, as the #metoo campaign still unfolds, are mainly negative and tend to present, as I have noted, masculinity as toxic. What happens, then, as a young woman posted, in a GoodReads comment on *Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls*, if you happen to be the parent of a little boy? What advice and what stories can you offer him?

I asked my new publisher in Catalan, Hugo Camacho ([www.orcinypress.com](http://www.orcinypress.com)) during a recent meeting at one of the most interesting bookshops in Barcelona (Espai Contrabandos, [www.contrabandos.org/espai-contrabandos](http://www.contrabandos.org/espai-contrabandos)) for his opinion. Contrabandos, actually a cooperative project connecting dozens of small independent presses rather than just a bookshop, specializes in books aimed at raising political awareness at all levels. Hugo and I were, thus, surrounded by a few hundred books on gender and feminism, none of which addressed specifically little boys. Hugo tells me that readers, who are mainly female, are now demanding books on women and that publishers go with the tide. He agreed that there is no room right now for the kind of book on male heroes that was common a while ago (no *Good Night Stories for Rebel Boys*, then). I don't like gender separatism at all, and I think it's about time we put

together a volume with positive role models for both boys and girls but Hugo corrected my idealism and stressed we haven't reached that point yet.

I should say, however, that this is an urgent task. The reasoning is quite simple: boys and girls are co-educated and interact socially all the time, not to mention the basic fact that, regardless of their gender and sexual preferences, they constitute future society and are already a mixed-gender community. It makes, then, absolutely no sense at all to boost girls' self-confidence and to make at the same time all boys the object of a blanket attack that should only apply to those endorsing patriarchy. Even if we assume that the budding patriarchs are the majority, my argument still applies: it is extremely important to find for them alternative models that undermine the appeal of toxic patriarchal masculinity. The problem, I'm well aware, is that the heroic discourse based on real-life persons works better for girls today than for boys: it is easier to find female heroes who had to struggle to be respected in their own patriarchal context, even when they did not call themselves feminist (please exclude Maggie Thatcher from this argument—she was in total collusion with patriarchy). In contrast, all habitual heroic role models for boys are, one way or another, tainted by patriarchy.

Let's take a look at the main areas of human activity to consider where we may find positive figures for young men (and start thinking of names):

- \*sport, including e-sports, both individual and team sports, summer and winter varieties, and, indeed, adventure sports
- \*arts, from the fine arts to the popular arts: writing, cinema, TV, videogames, radio, comics, illustration, painting, sculpture, performing arts...
- \*science and technology: laboratory work, engineering of all kinds, and a huge etc., including space exploration (which used to be so exciting!)
- \*intellectual work, usually expressed in writing but not the kind of artistic writing I listed above
- \*teaching, at all levels, kindergarten to college
- \*architecture, including urban planning and interventions in the landscape
- \*law enforcement, from police to the judiciary
- \*care of persons, from medicine to fire services; include care of animals, too
- \*humanitarian work, in and outside NGOs
- \*activism, including environmentalism, gender issues, racism, anti-capitalism and any other form of struggle against discrimination and injustice
- \*politics, both in conventional party structures in democracies or in the opposition under tyrannies
- \*business, particularly business following less predatory strategies
- \*unionism
- \*social media/celebrity, with youtubers and Instagrammers at the top
- \*the military...

At this point we start seeing where the problem lies: none of these areas is free from the patriarchal taint, with some being the most direct expression of patriarchy (the military, above all). Even in areas that should respect egalitarian principles—like unionism, humanitarian work, and activism—there have been constant complaints

regarding abuses and misbehaviour, I'm sure some are fresh in your mind (Oxfam in Haiti?).

This means that we risk a total collapse of the categories 'great man' and 'admirable man', even plain 'good man'. This might seem to be a cause for celebration, particularly for radical feminism, but it is actually a very serious problem. Plainly: without positive models to imitate, and told that they're the product of toxic masculinity (please, always use 'patriarchal'), many young boys might react by embracing the worst forms of patriarchal entitlement. I correct myself: many (most?) are already doing that. Patriarchy has, precisely, used this strategy against, us, women: by depriving us of positive role models and denying the achievements of many women in the past, our self-confidence has been heavily undermined. Still today, many of us exhibit what I can only call the traits of our deeply engrained slave mentality. We are now finally lashing out against patriarchy for mistreating us and this is why we need to understand that if we deny men their own positive role models this will also result in a backlash—a patriarchal one against our very own interests.

Of course, I realize that the task of finding a new, alternative list of heroes is daunting because it seems that there is hardly a man on Earth who is not guilty of espousing a patriarchal attitude and behaviour if only at specific times in their lives (the media are these days busy outing basically all public male figures). They are all presumed guilty, which is not really as it should be. Supposing that we agree, for the sake of argumentation, that, say, Mahatma Ghandi, is the greatest man in all of human History and the best role model for young boys, we immediately see the problem: it doesn't work, just as being told that Mother Theresa was a great woman doesn't work for girls. Too saintly. I mean, rather, someone more directly imitable—young girls may connect with Malala, but who is the equivalent for young boys? Is Leo Messi the best we can do? (if you forget for a second the patriarchal lines along which football operates).

It occurs to me that the necessary thing to do is to progress beyond the biographical approach and to use, for instance, the list of areas I mention here as the framework. If anyone is listening, I would like to buy next Saint Jordi 2019 a book that speaks both to girls and boys, and that offers portraits of great figures, both male and female, in a variety of fields. I acknowledge that I'm by no means sure that there is anyone to admire right now in the fields of politics and, indeed, the military but, perhaps we might find someone who has truly worked for justice on egalitarian foundations. Perhaps I should start a poll! The problem with the existing ones, obviously, is that the persons invited to vote for a favourite hero choose along easy, conventional lines, and not following the gender awareness criteria I am supporting. Try explaining to a young boy why Edward Snowden rather than Leo Messi should be admired (and I hope it doesn't turn out that Snowden is also tainted, one patriarchal way or the other—yes I do recall that he lives in Putin's Russia... deep sigh!).

Perhaps the current obsession with superheroes, leaving aside the economic interests of Marvel and DC Comics, has very much to do with the general inability to find admirable real-life men. Funnily, Superman, now 80 years old, still embodies much we admire in men, without being a patriarch (or is he?, I should check with Lois Lane) and

taking into account the fact that he is a (privileged) white male. We need to remember, however, that he is an alien and, hence, even more impossible to use as role model than human Gandhi. It might be either too early—or too late if you consider Trump—for new heroes to be born that can be both masculine and anti-patriarchal, that is to say, the good men little boys need to look up to.

## 17 April 2018 / A CLOSER LOOK AT PATRIARCHY THROUGH SOME KEY BOOKS

Since I am always ranting and raving about patriarchy, I have been taking a closer look at the key bibliography on the topic. The discussion of patriarchy appears to be disseminated among many heterogeneous texts and has not generated one single essential volume, though I grant that Austrian-American historian Gerda Lerner's *The Creation of Patriarchy* (1986) comes close. Also, the monograph by British sociologist Sylvia Walby, *Theorizing Patriarchy* (1990). I haven't read yet *Transformations of Patriarchy in the West, 1500-1900* (1998) by the historian of sociology Pavla Miller, nor her new volume, simply called *Patriarchy* (2017). Whatever I say here is, then, woefully underresearched.

My own enlightenment about how patriarchy has pulled the trick of making itself absolutely dominant yet invisible, camouflaged as 'human nature', came from Anne Baring and Jules Cashford's *The Myth of the Goddess: Evolution of an Image* (1993). I have no idea why this book is so little mentioned; perhaps Penguin's decision to place it in its Arkana collection has made many readers avoid it supposing this is a book on esoteric feminism. It is not, beyond leaning a bit too heavily on the theory supposing that Homo Sapiens first organized society along matriarchal lines and the cult of an Earth Goddess. This has not been proven, although the remains of Turkish proto-urban Neolithic (and Chalcolithic) settlement of Çatal Höyük suggest that non-patriarchal arrangements did happen. Baring and Cashford explain that by the end of Neolithic times nomadic bands, probably from Central Asia, colonized the Middle East, imposing a regime based on male dominance then new to most of the world. Lerner narrates how this regime started History by making private patriarchy the foundation of the state, that is to say, of public patriarchy. Proof of this is the Hammurabi Code (1754 BC), though at this point it must be clear to you that the history of patriarchy is much older than 3000 years.

We are going now through an intense examination of patriarchy, a word which has taken quite a while to finally appear in the media and public opinion as the root of all trouble. Patriarchy used to mean 'the rule of the father' but we are all aware now that it actually means 'male supremacism'. This poses the problem I am trying personally to solve (ehem!), which is how we distinguish between the men who support masculinism (another name for 'male supremacism') and those who don't. Supposing that all men are patriarchal is like supposing that all whites are racist, but, then, if this is what you do suppose, my arguments won't work with you.

I can't say with precision when the Second Wave feminist debate on patriarchy begins (possibly with *The Second Sex*) but I can say that a turning point was the publication in 1973 of Steven Goldberg's *The Inevitability of Patriarchy* (known since its second expanded edition as *Why Men Rule* (1993), see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Inevitability\\_of\\_Patriarchy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Inevitability_of_Patriarchy)). Goldberg, simplifying very much, started (or reinforced) biological essentialism and evolutionary biology by claiming that men rule because testosterone inclines them in that direction.

This is why, he claimed, all over the world we have the same social structure supported by patriarchy (the power-based hierarchy), male attainment (the 'achievements' that give men a place in patriarchy) and male dominance (self-explanatory). He himself claims in his website (<http://www.goldberg-patriarchy.com/logic.html>), in the long section counterarguing accusations of sexism, that his research descriptive, not prescriptive, for "No scientific explanation of how the world works can tell us how we should politically or morally act". In short, he offers a diagnosis on which society then can act, even in anti-patriarchal ways. Supposing we accept this diagnosis (I certainly don't) the only solution for patriarchy is, as he more or less concludes, a genetic intervention to curb down testosterone and produce a post-humanity with the right hormone balance. The word you're looking for is preposterous. At least I'm glad a man, not a woman, is suggesting this.

The obvious solution is education, based on the fundamental tenet that "Patriarchy is not a historical constant" (Walby, 173) and on the hope that, therefore, patriarchy can be ended. This is why understanding how it began is so important: because this historicity justifies the idea that, *pace* Goldberg, patriarchy is not inevitable. If it were, I, a woman, wouldn't be here expressing my opinion against it, to begin with.

Lerner believes that in a span of about 1000 years "patriarchal dominance moved from private practice into public law" by making "the control of female sexuality, previously left to individual husbands or to family heads, (...) a matter of state regulation" (121); this made it necessary to set up public law. I have little doubt that this neatly ties up with private property: the alpha male (with high testosterone?) who first announced "this is mine", whatever 'this' was, needed to make sure that his property would pass on to a male heir, hence the obsession with regulating virginity and all female sexuality. Also, as novelist Lorenzo Mediano wonderfully explains in his novel *El secreto de la Diosa* (2003), patriarchy may have started when Neolithic men finally realized how sex connects with reproduction—the time lapse between intercourse and birth may have been used by women to convince them that they created life alone and to maintain the cult of the Goddess.

Lerner makes the case that, in essence, the links between the patriarchal family and the paternalistic state have survived thousands of years of changes. An essential aspect of this process was the rise of monotheistic, patriarchal religion and, as we all know, its use to convince women of their secondary status. This is, Lerner, says, "the historic moment of the death of the Mother-Goddess and her replacement by God-the-Father and the metaphorical Mother under patriarchy" (198), precisely what Baring and Cashford narrate. As it is obvious if you know any woman with deep

monotheistic religious convictions (Jewish, Christian, Islamic), “The system of patriarchy can function only with the cooperation of women” (217). Sorry if I’m being offensive, but if you’re a woman, and much more so if you’re a mother, ask yourself why you need to believe in a male God as the world’s creator.

Lerner lists other ways in which patriarchy ensures our cooperation: “gender indoctrination; educational deprivation; the denial to women of knowledge of their history; the dividing of women, one from the other, by defining ‘respectability’ and ‘deviance’ according to women’s sexual activities; by restraints and outright coercion; by discrimination in access to economic resources and political power; and by awarding class privileges to conforming women” (217). This was published in 1986 but thirty years later still makes sense. If you think about it, 200 years of feminism (starting with Mary Wollstonecraft) can hardly dent thousands of years of patriarchy.

Walby typically defines patriarchy “as a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women” (20), denying the biological determinism defended by Goldberg but also the “notion that every individual man is in a dominant position and every woman in a subordinate one” (20). This is, precisely, why I cannot agree that patriarchy is constituted to subordinate women only: when pro-feminist men started giving their view of the matter in the late 1980s they stressed that actually patriarchy is also destroying the lives of many men (think of conscription in war times, for instance).

Most interestingly, Walby presents patriarchy as a flexible model “composed of six structures: the patriarchal mode of production, patriarchal relations in paid work, patriarchal relations in the state, male violence, patriarchal relations in sexuality, and patriarchal relations in cultural institutions” (20). This explains why at some points “some of the structures are more important than others. The elimination of any does not lead to the demise of the system as a whole” (177). Think of the Cold War: the Eastern communist block and the Western capitalist block were equally patriarchal though each foregrounded a different set of beliefs. How do I know that both were patriarchal when, actually, the Soviet Union presented itself as the utopian state in which women could finally enjoy total equality? Easily: there was never a Politburo (or Soviet Government) headed by a woman or with a significant female representation.

In patriarchies, like ours, in which hegemonic masculinity is at high risk of collapsing, the system makes room for women at the lower levels and occasionally at the upper ones but the glass ceiling of masculinism prevents radical change. I may be a university teacher, something my own mother could never dream of, but the university itself is still deeply patriarchal.

British historian Jill Stephenson’s *Women in Nazi Germany* (2001) is also very useful to understand something that has always puzzles me: how come that so many women work outside the home in patriarchies which insist that their nature is domestic. The plainly misogynistic, masculinist Nazi regime tried to exclude women from the public sphere and deployed a vast propaganda machine to convince ‘Aryan’ women to fill the Third Reich with perfect ‘Aryan’ babies. At the same time, the complex state

machinery and the economy needed women to participate, particularly in the 1939-45 war period, when the 'Aryan' men were sent to occupy Europe. In the face of these incompatible demands, many 'Aryan' women reacted by dragging their feet, having not too many children and even shirking factory work. The actual truth, Stephenson writes, is that Nazi patriarchy didn't exclude women from all kinds of work but only from the very high positions of power. Women were "a resource to be tapped when necessary and dispensed with when there were sufficient men" (72). Funnily, this excluded the Wehrmacht.

Stephenson categorically denies that gender lines operate in a clearly-defined way even in the most blatant patriarchies, like Nazi Germany: "Even if the only people wielding political power were men, the vast majority of men were politically impotent" (5). That most Nazis were men, does not mean that being a man in their regime granted you a privilege, as Communists men first learned, and then Jewish men, Roma and Sinti men, gay men. Actually racist/patriarchal criteria were applied above gender/patriarchal criteria: Jewish women and children were massacred, as 'Aryan' women were pressured to produce children (or sterilized if deemed 'worthless': 'asocial' or 'hereditarily unhealthy'). The correct picture of patriarchy is rather, one of a minority of Nazi men gathered around alpha male Hitler, oppressing the rest of society, with the collaboration of a minority of subordinated women.

The hardest passage to read in Stephenson's volume is this one: "There were women who collaborated in the worst crimes of the Nazis (...). Women were, clearly, neither better nor worse than men. The difference was that men had more opportunity to commit crimes against humanity, given their greater role in the public sphere, including serving in the Wehrmacht. *It was when women were given the opportunity that their potential for evil could be judged*" (128, my italics). Nazism, then, which only accepted women in Hitler's coterie as pliant wives or as pets (Eva Braun), placed, however, some of their female adepts in positions where they could exercise unlimited power over defenceless persons. I'll speculate that the horrors that ensued may have even surprised some of the Nazi men. It is still very hard for me to believe that gender equality might lead in the future to a female-dominated, genocidal regime but Stephenson's work presents patriarchy not so much a social structure based on gender but on power. Power, in its turn, is not enjoyed by all men, but by a minority, backed by a minority of women also seeking the enjoyment of power. I refuse to call these Nazi women victims of patriarchy (just in case this came to your mind).

I'm still shuddering, thinking of Stephenson's phrase: 'given the opportunity'. Perhaps Goldberg's thesis should be rephrased: what we face is the inevitability of gender-neutral oligarchy. Given the opportunity.



## 24 April 2018 / CONFUSED BY LOVE: READING ANDRÉ ACIMAN'S *CALL ME BY YOUR NAME*

One of my TFG (or BA dissertation) tutorees, Marc, has chosen to work on the novel *Call Me by Your Name* (2007) by Egyptian-born American author André Aciman. You may have already seen the successful film adaptation directed by Luca Guadagnino and based on a script by acclaimed filmmaker James Ivory, who was honoured with an Oscar for it. I am aware that the film is quite faithful to the novel but, since I haven't seen it yet, I will refer here only to Aciman's gorgeous text.

*Call Me by Your Name* is an exquisite literary novel which narrates in the first person the relationship between 17-year-old Elio (the narrator) and 24-year-old Oliver, a brilliant college teacher and published scholar. Prof. Perlman, Elio's father, has the habit of inviting budding academics to his Italian Riviera villa for a six-week stay during which they are supposed to assist him in his own work. Oliver is, then, the last addition to the list of guests, whereas his brief sojourn with the Perlmans functions as the time frame constraining his relationship with Elio. Their love story, which happens in summer, fits in many ways the conventions of this kind of transient romance: it is intense but brief and it finishes as soon as the participants return home.

Since they are two men, inevitably *Call Me by Your Name* has been read as a homosexual story— as a matter of fact, it got a Lambda Award for Best Gay Fiction in 2008. This is quite peculiar because actually both boy and man are in relationships with women: Elio has a besotted girlfriend, Marzia, whom he treats not too kindly, and, this is crucial, Oliver returns home to the United States to marry an unnamed girl. Technically, then, this is the story of two bisexual men. However, Aciman refrains from pinning any label onto his protagonists and their relationship; we need to wonder, then, why we, readers and critics, do use labels anyway. This is in fact my student Marc's research question.

Marc started off from a position which completely rejects how labels are used, arguing that Elio and Oliver are involved primarily in a love story, with their gender and sexuality being of secondary interest. This would work, I told him, if the members of the couple could be other than two men, and we agreed that they could easily be two women, and even a young man and an older woman. Turning Elio into Elia, however, would result in quite a different story: one framed by patriarchal heteronormativity. A surprising point in the romance happens when Prof. Perlman books a luxury suite in Rome for Elio and Oliver, aware of what has been going on between them under his roof. Marc and I read this as proof that, quite possibly, Prof. Perlman is a closeted homosexual. What would not fit, at any rate, our current politically correct taste is a story in which a father would book a hotel room for his underage daughter and her lover, and be fine about her having seduced one of his guests. Odd. Labels, then, are still needed.

Not that *Call Me by Your Name* is not an odd tale. Reversing Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* (1912), in Aciman's novel the one who obsesses over a beautiful male body is the adolescent (though Oliver, of course, is a young man whereas Mann's voyeuristic Gustav von Aschenbach is in his early fifties). Elio's erudition and fine prose are simply baffling. He belongs to a family of Jewish intellectuals, which might be a justification for the passion he feels for high Culture. Still, he's only 17 and, since I was myself 17 at the time he lives his summer romance, in 1983, I can tell you that he is a completely unrealistic rendition of a 1980s teenager. He sounds, in fact, like someone out of a Thomas Mann novel, perhaps Hans Castorp in *The Magic Mountain*. I don't doubt the intensity of the feelings Elio has for Oliver, but I find it impossible to believe that a 17-year-old would ever write in that subtle vein about them. Unless, that is, the one actually writing the story retrospectively is the 37-year-old Elio of the last part, set in the author's narrative present.

It is this segment, Part 4 'Ghost Spots', which makes *Call Me by Your Name* a particularly ambiguous text about modern love. As I explained to Marc, whatever gender and sex option we prefer, we're awfully confused about how we want our love stories to end: if the couple remains together, then what follows is dreaded domesticity, a total anticlimax; it seems, rather, that we prefer the lovers to separate for ever, if possible tragically, as this prevents domesticity from spoiling passion. Aciman, though, chooses a peculiar third option: he has Elio and Oliver get together for a return to the landscape where their love flourished so many years ago, but he offers an open end. No decision is made, albeit Elio seems to be hoping that Oliver takes a step.

This might never happen, however, because he and Elio spend the first four weeks of their 1980s summer romance giving each other very confusing signals as they feign mutual indifference for strange personal reasons. This is more or less justified because Oliver worries that Elio might not really be ready for a sexual relationship with him, and also because the boy is still finding his feet as a seducer. As I read the novel, though, and because we live in the Tinder/Grindr age, I marvelled that any two persons could take so long to express their desire. To be honest, I started getting impatient, absurdly concerned that they would run out of time! Elio's and Oliver's cavalier use of time presents, as you can see, a serious obstacle to believe in a possible happy future together, now in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Marc tells me that Guadagnino and Ivory are working on a second movie, so we'll see...

Let me step back a bit and return to this puzzling Part 4. As I was explaining, the summer romance ends, simply, with Oliver's return home. I find Aciman's decision not to continue the love story (by, for instance, having Elio become a student in the USA and Oliver abandon his fiancée) correct. A 17-year-old boy seems to be in no position to commit for long, as most likely Oliver sees. This is hard to say, anyway, because and this is my main complaint against this discerning novel, Oliver remains a cipher. He is all handsome face and sexy body, but not a full person, a round character. But never mind. Assuming, then, that it makes sense to keep the two lovers apart as long as Elio is young, I cannot see, however, why Aciman stages their reunion 20 years later. It

seems a very long time. Unless, that is, the author is narrating autobiographical events that simply happened in that way.

This long time lapse is a vital part in how *Call Me by Your Name* exemplifies modern love, for protagonists, author, and readers share a total uncertainty about romance. Conventionally, love stories are supposed to be intense but, like Elio and Oliver, we now avoid deep feelings out of fear of being excessively affected, or hurt. When romantic feelings start looming anyway, quite often the relationship is cut short, though this is, I think, far more frequent in real life than in fiction (is it?!). This is why Aciman's novel is so original and at the same time so realistic: there is no tragedy (remember *Brokeback Mountain*?), just a logical, sensible drifting apart.

Or not so logical. Elio and Oliver's passion could have been presented as a happy physical relationship within a specific period of their lives, and it would work well. Nevertheless, Aciman felt the need to add that problematic Part 4, which suggests that it was really love, of the kind Elio has never found (we're not sure about Oliver, who seems more keen on being a father than a husband). But, then, if that summer fling was true love, why does Elio take so long to seek Oliver out...? You may sense here a hidden (or not so hidden) fear that the renewed relationship might not be as exciting, sexy or satisfying. To begin with the seven years separating Elio and Oliver, which made their first encounter so problematic but also so thrilling, mean now nothing: one is 37 and the other 44, practically the same age.

Of course, if we compare *Call Me by Your Name* to the most popular heterosexual romance of recent times, the *Fifty Shades of Gray* trilogy, we immediately realize that Aciman's elegant final paragraph is light years away from the cheesy heteronormative resolution which E.L. James offers. The two texts, however, are at the same time inevitably linked: neither makes sense of how sex and love connect, and I very much suspect that, even though he could not have read James's first novel, published four years before *Call Me by Your Name*, Aciman is conditioned by the happy-ever-after trope she uses against all odds. That is to say, he avoids it like the plague it is.

This is both a strength and a shortcoming of *Call Me by Your Name*, published at a point in the history of the United States, 2007, when same-sex marriage was already available (Massachusetts was the first state to legalize it, in 2004). We need to read, then, in Aciman's open end a question mark about how to narrate romance today, when a main homophobic barrier has already been broken. Perhaps the remaining barrier is aesthetic and Aciman's main dilemma is that although Elio's inspired prose can transmit the nuances of attraction, it cannot accommodate the corny image of his walking down the aisle to marry Oliver twenty years later. And I have no idea, begging your pardon, whether any other LGTBI+ novel has managed to conquer something as essentially heteronormative as marriage for classy, literary queer romance. Or reinvent it.

Lovely novel... Wistful ending.

**8 May 2018 / TUTORING TFG/BA DISSERTATIONS ON VIDEOGAMES IN ENGLISH STUDIES: *THE WALKING DEAD* AND *THE LAST OF US***

I have access at home to three consoles, none of which I can operate—the plain truth is that I'm not a gamer and might never be. I do care, however, for how videogames are evolving. Nobody should ignore them if only because for more than a decade they have been generating much bigger business than films. Besides, they are a favourite entertainment among those born from the 1970s onward (but note: around 10% of all gamers are past 50 years of age). There are already two generations of gamers, mainly male but also increasingly female (excuse the gender binarism).

Genderwise, though, the videogame industry is particularly problematic. The news and the social media offer abundant complaints from the women in the field, mostly gamers but also developers and executives. They are routinely subjected to aggressive male chauvinism, a situation specially worrying because it is caused by patriarchal younger men. Women are not told to stay away from books, plays, comics, music, films or series appealing to men. In the gamers' world, in contrast, misogynistic attitudes are common and result, in the worst cases, in women's eviction from some particularly masculinist territories.

Why this sexist territorialism? The most recalcitrant men have found shelter in videogames after abandoning other domains of entertainment/culture convinced that they were being feminized: reading, above all, but also any activity that may seem passive, such as seeing films in cinemas or watching TV at home. For the patriarchal men videogames appear to solve two interrelated problems: how to approach entertainment in a more active way and how to keep the alleged threat of feminization away. The moment the more active girls have demanded admission into the all-male territory, the trolls have reacted as what they are. The truth, however, is that videogames are not as active as these patriarchal gamers assume, but rather passive. From a feminist point of view it also must be noted that their opening up towards a more egalitarian stance in some of their most advanced plotlines is not substantially altering their patriarchal narratives. Since I don't play, how do I know? Easy: I have learned from my students.

Last year an ex-student returned to UAB after an absence of twenty years to finish his degree. In the meantime, Josué Monchán had become a well-known videogame professional as writer, translator and popularizer. It seemed, then, logical for him to focus his TFG on this field, though not so logical that I became his tutor. This was a case of nobody else wanting to take the challenge and of my accepting on the grounds that Games Studies is a branch of Cultural Studies, my area. Josué focused his TFG/BA dissertation on a very popular videogame, *The Walking Dead* (Telltale Games) inspired by the TV series (now in its eighth season), adapted in its turn from a graphic novel. Having seen a few seasons of the series, I felt confident that I would understand the gist of his research. He explored player's agency and, to summarize his very sophisticated dissertation, Josué argued that even in the most accomplished games it is impossible to offer as much agency as the player demands. The multiple choices

which open up at each plot turn need to be limited, or else force the studio to make a ruinous investment. Enjoy the TFG: <https://ddd.uab.cat/record/181036>.

In hindsight, I realize that we were after all approaching gaming from a Gender Studies angle, as, basically, Josué explained that videogames attract gamers by lying about the degree of agency they will enjoy. Gamers are ultimately far more passive than the jumping on the sofa fuelled by all that adrenaline suggests. In any case, Josué didn't look in detail into the gender dynamics of *The Walking Dead*, a horror survival videogame which narrates how, in the context of a zombie apocalypse, university professor and convicted criminal Lee Everett rescues and afterwards protects young Clementine.

One year later, I find myself tutoring another undergrad student with a great enthusiasm for videogames. Andrea's TFG deals with *The Last of Us*—a horror survival game that narrates how smuggler Joel accepts protecting young Ellie in the context of a zombie apocalypse. Talk about *déjà vu*! A few months ago, I knew nothing about *The Last of Us* (2013, Naughty Dog), an extremely popular quality videogame, honoured with many major awards and already a contemporary classic. Now I can boast that I have even lectured about it! When Josué invited me offer an introduction to Masculinities Studies to his class in the BA 'Creación y narración de videojuegos' (Universidad Francisco Victoria), I cheekily asked to discuss *The Last of Us*. It was great to share my impressions for once with a male majority in class (12 young men, 3 women).

Andrea is analyzing the gender issues in *The Last of Us*, specifically the allegedly progressive characterization of the female lead, Ellie. The plot (for this is a narrative or adventure videogame) takes one year to unfold; in three of the seasons the gamer plays through Joel, but in one the game is focalized through Ellie. Technically, both are the main lead. I found everything I read about *The Last of Us* (including some academic work) very interesting. It never occurred to me last year that I should have watched a walkthrough (a video of the game as actually played) to understand gameplay in *The Walking Dead*. This time, curioiser and curioiser, I selected a condensed walkthrough on YouTube and spent... 6 hours watching it. The full game, incidentally, takes a maximum of 15/17 hours to play, depending on the gamer's skills.

Actually, I first watched one hour of a 10-hour walkthrough (this is average, it seems) to get the basics of the gameplay. The 6-hour version was more dynamic but also far more complete than the 90'/120' plot-driven versions also available. These reduce *The Last of Us* to its bare bones acting as the equivalent of a possible film adaptation. Let me explain that I chose to spend the 6 hours watching *The Last of Us* after reaching the conclusion that this is not longer than reading each of the novels my other tutorees are working on (see my previous post). I simply loved the experience!: at one point I even stayed glued to my tablet for 3 hours. Also, please believe me, I was deeply moved by the initial segment and devastated by the end section, like many other YouTube spectators as I saw from their comments.

I understand Andrea's interest in Ellie, though I have already warned her that women's characterization in male-dominated media is always limited. I must note that script writer (and co-director) Neil Druckmann tries hard to offer a variety of male characters. They include not only white Joel and his brother but also two loving African-American brothers and what I will call paradoxical examples of homosexuality... and of cannibalism. Druckmann also tries seriously not to stereotype women as sexy toys. The female characters are far less diverse but Ellie, and specially Joel's partner Tess, offer a convincing example of tough, self-reliant femininity.

What I didn't anticipate is that Joel's characterization would shake the foundations of my own Gender Studies research. Here is your classic handsome, rugged, mature Texan, helping Ellie to cross a devastated American landscape, using all the violence he can muster against the zombie hordes. Or, rather, 'infected' since they're living individuals plagued by a scary fungal parasite. Ellie needs protection because she is immune and might be the key to a vaccine, to be developed in a secret lab hundreds of miles away. Why is Joel appealing if all this seems so typically malestream? Because he is not sexist. Or is he?

Druckmann became a father in the course of writing *The Last of Us* and this explains the emphasis on Joel's paternal (or paternalistic?) stance towards Ellie. This is complicated, nonetheless, because for her to become his focus of attention, Joel has to lose first his biological daughter, Sarah, in awful circumstances—this is how the game begins. This child is a 'woman in the refrigerator', as the trope of the female who dies so that the hero can begin his adventure was christened back in 1999, in relation to the death of Green Lantern's girlfriend. Still grieving, Joel takes a long time to sort out his feelings for Ellie and trust her own survival abilities but he makes the required effort successfully. He, in short, learns to see Ellie as a complete human being. Add to this that Joel treats Tess as his total equal.

Faced at the end of the videogame with the problem of where his loyalty lies, with Ellie or with the US civilization he is being asked to save (split between a militaristic Government and anarchist guerrilla forces), Joel makes a controversial choice. I can only say that it astonished me because it is coherently heroic but also appallingly villainous. I take my hat off before Druckmann! However, and this is a major snag, Joel takes his decision alone, bypassing Ellie's opinion and agency even though she is the subject of that choice. Here's, then, the quandary: is Joel yet another patriarchal chauvinist, or a man with his heart in the right place?

What worries me about Joel, then, is that he seems to exemplify an insidious ongoing trend. Patriarchal storytelling, including videogames, may be evolving towards plots that, while not overtly sexist or misogynistic (even quite the opposite), are still patriarchal. This means man-centred and based on deploying an ultra-violent heroic narrative, in which men make if not all at least most choices. You need to wonder why the two major videogames that my tutorees have chosen (*The Walking Dead*, *The Last of Us*) share the same storyline. I speculated in my lecture that Joel, the paradoxically ultra-violent good guy, and his kind aim at claiming back for men the debased role of protector, which explains the zombie/infected scenario. The contradictory feeling they

inspire, even in feminist women like yours truly, is that they would be perfect companions in situations of danger. They want to protect us, as the idealized knights did but without the sexism, never mind how oxymoronic this sounds. As one of the young men in class told me ‘this sounds far-fetched, but might well be the case’. What worries me is that this type of effective protector only appears in violent fictions and not in the violent situations of real life, in which justice is needed. If you take the monsters away, could Joel channel his profound protective instinct towards justice? What would happen to his capacity for violence? If Tess had been entrusted with protecting Ellie, would *The Last of Us* be the same or substantially different, taking into account she uses plenty of violence, too?

I asked Andrea how it felt to be a woman and ‘play’ Joel because much has been written about boys manipulating female characters in videogames but very little, if anything, about the opposite case. Challenging, she said. The right word.

### 15 May 2018 / AN UNSOLVED PROBLEM: ZYGMUNT BAUMAN’S MODERNITY AND THE HOLOCAUST

The saddest paper I have ever written is “De la Primera Guerra Mundial al Holocausto: El uso de la tecnología en la destrucción en masa del cuerpo humano” (see [http://gent.uab.cat/saramartinalegre/sites/gent.uab.cat.saramartinalegre/files/Primer\\_a%20Guerra%20Mundial%20Holocausto%20Sara%20Mart%C3%ADn.pdf](http://gent.uab.cat/saramartinalegre/sites/gent.uab.cat.saramartinalegre/files/Primer_a%20Guerra%20Mundial%20Holocausto%20Sara%20Mart%C3%ADn.pdf)). I’m thinking again of that paper after re-reading Zygmunt Bauman’s impressive *Modernity and the Holocaust* (1989). Also, because I see all over 21<sup>st</sup> century Europe a menacing rebirth of the basic tenets of Nazism. Above all, of the 19<sup>th</sup> century patriarchal *völkisch* ideology, focused on the nation’s salvation by a providential messianic leader who embodies its spirit—as he believes and fawning fanatics confirm.

If we are blinded to the equivalence of current populist movements with Nazism this is because most people wrongly believe that Hitler’s main aim from the very beginning of his rise to power was the *Endlösung* (or Final Solution). This is incorrect: anti-Semitism was present in Hitler’s ideology from the 1920s onwards but not genocide—he was obsessed, above all, by the ideal of a racially homogeneous German Reich and the *Endlösung* only occurred to him eventually (I follow in this English historian Ian Kershaw). Today, very similar ideologies aim at rebuilding the so-called national territory as a self-sufficient, uniform community purged of external elements. They are not, however, seen as spin-offs of Nazism because anti-Semitism is not part of their outlook. The far-right represented by UKIP is not an anti-Semitic genocidal party: the Nazi *völkisch* ideology, however, is part of its core beliefs. Call it Nazism, Fascism, neo-Anarchism, or post-Romantic nationalism, it’s all the same basic principle: ‘we’ exist in opposition to ‘them’ and ‘we’ are unique because ‘we’ are culturally and linguistically homogenous—even, God save us, a distinct ethnic group with the ‘right’ values.

This is why it is so important to read Bauman: because he warns us that the problem of how the Holocaust happened has not been solved for good. I'll proceed, then, to highlight the main lessons he teaches (using his own italics throughout the post).

The first lesson is that although the Holocaust was indeed a "*Jewish tragedy*" (x) it was not just "*a Jewish problem*, and not an event in *Jewish history* alone" (x). The Holocaust, Bauman adds, was a product of "*our modern rational society*" (x). He warns us very strongly that believing in the exceptionality of the Shoah—an event now about to lose its last survivors to the passage of time—"results not only in the moral comfort of self-exculpation, but also in the dire threat of *moral and political disarmament*" (xii, my italics). I worry in particular about what the youngest generations know about this genocide, now that *Schindler's List* (1993) is about to celebrate its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Also, because most 21<sup>st</sup> century novels about the Holocaust are trashy, blithely sentimental tales (see [https://www.goodreads.com/list/show/6066.Best\\_Holocaust\\_Novels](https://www.goodreads.com/list/show/6066.Best_Holocaust_Novels)). Spielberg was accused of committing the same crime but he was never *that* guilty.

The Holocaust was not at all a pre-meditated plan devised by an evil villain and his henchmen but, Bauman argues, the "*outcome of a unique encounter between factors by themselves quite ordinary and common*" (xii). These factors were closely connected with Modernity in two ways: the rationalization of industry on scientific principles (inspired by Henry Ford's assembly lines in his car factory) and the establishment of modern-style, machine-aided bureaucracy (IBM, International Business Machines Corporation, was founded in 1911). These had already been applied in WWI to create a colossal machinery of mass destruction. The collapse of German economy and of the Weimar Republic in 1929 helped, of course, Hitler to access power and to undermine from the inside the fragile German democracy. Once the structures of control over his autocratic rule were destroyed following the brutal repression of his political enemies (1930-33), Hitler faced no obstacle, as he had the complicity of the upper classes and the Prussian-style loyalty of the Army. Remember, please, that the Nazis were voted democratically into power and that Hitler was appointed Chancellor legally. By 1938 he already had the law and the executive power united in his dictatorial person.

Bauman insists that although "Modern civilization was not the Holocaust's *sufficient* condition; it was, however, most certainly its *necessary* condition" (13). The Jewish genocide was not at all an irrational event: "the rational world of modern civilization (...) made the Holocaust thinkable" (13); the Final Solution came from "*bureaucratic culture*" (15), coolly applying "*routine bureaucratic procedures*" (15) to human extermination. Bauman stresses that although the mass of Nazi underlings involved in the *Endlösung* knew very well what they were doing, most pen-pushers had little contact if any with the process itself, mostly carried out far from German offices. Bureaucracy, Bauman accuses, "is intrinsically *capable* of genocidal action" (106), which does not mean that all bureaucracies and each single bureaucrat act in genocidal ways. Rather, it means that if the most powerful person in Government marks a certain direction, bureaucracy will blindly follow it, and this is what happened in Nazi Germany.



Bauman is adamant that whatever allowed the Holocaust to happen between 1941 and 1945 (after the defeat in Russia that made wholesale Jewish deportation impossible and before the extermination camps were liberated by the Allies), “we cannot be sure that it has been eliminated since then” (86). In his view, we still live “*in a type of society that made the Holocaust possible, and that contained nothing which could stop the Holocaust from happening*” (86). The Holocaust will not happen exactly in the same way again, and no copycat Hitler with the same powers will arise. Bauman’s argument is that just as the Nazis could overcome the moral restraints active in the 1940s, someone else might overcome just as easily our own moral restraints. It is happening right now in the current war in Syria and to the Rohingya minority in Myanmar.

A note of warning: despite the lessons learned from the Jewish Holocaust by the Nazis, we cannot say that the far worse threat of *nuclear* Holocaust is over. Far from it. As Bauman writes, “*In the years leading to the Final Solution the most trusted of the safeguards had been put to a test. They all failed—one by one, and all together*” (108). As they are failing now: just last week President Trump broke the nuclear deal signed with Iran in 2015; the whole world has complained but nothing can seemingly stop Trump. Bauman wrote back in 1989 that during the 1940s “*Civilization proved incapable of guaranteeing moral use of the awesome powers it brought into being*” (111) but this might apply again to the 2010s, the 2020s or whenever someone finally starts a nuclear war. Nobody will ever again gas 6,000,000 Jews in extermination camps but we need to bear in mind that 600,000,000 persons could be wiped out in a nuclear conflict. Survival could be even worse than death.

Bauman complains that the popular narratives based on the Shoah tend to portray the victims with a dignity which was simply impossible to sustain in real life. He names the 1978 TV mini-series *Holocaust* (<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0077025/>) as an example of this unrealistic representation of victimhood. Naturally, if the Holocaust were represented in all its crudity, and some films come close (*Son of Saul*, *The Grey Zone*) it would be unwatchable—arguably, a sub-genre of torture porn. Perhaps that should be the whole point, though I must say in favour of *Holocaust* (and of *Schindler’s List*) that they approached the horrors of the Nazi camps to plain viewers in a way that Claude Lanzmann’s revered, stark 10-hour arthouse documentary of 1985, *Shoah*, never could manage.

I’m sure that whenever we read about the Holocaust perpetrated by the Nazis we always wonder how we would have reacted. We imagine ourselves (correct me if I am wrong) as either a victim, or an ‘innocent non-Nazi bystander’ and fantasize that, if we knew that our neighbours were about to be deported and gassed, we would heroically save them. Leaving the Danish population aside, and the other well-meaning persons all over Europe who managed to defy the Nazis, this is not what happened at all. After discussing the famous experiments by Milgram and Zimbardo, which proved the propensity of all individuals to abuse fellow human beings if authorised by a superior, Bauman reaches a ghastly but realistic conclusion: “*The most frightening news brought about the Holocaust and by what we learned of its perpetrators was not the likelihood that ‘this’ could be done to us, but the idea that we could do it*” (152). The persons who

actively participated in the Holocaust were, as a flabbergasted Hannah Arendt discovered during the trial of Adolf Eichmann, *normal*—perhaps 10% were sadists to begin with but 90% were just carrying out orders (and keeping a low profile if they disagreed with their bosses). This is easy to imagine: think of the engineers designing the bombs that kill children in Syria returning every evening to the comfort of their middle-class homes.

One of the most chilling passages in *Mein Kampf* (1925), among the many in this crazy book, appears in Chapter II. “There were very few Jews in Linz”, his home town, Hitler recalls. The Linz Jews, he explains, “had become Europeanized in external appearance and were so much like other human beings that *I even looked upon them as Germans*” (my italics). Hitler did not “perceive the absurdity of such an illusion” because the Jews were like any other ordinary Linz fellow-citizen, except for “the practice of their strange religion”. Pay attention now: “As I thought that they were persecuted on account of their Faith my aversion to hearing remarks against them *grew almost into a feeling of abhorrence*. I did not in the least suspect that there could be such a thing as a systematic anti-Semitism”. This, he claims, was something he discovered in cosmopolitan Vienna.

There was a time, then, when young Hitler was not a Jew hater. That he could become eventually the arch-Jewish hater shows that he was persuaded by an already widespread prejudiced ideology which ignited fanatic flames ready to burst in his brain but also in many other brains. A concatenation of appalling circumstances put absolute power in his hands and then Hitler proceeded to commit one of the worst atrocities the world has seen using, as Bauman stresses, the tools that Modernity had already developed for his grisly project. Bowing before his power, others helped Hitler to use these tools, because they shared his fanaticism and rotten beliefs. They were all, however, *normal* people—not evil monsters from Hell. As normal as you and me, though convinced that by torturing and killing fellow human beings following the atrocious ideology embodied by their messianic leader they were working for the good of their nation. They felt morally authorized. Put it the other way round, if you will: tell ordinary people that they must protect the nation and they will do anything—from fighting in wars to committing genocide. This is normal human behaviour, enhanced in our times, by Modernity.

Reading Bauman’s volume is fundamental to understand that, as he so convincingly argues, the Holocaust was not an sporadic descent into barbarism but the very essence of 20<sup>th</sup> century Modernity. Hitler took advantage of the German humiliation after WWI to present himself as the *völkisch* leader that would return to the nation its lost dignity. He then destroyed not only the Jews but also most of his own nation: the Machine—as J.R.R. Tolkien, another WWI veteran, called Modernity—was at his service both in the camps and in the Wehrmacht. Since there is a relatively short distance between 1918 and 1945 but a much longer time lapse between that date and 2018 we tend to believe that the risk of a new Hitler and a new Holocaust is over. However, as Bauman stressed and Tolkien defended, only the rejection of Modernity itself can save us.

This doesn't mean a return to pre-history—for God knows what Homo Sapiens did to the poor Neanderthals then—but questioning the benefits of Modernity. Many argue that progress and the barbaric go together in Modernity but this seems to be a spurious argument aimed at defending barbarism. It should also be time to move beyond the ideologies of the 19<sup>th</sup> century with their ethnic and racial obsessions and work for the good of the whole human species. For planet Earth will go on until the Sun goes supernova, whether we're on it or not.

## 22 May 2018 / IN MIDDLE-EARTH AGAIN: TOLKIEN (AND WILLIAM MORRIS)

I'm re-reading again *The Lord of the Rings* these days, for the third time. J.R.R. Tolkien (1892-1973) is not one of my great passions as a reader or researcher but I acknowledge the immense importance that he has as a major contributor to English Literature, and not just to fantasy. What he offers in his work is astonishing. Also, it makes me wonder what academic life was like back in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, since he managed to be a highly respected Oxford don and the writer of such massive texts. I do not refer here to the extension of his works but to the density of his mythological imagination, which reaches amazing heights in *The Silmarillion*.

There are actually several Tolkiens (without even mentioning the academic philologist and the fancy linguist): the charming children's author of *The Hobbit* (1937), the epic writer of *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-55) and the mythmaker of *The Silmarillion* (1977, edited and published post-humously by his son Christopher Tolkien, but started in 1917). The latter book is far less known because few readers are willing to face the demands that Tolkien's languid pseudo-Biblical prose imposes (even on his most ardent fans). I just wish Amazon would adapt that book instead of doing again *The Lord of the Rings*, not only because *The Silmarillion* has such an attractive plot (together with the other texts attached to it in the volume) but also because a new adaptation feels like a gratuitous insult to poor director Peter Jackson and his still recent film series (2001-3), undoubtedly a major feat in the history of cinema.

Here's a personal anecdote: on Sunday I rushed to the Museu Nacional de les Arts de Catalunya to see the exhibition on William Morris and the 'Arts and Crafts' movement that ended yesterday. I find Morris (1834-1896) a fascinating figure in many ways but, above all, because he came up with the idea that beautiful objects need not be the prerogative of the rich. Disliking very much the habitual clutter of useless objects that you could find in most wealthy Victorian houses, he drew a "golden rule": "Have nothing in your houses that you do not know to be useful, or believe to be beautiful" (this comes from "The Beauty of Life", a lecture delivered at the Birmingham Society of Arts and School of Design, 1880). IKEA is the ultimate descendant of that philosophy but also all our current perspective on high quality design, for Morris had a gigantic international impact.

Anyway, I was contemplating one of the magnificent pseudo-Medieval tapestries made by Morris's house and thinking 'um, this looks like Rivendell' (the perfect home of the lordly half-Elf Elrond in *The Lord of the Rings*) when I overheard a guide explain that Tolkien had drawn much inspiration for his work from Morris' fiction and, specially, his translations of the Icelandic sagas. Please, recall that Rivendell is presented in Peter Jackson's adaptation as a kind of pseudo-Gaudinian paradise, which closes the circle very nicely: Morris was a major influence on Catalan Modernism (approx. 1885-1920), in which Gaudí (1852-1926) is a key figure (see the article by Anna Calvera on Morris' impact in Catalonia here: [www.raco.cat/index.php/Dart/article/download/100491/151064](http://www.raco.cat/index.php/Dart/article/download/100491/151064)).

Obviously, I have not paid enough attention either to Morris or to Tolkien for I didn't know what, checking the internet, everyone appears to know: Tolkien was very fond not only of Morris's poetic translations from Icelandic (which he actually produced with his friend Eiríkr Magnússon, see one instance here: <https://archive.org/details/volsungasagatran009188mbp>) but also of his historical and fantasy novels. *The House of the Wolfings* (1889) tells the story of how a Germanic tribe (renamed Goths in Morris's novel) resists the invasion of the Romans, unusually presented as the true barbarians. *The Wood Beyond the World* (1894) appears to be a sort of update of Thomas Mallory's style (not of the Arthurian content), and a clear precursor of current epic fantasy. *The Well at the World's End* (1896) continues in the same supernatural vein. It has a King Gandolf, a name everyone cites as proof that Tolkien knew his Morris (apparently he spent part of the money earned for winning the Skeat Prize in 1914 to buy several books by Morris, including his translated *Völsunga Saga* and *House of the Wolfings*).

Tolkien was also familiar with Morris' classic of socialist utopianism *News from Nowhere* (1890) in which he preached essentially that the future should be built on a pre-Industrial Revolution rural economy. Echoes of this are, indeed, found in "The Scouring of the Shire", the penultimate chapter of *The Lord of the Rings*. After fulfilling the hazardous mission of returning the evil One Ring to the place where it was made by Sauron, the hobbits (Frodo, Sam, Merry, and Pippin) go back home to the Shire only to discover that its lovely landscape has been destroyed by the wizard Saruman, posing as the capitalist Sharkey. Jackson didn't film this segment, which he doesn't like, even though it is essential to understand Tolkien: this author hated modern life (what Bauman called Modernity with a capital M—see my previous post), in which he was following Morris but also his experience in the trenches of WWI. Tolkien's utopian Shire is, ultimately, much closer to socialism than the author's dream of a restored Medieval feudalism might allow us to see. Gondor may enjoy the aristocratic rule of the returned King Aragorn, but in the Shire there is no equivalent ruler, just a Thain in charge of guaranteeing the safety of the tightly-knit community and the enjoyment of its simple pleasures.

In this third reading of *The Lord of the Rings*, and possibly because in the last stages I was thinking of Morris, I have noticed a few things that I had overlooked. One is that the references to the economy and the labour system of the lands of Middle-earth are very vague: actually, we know more about how the arch-villain Sauron runs Mordor

than about the other kingdoms and territories run by Elves and Men. The class system is also a problem. Many others have noticed that Sam Gamgee appears to play the role of WWI 'batman', or officer's servant, a position often assumed by private soldiers from rural backgrounds. Tolkien was himself a junior officer (1915-18) and acknowledged in some letters that the batmen he knew had been an inspiration for Sam. However, I find Gamgee's status as a servant (batman or otherwise) problematic mainly because it has a clear impact on how Sam's deep bond with Frodo functions: it's one-sided. Sam declares again and again that he loves Frodo but I don't see that he is requited in the same way. This is a lopsided friendship, which somehow mars the text. By the way: I had missed how often Tolkien uses the word 'queer', it's amazing... But I'm not saying that Sam and Frodo are gay, that's a topic for another post.

Something else I had overlooked: I had kept the impression from my previous readings that Tolkien uses plenty of description but I realize now that this is not correct. His topographic detail is extremely abundant but also overwhelming for someone who can barely distinguish north from south (like yours truly). I realize now that Peter Jackson's production design team (headed by Grant Major) must have faced a gargantuan challenge despite the precedents set by the illustrators of Tolkien's works, among them Alan Lee. Incidentally, Tolkien was a marvellous illustrator as it is plain from his drawings for *The Hobbit*—clearly inspired by the painters of the Arts and Crafts movement. At any rate, Major's design team had to be necessarily specific to make up for Tolkien's descriptive vagueness. I don't mean that he offered no descriptions whatsoever but that they are limited to certain features rather than to complete portraits, both for characters and for landscapes. Tolkien suggests, in short, rather than draw a full picture, in which he is far less Dickensian than I thought.

The women... What can I say? *The Lord of the Rings* is a patriarchal text 100%: it's male-centred, exalts male bonding, celebrates patriarchal aristocratic power and so on. Funnily, if you read *The Silmarillion* you will see that the Valar (the fourteen auxiliary gods that the god Ilúvatar employs in creating Arda, or Earth) are genderless until they decide, according to individual inclination, to take a gendered form. Some of the females, like Varda, are very powerful but it is soon obvious that this is a patriarchy and that the male Manwë is in charge. Likewise, although the female Elf Galadriel astonishes everyone with her beauty, intelligence and power, she's just the exception that confirms the rule: power is gendered male, anyway. Frodo timidly suggests to Galadriel that, if she took the Ring, she might use power in a beneficial way but she denies this—there is no feminine or feminist alternative. Or Tolkien is too nervous to consider it.

All female characters are, of course, defined by their physical appearance. And as the cases of Lúthien and Arwen show, Tolkien had this fantasy about superior women abandoning their high status for the love of men: both Elves become mortals to marry Men. Tolkien, by the way, who claimed to love and admire his wife Edith very much (naming her as the inspiration for Lúthien) forced her very much against her will to become a Catholic like him and raise their children in that faith—do what you will of this factoid. Finally, Eówyn, whom many worship as a figure of empowerment because she is a successful warrior, ends up assuming her proper feminine role of wife and

future mother. For me Eówyn is particularly annoying, poor thing, because her dissatisfaction with her housebound life shows that Tolkien understood very well the problems women faced as he wrote (1940s to 1950s). I don't mean with this that *The Lord of the Rings* is a sexist or misogynistic text: it's, rather, a text with a conspicuous lack of concern for women. Fathers mourn again and again lost sons but mothers are hardly ever seen, and daughters are just princesses to be married off.

So why read and re-read this? Well, we women have this long training in reading patriarchal stories as if they had been written for us and we can even forget how deeply gendered they are. I have complained that the bond between Sam and Frodo is unbalanced in Frodo's favour but even so, this relationship is the main reason why I do love *The Lord of the Rings*. The scene when Frodo volunteers to carry the evil One Ring back to Mount Doom and try to destroy it is very moving, as is his realization that he will never heal from his psychological wounds once he has accomplished his mission—or not, since he actually fails (do read the book to know how and why). I have read plenty of WWI fiction and I recognize in the brave hobbit the veteran suffering from shellshock, or what is now called post-traumatic stress syndrome. This might be a misreading, but in my view this is Tolkien's main contribution to fantasy and mythmaking: its grounding in the evil reality of the trenches, not as allegory but as background inspiration. Beowulf would not understand what kind of hero Frodo is—but Harry Potter does.

Now, if you're minimally interested, go beyond Sauron, and check who Melkor/Morgoth was. For if Morris is all over *The Lord of the Rings*, Milton reigns in *The Silmarillion*. Or, perhaps, now that I think about it, William Blake.

## 5 June 2018 / A PERSISTENT BUNCH: DOCTORAL STUDENTS AGAINST THE WORLD

Yesterday we spent our working day going through the yearly interviews with our doctoral candidates—it seems, then, a good moment to ponder the use of doctoral programmes. To begin with, a reminder: only a very small minority of the individuals who practice medicine are properly speaking 'doctors'; most just have a degree (a BA) in Medicine and mandatory professional training. They are 'médicos', not 'doctores', a distinction that, it seems, is respected in Latin America though not in Spain (see <https://www.elsevier.es/corp/conecta/medicina/medicos-o-doctores/>).

Here, 0'8% of the population (376,000 individuals out of 47 millions) are doctors, that is to say: they have completed a doctorate, after submitting a doctoral dissertation (or 'tesis'). In 2014, 10,889 persons managed to complete theirs (see <https://www.weforum.org/es/agenda/2017/03/estos-paises-tienen-la-mayor-cantidad-de-graduados-con-titulo-de-doctorado/>), which is not at all a low figure in the context of the OCDE countries. Actually, the number of new doctors is growing all the time in Spain: the theses read in 2015 were 68% more than those read in 2010. This coincided with the introduction of the new 2011 national regulations for doctoral

programmes and the extinction of the old ones but, anyway, it's an amazing increase. Notice, please, that the age of the new doctors was 30-39 in 50% of the cases, with only 13'6% 29-years-old or younger (I assume that the rest, 37'4%, corresponded to persons above 40). 90% of all doctors in Spain are employed though not necessarily in their area and only a minority by commercial companies, which still don't quite understand the value of having a PhD. A doctoral degree shows, I think, not only that the doctor is question is an intelligent person but also someone constant and capable of organizing his/her own projects. Ideally.

Many questions are being asked in relation this strange thing called a doctoral dissertation: is the world producing too many? (<https://www.nature.com/news/2011/110420/pdf/472276a.pdf>), how should they be valued socially? ([https://www.eldiario.es/cienciacritica/Doctorado-ciencia-fraude-doctor-medico\\_6\\_110648947.html](https://www.eldiario.es/cienciacritica/Doctorado-ciencia-fraude-doctor-medico_6_110648947.html)), what should we do to improve the situation of tutors and tutorees? (<https://www.radoctores.es/doc/INFORME-GRUPO-DE-DOCTORADO-ACTUALIZADO.pdf>), what good is in the end a doctoral degree? (<http://www.elmundo.es/f5/campus/2017/10/25/59ef61f146163f721b8b465d.html>).

I always heard that Cuba is the country in the world with the highest percentage of university students in relation to its total population. This factoid was usually followed by the opinion that this is bad since, as happens in Spain, a country cannot offer all its graduates high quality employment. The same argument is being invoked by those who think that not all doctors can be given satisfactory jobs: here, as we know, we are losing the best generation of Spanish researchers ever for lack of investment in research; many have migrated to richer countries, which in this way benefit from our restricted budgets. What is wrong, then, is not that we're producing too many doctors but too little opportunities for them, possibly world-wide.

The United States shows, besides, that a country can generate a colossal amount of new doctors without this having an impact on the rest of the educational pyramid (perhaps because half or more of these new doctors are foreigners). I believe, however, that in a healthy educational system, the higher the percentage of doctors, the better all other levels should be. Doctors are not only supposed to do research but to train all the other professionals of education in secondary and primary schools. It might be even the case, then, that we need many more doctors.

Whereas in civilized nations like Germany average citizens understand the value of a doctoral degree, in Spain they don't. This is no surprise: a barely educated society can hardly be expected to value intellectual effort, which, besides, is totally invisible outside universities. A PhD dissertation is an original contribution to knowledge but this is a definition that does not explain what it really is: three to five years of obsessing over an obscure topic, reading non-stop, trying to generate new ideas and finally writing a thick volume, possibly 400/500 pages on average. I have never seen anyone explain our educational system in any public forum, which means that families with no graduates face a hard time understanding what their children actually do in universities. A doctoral student may simply be an incomprehensible anomaly.



Why, then, do individuals put themselves through a major effort with scarce social recognition and low professional use? The usual answer is that doctoral candidates expect to start an academic career. However, as we all know, the Spanish State decided back in 2008 to suppress all full-time contracts of the kind I myself enjoyed as a rookie teacher (I was first hired in 1991). The cost of producing doctors, it was decided, should be met by the candidates themselves, with the exception of the very few grants and scholarships available. In contrast, all doctoral students, if I recall this correctly, receive a salary in Finland. Please, consider the absurdity of our situation: instead of funding the best brains in Spain to work full-time in producing innovation, we are forcing them to produce dissertations while they are employed elsewhere, often full-time. These are adults over 25 who expect to lead a normal life and who should not sacrifice themselves for the benefit of an indifferent State (and fellow citizens). No wonder then that one third of Spanish doctoral students are at risk of suffering serious mental health problems (<http://www.elmundo.es/f5/campus/2017/04/19/58f646dfca4741dc138b461b.html>).

Unlike a BA or an MA, then, which are supposed to have immediate professional application, a PhD appears to be an unnecessary addition to one's education in our current circumstances, in which there is no guarantee at all that it leads to a career in research. If things are bad in science and technology, just imagine what they are like in the Humanities, an area of diminishing importance in the university and of no interest for employers outside it, except schools. Even though I have seen half of my doctoral tutorees abandon their PhD (usually after three years and when writing requires concentration they could not find), I know that this type of student is immensely self-motivated. I would have written my doctoral dissertation even if not employed by my university, and so they are doing. Completing a PhD dissertation, as I saw it and as they see it, is a challenge, a test of endurance and the culmination of the process of pulling yourself up by your intellectual bootstraps. The Victorians valued self-improvement above all else in education and a PhD dissertation is the ultimate step in that sense.

Naturally, what makes PhD dissertations so hard to sell in social terms is their specificity. BA degrees are already difficult to explain to those who don't have one: my father used to call my degree 'English Philosophy' rather than 'Philology' although I find the idea of a BA specifically on Locke, Hume, Russell and company positively eccentric. An MA is simply understood to be a specialization course and possibly makes rather good sense at a grassroots levels because it is short: one or two years at the most. But just think of a PhD!! I always tell my doctoral students that they should be able to summarize their dissertation in a catchy sentence for conversational purposes: you immediately get a glassy stare the moment you go past three sentences whenever someone asks 'so, what's your thesis about?'

I assume that doctoral students working in labs, or in research groups that meet frequently (never the case for the groups I've been a member of), enjoy the luxury of sharing their progress and doubts. In the Humanities, however, producing a PhD dissertation is, most often, a lone-wolf affair. In my view, this is the worst effect of suppressing full-time contracts in Spanish universities. The doctoral students in my Department meet once a year in February in a workshop where they offer samples of



their ongoing work to fellow students and teachers. They have no other regular meetings (we don't have doctoral courses) and, so, basically no chances to socialize in our facilities. If they do that outside, this is on the basis of personal affinity and not necessarily in relation to their research. Since most doctoral students work outside the university they are not given free days to attend conferences; at most, they spend one day at the event to present their paper, perhaps just the morning or the afternoon. The generational networking that should be happening is thus curtailed (as is the generational replacement, of course), and conferences might be facing inevitable decay.

What is it like for tutors, then? Frustrating... The frustration begins the moment a good MA student, perhaps your own dissertation tutoree, walks into your office to ask for advice about writing a PhD thesis. What used to be 'Of course! How can I help you?' has now become 'Why? Are you aware that there are no openings for young scholars?', hardly a nice way to start. I have supervised so far six dissertations but have failed to complete the supervision of four others—they are thorns in my side, because the topics were very good and because they took time that counts for nothing in my CV. I have, then, become more cautious, less enthusiastic. Even in the best cases, what should be a three-year investment of energy is now lasting up to five or even six years. I like very much the company of my PhD students but tutoring for so many years is just not what it should be, for me and for them.

In practice, then, currently all doctoral students are part-time (like, incidentally, more than 50% of our teachers) and run, thus, the risk of 'losing cohesion', as one of the students who abandoned me explained. One might find this counterintuitive because it might seem that research carried out in five years should be more solid than that carried out in three. This is not true: researchers get tired even of favourite topics and need to move on after a while. A PhD is, besides, mentally exhausting in a way that writing later monographs is not because it is your first battle with a very extensive piece of academic writing. Better be done with it in a shorter, more intense period than over many years—yet, this is what we have now and must put up with.

I'll end where I started, with the yearly interviews. I find them a great idea, one of the few useful improvements in all the arbitrary changes introduced into higher education in recent decades. They are at the same time an occasion to commiserate with the poor students, who, with very few exceptions, do all they can in an almost impossible situation. I cannot help reaching the conclusion, however, that interviews have become necessary precisely because our doctoral students are not where they should be: working with us full time.

Funny how I never made an appointment to see my supervisor: I just knocked on his office door, three down the corridor from my own office... Gone are the times when this was common for most doctoral students...

## 12 June 2018 / AN EXTREMELY GUILTY PLEASURE: *THE GREATEST SHOWMAN*

I recall from my childhood years how annoyed my father grew every time there was a musical film on TV and the actors burst out singing. I am confused to this day about whether the songs were also dubbed or left in the original English version (with no subtitles, that's for sure). Both possibly happened, for I seem to remember my father loudly complaining that the worst thing about the songs was that you could not understand them. I still don't like much translated musicals but I have overcome my father's prejudices, which were my own for years, and, though not the staunchest fan, I can say that I do enjoy musicals both on stage and on screen.

I hated *La La Land* (2016), however, because I found it to be very weak in its dancing and singing routines, and, above all, because I intensely disliked its tepid discourse about contemporary love. To be frank, I was repelled by it; musicals are supposed to be naïve romantic fantasies, not depressing reminders of the sorry state of love today. Well, never mind. As happens, Benj Pasek and Justin Paul, the composers of the songs in *La La Land* are also the authors of the songs in this other recent musical film: *The Greatest Showman* (2017). They have also written "Get Back Up Again" for Poppy in *Trolls* (2016), a glorious hymn to persistence that I recommend you to sing in low moments (see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IFuFm0m2wj0>).

You may have heard about *The Greatest Showman* because of Hugh Jackman's very visible shock at losing to James Franco (*The Disaster Artist*) the Golden Globe to the best actor, back in January. Jackman, who has a solid background in musical theatre, had put much energy into completing what turned out to be a rather complex project, (complicated by his being diagnosed with skin cancer) and he was devastated. At least, Pasek and Paul won the Golden Globe for "This is Me", though they lost the Oscar to the awesome "Remember Me" in the simply wonderful Pixar-Disney movie *Coco*.

*The Greatest Showman* is, as a musical, simply lovely. It has a gorgeous, fancy pseudo-Victorian look which director Michael Gracey does wonders with, it displays thrilling dancing choreographed by Ashley Wallen and it offers eleven exciting numbers, among which one, at least, stands out: the trapeze love dance with Zac Efron and Zendaya. After seeing the movie once, I found myself recalling every single song, which is, I think, the mark of a great musical. After seeing it again, I could sing most. And this the very key to the film's transformation into what is now: a cult film doing the rounds of midnight sing-along sessions very successfully. The critics who panned it as a hideous fantasy are flabbergasted. I'm not, but, then, yes I am.

Why's *The Greatest Showman* hideous? The screenplay by Jenny Bicks—revised by Bill Condon (it's her story)—offers a rosy picture of American circus businessman P.T. Barnum which is less than acceptable in its bland lack of criticism of what this shady man did do. The many differences between real-life facts and what the film narrates are irrelevant in some cases: Zac Efron's and Zendaya's characters did not exist; famous Swedish opera singer Jenny Lind had strictly a business-related relationship with Barnum (who organized her first American tour). What is far more controversial is

how Jackman's film presents Barnum as a champion of human diversity, which he was not at all.

Barnum (1810-1891), the founder of the long-lived Barnum & Bailey Circus (1871-2017), was a ground-breaking showman who perpetrated constant hoaxes on the gullible American public and was known for his manipulative 'freak shows'. The problem with *The Greatest Showman* is that, unlike David Lynch's *The Elephant Man* (1980), it completely fails to address its own key issue: the exploitation of the freaks publicly exhibited in America, from village carnivals to Barnum's famous Manhattan circus. Barnum's presentation is simplistic and one-sided: to convince a hesitant Charles Stratton, a midget (or little person), to accept being transformed into General Tom Thumb Barnum uses the argument that if people are going to laugh at him (as Stratton worries) they might as well pay. Incidentally: the real Stratton was recruited when he was only four-years-old, not twenty-two, and, thus, unable to decide for himself. This is the only comment about the dubious business relationship between Barnum and his distinct employees, apart from his snobbish exclusion of them from upper-class events, like the opening gala of Lind's tour.

That the Barnum & Bailey Circus closed in the year *The Greatest Showman* opened is a clear indication of the colossal *lacunae* in the film's discourse. 'The Greatest Show on Earth', as the circus proclaimed itself, was the object of constant complaints from animal defenders until it was eventually forced to bow down to pressure, unable to transform itself into a spectacle better suited to contemporary preferences (think Cirque du Soleil). If Barnum's record with animals is poor (he claimed that elephants feel no pain in their trunks to justify his appalling training methods), his treatment of his human fellow beings is also deplorable. His career started with the exploitation of a black slave, supposed to be the oldest woman in the world but actually only 76, whom he even exhibited once dead. His many human curiosities and oddities were, if not actually enslaved, at least treated with what now would be called intense ableism. As Richard Brody wrote in *The New Yorker*, "The movie isn't merely stylistically mediocre and emotionally simplistic, it's grossly ahistorical, shorn of the complexities and fascinations of the character whose name is associated with the film. The master of ballyhoo has been ballyhooed off the screen" (<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/richard-brody/the-greatest-showman-and-the-far-more-fascinating-real-life-of-p-t-barnum>).

This opinion, as you can see, clashes with my view of *The Greatest Showman* as highly enjoyable spectacle, an "extremely guilty pleasure". After *The Elephant Man*, a film telling the story of how Victorian Dr. Frederick Treves rescued John Merrick—a man suffering from elephantiasis exhibited by ruthless exploiters—we all grew sensitized to a very different view of the freak. Photographer Diane Arbus (1923-71) owed much of her fame to her portraits of freaks in the decaying 1960s shows but now we find her approach abusive. With the rise of Disability Studies in the mid-1980s the very word 'freak' became an insult and a new vocabulary of PC terms was deployed. The intensive medicalization that in the 1930s started pulling freaks out of the limelight to present them as cases was, however, also an expression of hypocrisy: Merrick's deformed skeleton was exhibited only to doctors but it is doubtful that this was only in

the interest of science. Incidentally, singer Michael Jackson was its last owner, which is fitting considering what Jackson himself did to his physical appearance.

The ableist hypocrisy I stress is grounded on the impression that the persons once called freaks have been freed from their freakdom to become integrated in society. This is completely false: I would never endorse Barnum's awful business practices but what I see on the streets and on the screen is a totally homogeneous human body following narrow, damaging beauty standards. Whenever freaks appears in texts calling allegedly progressive, they are woefully sentimentalized. The recent film *Wonder* (2017, based on the novel by R.J. Palacio) is not only incredibly sickly sweet but also very false in its presentation of children with Treacher Collins Syndrome. It's insulting to them that pretty Jacob Tremblay had to be put through gruelling make-up sessions when, surely, some actual patient could have been found for the role. This is an argument, of course, constantly advanced by activists in disability causes: we award Oscars to fully-abled actors for playing freaks but reject actual freaks (excuse my language).

*The Greatest Showman* is guilty of this sin and of many others. When I saw the Honest Trailer for it (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CaE0JD1X12g>) I was truly dismayed. Yes, all the points raised there are undeniable, not only the many lies but also how the interracial romance is used to leave the freaks' presence reduced to just a colourful background, and how the exploiter is, as I have said, presented as a romantic redeemer. I do not think, then, that I can defend my pleasure in this film without committing many ethical offences. This worries me very much, for I seem to be unable to extricate myself from the conundrum: why am I enjoying a text which I should abhor, given my knowledge of 'freaks' and my ideology? I cannot make sense of how my ethical barriers have been weakened.

But I'll try...

It's the glee. A trite answer, no doubt. Of course, I'm not the first one to argue that glee is the key. *Variety* notes that "*The Greatest Showman* is unabashedly nostalgic. Whereas *La La Land* was grounded in a darker realism, this film is bright and ebullient, infused with a let's-put-on-a-show spirit that's been largely missing from cinema since the days of Judy Garland and Gene Kelly" (<https://variety.com/2017/film/features/hugh-jackman-the-greatest-showman-logan-1202629864/>). For *The Guardian*, in an article about the film's transformation into a surprise sleeper by word-of-mouth, "It isn't hard to see how the film's feelgood factor can give audiences a much-needed sense of escape or respite" (<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/jan/31/the-greatest-showman-success-film-story-of-the-year-hugh-jackman>) from our dark times.

Still, the problem of the subject matter and its treatment remains. In Mel Brooks' 1967 hilarious film *The Producers*, Max Bialystock (a Broadway producer) and his accountant Leo Bloom decide to stage the most appalling musical ever, expecting it to be a flop, which would, paradoxically, benefit them. Their aim is to raise money before the play opens and then embezzle it. To their chagrin, however, *Springtime for Hitler: A Gay*

*Romp With Adolf and Eva at Berchtesgaden* becomes an immense success when some members of the audience start laughing, mistakenly believing it to be a satire. *The Greatest Showman* is not amenable to this ambiguous reading, which is why I fear that this is actually our own candid *Springtime for Hitler*, with dancing freaks instead of dancing Stormtroopers.

Director Michael Gracey convinced Hugh Jackman to turn the script into a musical, perhaps as a way to politely tell his fellow-Australian film star that only the addition of songs could turn the awkward content into congenial film material. He was right. The songs and their lyrics provide the film with the uplifting tone which its admirers celebrate but also cancel the more problematic discourse carried out by the rest of the film. Or perhaps I'm totally wrong, and in the times of Lady Gaga and her 'little monsters', the images of the 'freaks' dancing riotously (so different from the Elephant Man's tragic passivity) are far more positive than political correctness assumes. This is not nostalgia for Gene Kelly and Judy Garland but for a time when, though exploited, freaks were world-wide stars for—this is important—they were admired performers and not medicalized bodies displaced from public spaces. And, yes, I do know that my argument is problematic to say the least.

Do see *The Greatest Showman* and check whether what you feel and what you think clash.

## 26 June 2018 / KATHARINE BURDEKIN'S SWASTIKA NIGHT IN THE TIMES OF THE HANDMAID'S TALE: A WARNING ABOUT PATRIARCHAL ENSLAVEMENT

I read Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) many years ago before seeing the unfairly neglected film adaptation with the late Natasha Richardson as Offred, directed in 1990 by Volker Schlöndorff and written by none other than Nobel Prize award-winner Harold Pinter. I have not seen, thank you very much, the ongoing HBO series, now in its second season and the object of a hot debate about whether watching misogynistic torture porn is every feminist's duty or yet another insidious patriarchal contamination of a text about women's suffering. On principle, I dislike feminist dystopia because in the end it tends to depress women and favour patriarchy by multiplying sexist images of women in deep distress. I believe, however, that this is a good time to recall another key feminist dystopia, which may even have inspired George Orwell's *1984*. I refer to Katherine Burdekin's *Swastika Night*.

I hesitate whether to call this book a novel because, as it is often the case with utopia and dystopia, its plot is flimsy and what truly matters is the description of the happy or unhappy state of a given civilization. Burdekin (1896-1963) published *Swastika Night* in 1937, using the male penname Murray Constantine, as a specific warning about a future in which Adolf Hitler had not only won WWII but also become the object of a divine cult, enduring at the time the novel begins already for 700 years. Please, recall that Burdekin's dystopia appeared two years before WWII began and one year after

the Berlin Olympics, when the world didn't yet suspect that the catastrophe that started in 1939 was on the horizon. The Jewish Holocaust that overlapped with this period and that lasted until 1945, however, may not have been so unexpected since Burdekin includes it in her novel, as one of the many shows of power of the Nazi regime. Her book didn't do very well at the time of its release but was re-issued in 1940 within a left-wing collection, to be soon forgotten again. Decades later, feminist scholar Daphne Patai finally realized that Burdekin was Constantine and *Swastika Night* was re-released in 1985—the same year when Atwood published *The Handmaid's Tale*.

In Burdekin's novel the world consists of two militaristic blocks constantly at war: the Nazi Empire, which comprises Europe and Africa, and the Japanese Empire (all of America, Asia, and Australia). Hitler's miraculous birth from God the Thunderer without a mother is the foundation for the most horrendous misogyny ever imagined. Women have been reduced to the most basic animal function as breeding machines. They're not sexually interesting to the men, who bond with each other through homosexual sex and a complex pseudo-feudal network of allegiances. Even more thoroughly than in 1984, all records of the past have been destroyed so that the Nazi Empire appears to be the only possible way of life. The plot narrates how a book assembled by a disaffected Nazi Knight falls into the hands of an Englishman, Alfred, through whom we discover how this sinister masculinist society works.

Men's compliance with the Nazi patriarchal system is business as usual: patriarchy tells men that they are superior to women (sounds familiar, right?) and, so, they feel entitled to abusing them in any way they want. In *Swastika Night* rape is not a crime—it is a man's right to which women must submit (unless they are officially 'owned' by a specific man). This is a demonstration of power, with no pleasure involved, since women are considered disgusting; beautiful young boys are preferred as objects of sexual desire. Mothers are routinely separated from their male offspring at eighteen-months but allowed to keep their daughters as they need to be educated into submission. This is all the education they receive. The boys are also educated in patriarchal submission but at least this affords them the protection of their fathers who, of course, try to do as well as they can by them.

Hitler was a defender of the Victorian 'separation of the spheres', a patriarchal doctrine by which women were told that they should accept being wives and mothers as their main role in life. In public he would claim that this should be a cherished role by no means inferior to those played by men; in private, he made no bones of abhorring women (and never had children), though he could be a gentleman if he chose to. It seems that the Nazi pro-natalist policies were not, however, particularly successful and that the aim of returning to pre-1914 birth rates was never achieved. Historian Jill Stephenson explains that the Nazi project of expanding the 'Aryan race' was undermined by the regime itself, which sent the 'Aryan' men to conquer Europe and, thus, left the 'Aryan' women with no adequate mates—instead, they were surrounded by foreign war prisoners, which in the end only resulted in many illegitimate children of the unwanted kind (in the Nazi's view, of course). I won't even mention what was done to Jewish mothers, and children.

The “fundamental immutable laws of Hitler Society” dictate that “As a woman is above a worm, So is a man above a woman. As a woman is above a worm, So is a worm above a Christian”—yes, religion is banned, except for the Hitlerian cult. What is then “the meanest, filthiest thing that crawls on the face of the earth”? A Christian woman. A classic mistake often made about patriarchy is that it privileges all men: this is not correct, for whereas men are persuaded that they are above all women, the pecking order in patriarchy is inexorable. “As a man is above a woman, So is a Nazi above any foreign Hitlerian. As a Nazi is above a foreign Hitlerian, So is a Knight above a Nazi. As a Knight is above a Nazi, So is Der Fuehrer (whom may Hitler bless) above all Knights, even above the Inner Ring of Ten”. God lies at the top of the pyramid. The word ‘mother’ is obscene. ‘Marriage’ no longer exists in the vocabulary of the English language.

Women were once as desirable as boys but the new women of the Nazi Empire are pitiful creatures, with their “naked shaven scalps,” the “horrible meek bowed way they had of walking and standing”; they have “no grace, no beauty, no uprightness, all those were male qualities. If a woman dared to stand like a man she would be beaten”. When they age past menopause women stop being socially useful beings and are only tolerated because they help to raise the younger generation of female slaves. Men like Alfred, though ‘good’ in comparison to his Nazi oppressors, never care “about the ordinary day-to-day sufferings of women”.

This starts changing somehow when the secretly rebellious Knight Hermann (of the Inner Ring of Ten) corroborates to Alfred that Hitler was indeed born of a woman and that, as the rumour goes, the creatures were different in the past. Why, Alfred wonders, “have they let themselves go down so?” Here is a passage that will hurt any woman reader (though please recall that this is a Nazi speaking, no matter how disloyal to the Hitlerian cause): “They acquiesced in the Reduction of Women, which was a deliberate thing deliberately planned by German men. Women will always be exactly what men want them to be. They have no will, no character, and no souls; they are only a reflection of men. So nothing that they are or can become is ever their fault or their virtue”. We might agree that women’s standards of beauty change to please men but when Hermann claims that “If men want them to have an appearance of perfect freedom, even an appearance of masculine power, [women] will develop a simulacrum of those things”, we may think that Burdekin is going too far. The conclusion that men can never “stop this blind submission and cause the women to ignore them and disobey them. It’s the tragedy of the human race” is infuriating, perhaps because it surpasses the limits of the novel to become something that rings true. Sorry.

The conversation continues, with Alfred defending the idea that, then, “It must be right for women to submit to men. Anything else would be unnatural”. The Knight disagrees: “It would be all right (...) if men were infallible” but it is women’s misfortune to have followed inadequate leaders. This is what I call ‘the faulty patriarchy argument’. Once a friend taunted me by declaring that feminism is the product of bad patriarchy, that is to say, if patriarchy had really fulfilled its own ideals (the chivalric

code) then women would have seen no need to rebel. If every man were Darcy, we would all be happy Liz Bennets. Unfortunately, as the Knight Hermann observes, men of the patriarchal persuasion are not infallible—and, so, they abuse their authority using violence to confirm their power. Hence the constant conflicts with each other and over/with the women and children supposed to obey patriarchal family heads.

In *Swastika Night* the ‘Reduction of Women’, as the process is called, does not begin from above, as it happens in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. It begins from below with the devaluation of rape. Like the men who have distorted the label ‘incel’ (involuntarily celibate), created to define recently separated individuals, into a misogynistic badge of dishonour, the Nazis believe that “the rejection-right of women was an insult to Manhood (...)”. Their main theorist, one von Wied, claims (like the incels) that women’s beauty is another “insult to Manhood” for it gives females “an enormous and disgusting sexual power over men”. Following this man’s revolting directives, women are deprived of everything that might make them attractive: hair, flattering clothes, even basic cleanliness. When they reach the age of sixteen, they must be “completely submissive” to any man.

You might think that women put up a fight rather than meekly accept the delirious Nazi mandate. On the contrary, Hermann explains, “they threw themselves into the new pattern with a conscious enthusiasm that knew no bounds”. They believed, he adds, “those poor little typically feminine idiots, that if they did all that men told them to do cheerfully and willingly, that men would somehow, in the face of all logic, love them still more”. There is more: the women contributed to their own degradation with their love and admiration of men, which instead of gratitude generated a reinforcement of men’s feeling of superiority. Alfred begins to see that these animals are “not women at all, and never have been” because they have always seen themselves as slaves with no self-esteem. The remedy, he clarifies, is “simple”: “The highest possible masculine pattern of living should be imposed on women (...)”, beginning with basic literacy, and in this way they would see that men loathe their easy submission. By the end of the novel, Alfred feels something new when he holds his newly-born daughter in his arms, though this is not really the main point of the novel.

I am aware that Burdekin’s controversial discourse on women’s submission has elicited many answers from feminist scholars. I will insist that this is placed in the mouths of men living in an extreme form of patriarchy, though I very much suspect that the author is expressing through them her own feminist despair. *The Handmaid’s Tale* also complicates the issue very much with the presence of the Aunts, the women fully complicit with the system that help patriarchy to dominate the Handmaids. In Burdekin’s *Swastika Night* the whole situation is far worse: of course, violence was used to overpower the rebels, but most women accepted the restrictions of the (fictional) Nazi regime. Their way of life would be a nightmare even for Offred, for she recalls what life as a free woman was like whereas Burdekin’s women have lost all memories of the past. Arguably, the conversations between Alfred and Hermann are designed to elicit our disagreement and to be jolted out of any possible passivity in the face of our own patriarchal domination.



HBO, Amazon, Netflix: No, don't do *Swastika Night*—time to move on and abandon dystopia for constructive utopia.

## 2 July 2018 / ANATOMY OF THE BOND GIRL: THE CASE OF SOLITAIRE

In one of those bouts of curiosity that may overpower even the most cautious reader, I have gone through the twelve James Bond novels by Ian Fleming (there are two more books, with short fiction, and other novels by living authors). I am by no means a Bond fan but, like many others who don't particularly care, I end up seeing all the new releases and even (mildly) bothering about who should play the MI6 spy next. Blame the nagging advertising campaigns.

Bond functions much like Dr. Who in the sense that every few years he is played by a new actor, thus remaining perpetually in the 35-45 age bracket, roughly corresponding to the novels. I found Daniel Craig's proposal that Idris Elba should be the next Bond appealing and was appalled by the subsequent racist reaction. I suppose that Tom Hiddleston will play Bond eventually (I'd much rather have Tom Hardy play a villain) but, really, it's all the same. There is also some debate about whether the seventh official Bond actor should be a woman, inspired, precisely, by *Dr. Who*. The current one, number twelve, is played by Jodie Whittaker, a choice that caused some ripples in the misogynistic waters but that has been on the whole welcome. If it were up to me, I would simply bury the Bond franchise.

The James Bond series has been a relic of the past for decades. In our better enlightened times its racism, homophobia, misogyny and ridiculous British patriotism can only be approached in the spirit of an archaeologist digging up ancient tombs. The film franchise is pretending to correct the novels in all these fronts by, for instance, turning Bond's boss M into a woman, or his American colleague Felix Leiter into an African-American. Much was written about the casting of 50-year-old Monica Bellucci in *Spectre* (2015) as a Bond girl, the oldest ever (Craig was 48 at the time). Although this might seem an improvement over the archaic, the 'Bond girl' is not yet a *woman*. This is a typical pseudo-feminist trap: you change some details to get progressive kudos but the bottom line remains the same. Indeed, the girl's bottom still must be pert and pleasing to Bond's touch.

A complication in any analysis of the Bond saga is that there is actually very little analysis of the original works because they are obscured by the far more popular films. The original fiction was published between 1953 (*Casino Royale*) and 1966 (*Octopussy and The Living Daylights*) and is, then, a product of the time right before the onset of Second Wave feminism (officially begun in 1963 with Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*). The women in the Bond novels are, thus, stranded between the traditional homemaker model and the liberated girl of 1960s Swinging London; above all, they are the figments of a male imagination that sees them primarily as sexual objects. All are extremely beautiful and never past thirty. I'll leave aside the preposterous names that

Fleming came up with, some elegant (Vesper Lynd), some inexcusable (Pussy Galore), to explain that perhaps what most surprised me is that, for despite the deep misogyny, Fleming prefers his 'girls' to be fond of sex and not just passive dolls; none is stupid, and, on the whole, all are much better balanced people than Bond.

James Bond, himself an insatiable womanizer, never criticises the promiscuity of the women he beds (he even often justifies it as freedom) and if he consumes the 'girls' as he consumes his gourmet food, drink and cigarettes, it can equally be said that he is consumed by his sexual partners. This does not mean that the women are empowered in any way—not at all! Some are literal slaves of a specific villain and are more than willing to grant Bond power over them as soon as he shows any interest. For he is, here is the key word again, handsome.

The basic formula is this: he meets a truly interesting sexy and clever girl who seems unconquerable, she is eventually conquered to their mutual sexual satisfaction; next, either the relationship is soon over with no mutual grief, or love complicates matters so much that it needs to be over. When Tracy, Bond's wife of one day, is murdered by the villain Bloefeld, Bond is hypocritically devastated—he seems, rather, relieved that he does not have to play husband and, God forbid!, become a father. Maybe this is the key to his characterization: Bond might settle down with a woman who loves sex as much as he does but could never accept her becoming a mother and himself a father. That would mean the end of his perpetual adulthood.

Let me focus on one of these women (I'm making an effort not to call them 'girls'), a bit at random: Solitaire in the second Bond novel, *Live and Let Die* (1954).

This young woman is introduced in a scene with her master, Mr. Big, who is holding Bond captive. Buonaparte Ignace Gallia is unusual in Fleming's gallery of villains because he is black. The absurd plot supposes that this Harlem boss gangster is interested in aiding "the Soviet organ of vengeance, SMERSH, short for Smyert Spionam—Death to Spies" by funding it with the earnings of the illicit traffic in the colonial treasure lost in the Caribbean. Jurisdiction problems are habitual in the Bond novels and, so, this one is set mainly in Jamaica, a colony until 1962, to justify the alliance between the MI6, the CIA and the FBI.

Back to Solitaire: she is, like all the others that appeal to him, "One of the most beautiful women Bond had ever seen (...)", in this case, a black-haired white woman born in Haiti with "The face of the daughter of a French Colonial slave-owner". Frigid Solitaire bears that name because, Mr. Big explains, "For the time being she is difficult. She will have nothing to do with men". Actually, this is the bogus excuse which Fleming uses not to present this woman as the villain's mistress for, as I am supposing here, inter-racial sex enslavement would have been too much for his readers. Unlike the other Bond women she is not, then, so openly sexualized.

Mr. Big, who does want to marry Solitaire but has not forced despite being a most cruel villain..., presents her as "my inquisitor". He dislikes torture (at least at this point in the story) and uses the woman's mental powers to deduce whether his prisoners

are lying—the silly man. Solitaire has, then, a strange kind of power for although she really has no supernatural abilities, she classes Mr. Big's prisoners "according to whether she sensed these people were good or evil". She knows "that her verdict might often be a death sentence" but she cannot care—until she sees Bond and is smitten at once. Like all the other women in his life.

Naturally, she lies about Bond to Mr. Big, sending to the spy the message that she is his ally by "nonchalantly" drawing "her forearms together in her lap so that the valley between her breasts deepened". He quickly gets that "He had a friend in the enemy's camp" and rescues her as soon as both can fool Mr. Big. Grateful, Solitaire warms up to Bond: "You've given me a new life. I've been shut up with him and his nigger gangsters for nearly a year. This is heaven". Bond, typically, never hesitates about his capacity to undo Solitaire's dislike of men: "She seemed open to love and to desire. At any rate he knew that she was not closed to him".

He imagines for her a 'romantic' colonial background (later recycled for Honeychile Rider in *Dr. No*): the lonely white child in Haiti that becomes an orphan and is raised by a devoted servant, then the "struggle against the shady propositions" as beauty is her only asset. Next, "the dubious, unknown steps into the world of entertainment", where she gains fame by exploiting her mentalist tricks, until she is charmed by Mr. Big's promise of a Broadway career. Simone Latrelle, her real name, age 25, is a 'solitaire' virgin because Fleming cannot imagine a white partner for her in Haiti, much less a black one.

Soon Bond sees Solitaire as part of his professional rewards, "the ultimate personal prize". The reward, however, takes a while to reap because both are kidnapped by Mr. Big and, this being a Caribbean tale, exposed to the sharks and to the nasty consequences of being dragged through a coral reef. Fleming, always the sadist, puts the pair naked together in a sort of alternative sexual encounter—guess which part of women's anatomy he was obsessed by: "Their bodies were pressed together, face to face, and their arms held round each other's waists and then bound tightly again. Bond felt Solitaire's soft breasts pressed against him. She leant her chin on his right shoulder. 'I didn't want it to be like this,' she whispered tremulously". Are you sick yet...? Bond, logically, rescues himself and Solitaire, the villain get his come-uppance. In the chapter called "Passionate Leave" Bond gets finally his reward, once she learns to mix martinis to his taste. When Solitaire (never once called Simone) looks at him there is "open sensuality" in her eyes. How could it be otherwise?

Bond is not, then, a blunt sexual predator but a man actually capable of connecting with the willing, pliable women he meets, if only for the time his cases last. Whether she is sexually active or less so, the pattern is similar: the relationship with the women is always presented as a reward for Bond as a protector in one way or another. Perhaps what is incongruous is that although Fleming seems incapable of showing Bond's deeper emotions he tends to involve his hero in relationships beyond the merely sexual. Nevertheless, one must wonder why if everything is so satisfactory the women disappear so easily from Bond's life. Simone is simply gone by the next novel and when Bond wonders whatever became of her, we, the readers, also wonder.

Bond only proposes to one of his many women, Tracy, yet all seem good potential partners for him. You can see, then, that the problem lies in the seriality of the novels. If Bond were the protagonist of just one novel, then the plot would be straightforward: the hero slays the dragon and marries the princess. Seriality, however, turned Bond into a combination of the classic rake that will not reform and the modern serial monogamist. The 'Bond girl', excuse me!, is a stereotype (Bond's preferred type) that must also be a variation, always within the pattern of the extremely beautiful, sexy, clever woman. Once Bond succeeds in bonding with them, excuse the silly pun, the problem for Fleming is how the end the relationship: some die, others leave or let Bond go, for who can imagine Bond married for life?

On the other hand, arguably the Bond women embody the beginning of the late 1960s rebellion. Tiffany Case, the strongest among Bond's women, abandons him, which suggests that the real question is: who would want to marry someone like Bond? Fleming possibly understood that a change was coming, this is why he fantasised in his novels about how Bond conquers all these active women—though for that he had to transform them into passive princesses. Still, with Domino Vitali of *Thunderball*, his first 1960s woman, he even came close to presenting a better hero than Bond, which would have made him superfluous.

Even so, no, thanks, I don't care for a renewal of the franchise with a Jane Bond in the main role—and a string of Bond boys, what a terrible thought. As far as I am concerned, it is about time to let bygones be bygones and allow Commander Bond to retire. After all, if he were alive the guy would be nearing his hundredth birthday. Time to move on (or to start ignoring the films!).

## 10 July 2018 / DEATH OF THE NOVEL, DEATH OF THE READER: A DEBATE (WITH AIs)

This post is inspired by two articles about novelists considering whether the novel is in its dying throes. The interview by Vicent Bosch of Guillem López (Castelló, 1975) for *JotDown* bears the heading "No creo que la novela sobreviva medio siglo" (<https://www.jotdown.es/2018/06/guillem-lopez-no-creo-que-la-novela-sobreviva-medio-siglo-la-literatura-si-pero-sera-otra-cosa-tal-vez-un-videojuego/>). *The Guardian's* article about the BBC Radio 3's *Free Thinking* talk by novelist Howard Jacobson (Manchester, 1942) is titled "'The Problem is the Reader'".

Guillem López is one of the most important Spanish fantasy writers, and *Challenger* (2015)—which does deal with the space shuttle disaster of 1986—his most acclaimed novel. Here is an anecdote. López novel won the 2016 Ignotus for best fiction, the main award for fantasy fiction in Spain (apart from Planeta's Minotauro). The awards ceremony is usually celebrated within Hispacon, which that year coincided with Barcelona's Eurocon—and there I was. López was not in the room and his publisher, Cisco Bellabestia of Aristas Martínez (Badajoz, active since 2010) collected the award.

He then launched into the total opposite of the thanks speech you might expect, shaming everyone in the room into considering sheepishly the charms of the floor tiles. His main point was that it was no use giving awards and clapping authors on the shoulder if sales remained so low—he mentioned having sold only 100 copies of *Challenger* in its first year. My, he was angry... The *JotDown* interview mentions an iron ceiling of 2000 copies at most for Spanish fiction (not just fantasy), and other editors and authors I know put habitual sales figures between 150 and 450 copies. In contrast, top YouTuber El Rubius has 30 million subscribers worldwide—yes, that is correct. There is a series of books presenting him as a superhero. No wonder...

Towards the end of the *JotDown* interview, López is invited to speculate on the future of the novel. He notes that even though the foundations of the genre remain quite static, innovation is still possible, as shown by Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2000)—most likely, the only truly post-postmodern novel I have come across and an admirable text but also a one-off eccentric beauty. López remarks next that, in his view, novels will have probably disappeared in about fifty years, with only a small circle of committed readers keeping them alive at the end of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. If, I add, pastoral poetry went out of fashion why shouldn't the novel go out of fashion, too? If, furthermore, you can date the birth of a genre then why couldn't you imagine its death?

In López's view, and this is what gives the interview its controversial subtitle, "Perhaps we should all be writing videogames because videogames are the literature of the end of the 21<sup>st</sup> century". For López literature will survive, then, though not necessarily the novel. I must clarify that López does not mean that videogames are literature as they are right now but that they offer a model to explore. He stresses that the novel should fit the world awaiting us round the corner and not the other way round, and we need to start thinking of novels amenable to virtual and augmented reality, transmedia contents, etc rather than just the book. Why he assumes that 'literature' is a synonym for 'narrative' is an issue that I'll leave aside for the time being.

What is in question, then, is not so much the novel's survival but the convention according to which the novel must be read between the covers of a book and transmitted in printed text. This is not at all a new argument, though so far the constant obsolescence of computers has prevented most of the hypertextual fictional experiments to make it into any kind of canon (popular or otherwise). I still wonder that we don't have hypertextual editions of the classics, with 'footnotes' popping up windows with all kinds of information. And, though I'm not sure this will ever happen, I have no problems imagining the use of virtual reality technology in immersive versions of novels, as if you could insert yourself in a BBC adaptation as you listen to Charles Dickens, to name an example. The videogame format that López alludes to suggests, however, something more interactive but, then, I'm not sure how that would still be a novel rather than an enhanced film.

In Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) the protagonist's wife, Mildred, is totally addicted to a soap opera she can interact with through the four screens in her living room, a sort of predecessor of immersive virtual reality. This might be the kind of novel

most valued in the 22<sup>nd</sup> century. Of course, in Bradbury's dark tale books are banned and firemen are, ironically, in charge of burning them—the texts survive in the wondrous memories of volunteers who recall them verbatim for future generations, that is to say, the literary works survive as oral artefacts. Perhaps audiobooks and not videogame books are the future, one way or another, for even Bradbury grants that while books need to be written they needn't be read.

Jacobson's talk was given at the Man Booker festival (Southbank Centre, London) at a time when the award itself is under fire for not generating the enthusiasm of past decades. Incidentally, Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* (1992) has been voted the best Man Booker novel in the 50 years of the award's history, which sounds a bit suspicious to me for this in an extremely demanding novel and I would think that many voters were thinking of the far more accessible film. Maybe I'm wrong... Anyway, Jacobson's argument is the opposite of López's: for him, the screen is the enemy to beat (he forgets e-book readers, as usual). Instead of the "infinite distractions of the Jumpin' Jack Flash screen" Jacobson praises the "the nun-like stillness of the page" and, above all, of the page that requires concentration. "To say that reading more closely resembles study is not to be a killjoy: concentration and enjoyment are not opposites". To reinforce his point, he offers a comparison: "Strange that when everyone's running marathons and otherwise raising sweat for the hell of it, working hard at a novel is thought to take the fun away". Um, perhaps that explains why few keen readers are also keen athletes: our sport is reading.

"Until people fall out of love with the screen, I don't know what will win them back to writing", Jacobson sentences. We are, then, lost because unless nuclear Armageddon or alien invasion wipes out electricity-based civilization, the reign of the screen in all its multiple forms is here to stay. Jacobson, the way I see it, is a combination luddite/print Taliban, not much to my taste. I love screens (cinema, TV and computer) and I don't see that this love has affected in any way my passion for reading. Neither the screen nor the page are monogamous affections for a great percentage of individuals, though I agree that the youngest age demographic is where the real problem lies. People change and, thus, my father who had not read more than ten books before he hit 80 is now reading a thick novel every two days—boredom has unexpected effects. It is, however, much harder for me to imagine my 17-year-old nephew suddenly dropping his iPhone for a bunch of printed papers between covers. The last book I bought him was an exercise in self-defeat for both author and aunt: it explained, *in print*, why young people like him do not find enjoyment in reading and studying.

I grant, then, Jacobson one major point: concentration is going the way of the Titanic and the iceberg is not so much the screen itself but the downsizing of dialogue and discourse to the tweet and the Instagram post. Influencers' blogs are all photos, no need to go through much text. And why read if YouTube can teach you all you need to know? Just imagine what I am thinking these days, now that I know that next year I'll have to teach Romantic Literature (the main poets, Mary Shelley and Jane Austen) at 8:30 in the morning, and on Fridays. I can feel already the waves of enthusiastic concentration...

The problem which the reader has become for the writer is a consequence of the ambitious US white guys, now billionaires, who have peddled their wares to the most vulnerable age segment: Google, YouTube, Instagram, Whatsapp (add whatever you wish) have their uses but they are heavily undermining the more productive revolution which Johannes Guttenberg brought about (I'm not sure whether he would like the idea of the online repository of e-books Project Guttenberg being named after him...). Many defend the idea that reading is at no risk because we are continuously reading what reaches us though the screens (like my posts!) but nobody should claim that reading thousands of words in tweets is the same as reading longer, monographic pieces of writing.

I myself do not fear very much for the novel but I do fear for the book-length essay, as I see more and more of us, academics in Literary and Cultural Studies, publishing collective books rather than monographs. The short essay has its place in journals and volumes of this kind but, again, it aims at a short burst of attention both from writer and reader. There are days when it seems to me that only doctoral students will ever produce monographs—unless they start producing, as my university wants, theses which actually compile three or four articles.

Is the novel dead or dying, then? I think the answer is 'it depends on which novel you mean'. The books that are dying, whether they are fiction or not, are those that demand, as Jacobson notes, concentration and attention. *Ulysses* will die faster than *The Pillars of Earth*, if anyone under 35 can recognize either of the titles. Conquering *The Magic Mountain*, still a badge of honour in my time as an undergrad in the mid-1980s, now means nothing. And I'm sorry to say that Howard Jacobson's own novels are not really that thrilling as a readerly challenge. We may be going towards a world without difficult books, which is not the same as a world without novels.

I read yesterday that AIs are already writing fiction and perhaps our hope is that our machines will generate a new fashion for the exquisitely crafted page though, so far, the snag seems to be that they're not very good at characterizing human beings. Perhaps the new Jane Austen, the new Noam Chomsky will be born from AI talent and computers will be not only the truly sophisticated authors of the future but also the only accomplished readers left, while human beings continues wasting their lifetime and the precious gifts of the human brain in inane messaging in the social networks.

## 17 July 2018 / BIBLIOMETRICS AND OPEN ACCESS: FIGHTING FOR COMMON SENSE

My topic today is the corporate hold on academic research on two different but closely interrelated fronts: open access and bibliometrics. Open access policies are very simple to understand: the publications generated by research funded with public money should be available for free to anyone interested. This is, simply, not happening. Bibliometrics used to be a system designed to aid university librarians to choose how to invest their meagre, or large, resources into the best journals available but became

about ten years ago an Orwellian way of measuring what cannot be measured: scholarly reputation and impact.

I attended back in 2010 a one-day workshop, organized by the Catalan Agència per a la Qualitat del Sistema Universitari de Catalunya (AQU), to debate the best way to implement the, at the time, rather new bibliometric approach to research. I was on the side of the Catalan researchers who complained that if you work on a tiny corner of the world of knowledge (and in a minority language) you can hardly expect your research to have world-wide impact. Your specialized journals will always be on the C and D list, even for your own local Catalan universities. So why measure not only personal production but also whole areas of research by pitting them against each other? Who has the right to say that a journal in English about Milton is more relevant than one in Catalan about Pedroló? Why should an article published in the former be automatically regarded as superior to one published in the latter?

The other main concern expressed had to do with how bibliometrics negatively affect new publications, as scholars have quickly learned that since newly-born journals take time to consolidate it is preferable to try to publish in older, fully consolidated B or A-list journals—the only ones that really count for assessment though it takes years to publish in them even when accepted. I believed all this was plain common sense but was totally flabbergasted when hearing the line defended by some of the Catalan colleagues present at the AQU workshop, who were truly convinced that *where* you publish and not *what* you publish is what matters. Since then I have learned to do as required by my employers, and, so, I made sure that my last research assessment exercise included at least one article in an A-listed journal. I am also flooding, however, the digital repository of my university with plenty of academic work which I am self-publishing, following my own version of open access.

I say my own version because what is usually meant by open access is not free self-publication, whether peer-reviewed (which can be easily done) or not, but the online liberation of work previously offered through an academic journal (occasionally in collective books). That is to say: even though most universities have set up digital repositories to guarantee their researchers easy access to a platform where they can publish their work (beyond Academia.edu or Research Gate, which are private), it turns out that this has had no major impact because our CVs are measured, more rigidly than ever, on the basis of journal bibliometrics. If, to give an imaginary example, I publish an article in an A-ranking journal available by subscription that gets read by 30 persons but the same article is downloaded 300 times from the DDD of my university, which has the higher impact? You might think it's the DDD but, no, it's the journal publication—officially, digital repositories contribute zero to academic CVs. I am not speaking here of peer-reviewing vs. self-publication, I'm speaking only about access, which is supposedly the basis of impact.

Open access, in short, cannot function unless all journals decide to act like repositories and offer their publications for free online. Many, of course, are doing that and even using, besides, open peer reviewing, which means that you can leave comments either as a plain reader or as a formal reviewer (not anonymously). In contrast, most of the A-



listed journals (highly-ranked according to bibliometrics, not necessarily scholarly consensus) tend to be available only by subscription, which means that universities are spending most of their library budgets on publications that actually depend on the researchers' giving their work away for free. As we all know, though we do not get payment for our articles, the main academic journal publishers do good business by charging money for each article independently and for the subscriptions, some truly expensive—I mean up to tens of thousands of dollars for one journal (in the sciences).

A recent article in *The Guardian* complains that the European Union, in charge of guaranteeing the growth of open access policies, has hired academic giant Elsevier to check its progress. As the author, Jon Tennant, protests, "That's like having McDonald's monitor the eating habits of a nation and then using that to guide policy decisions" (<https://www.theguardian.com/science/political-science/2018/jun/29/elsevier-are-corrupting-open-science-in-europe>). Elsevier, naturally, very much disliked at the critique. See in Tennant's own blog the letter that Elsevier sent him, defending their appointment, and his arguments (<http://fossilsandshit.com/elsevier-open-science-monitor-response/>).

Business is business and corporations will do their best to go on accruing power over us, academics, as well as they can—just as Amazon, Apple and company do. What you should be wondering at this point is why this state of affairs is tolerated. If most of us, researchers, agree that open access is the way to go, why is this so hard to implement? Well, one answer is that open access is not free in the sense that if you want to set up a respectable online journal you still need extensive resources: a platform funded by your university, the know-how to operate it as editor (a time-consuming task), and lots of stamina to send regular cfps and manage peer reviewers, that unruly lot. It seems easier to let others do the job or, to be more specific, help to give the job you're anyway willing to do more resonance.

Also, and this is the main point, for whatever reasons the political authorities, from the European Union down to each regional government, including the university admin teams, are upholding an assessment system that benefits the major academic publishers. We are assessed on the basis of *their* impact and reputation not of ours and, one way or the other, we have ended up working not quite for the good of knowledge but for the benefit of our publishers. Let me give you an example of things that are beginning to scare me very much: I was planning to reuse a chapter that I wrote for a collective volume issued by a very well-known academic publisher in a monograph for another publishing house; I found out, however, that I was expected to pay 1000\$ to get their permission. Needless to say, I'm writing a completely new chapter for the monograph. A doubt now corroding me is whether I can use the arguments without repeating my own text verbatim, for I'm not even sure that I can. What exactly do we give away with copyright?

Concerned specifically about the Journal Impact Factor, The American Society for Cell Biology (ASCB) published in 2012 a document known as the "San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment" (<https://sfdora.org/read/>). JIF, a product of Thomson Reuters now published by Clarivate Analytics, is being used to measure academic CVs

at all levels and beyond the USA. Incidentally: Clarivate Analytics is owned by the Onex Corporation (a Canada-based private equity or investment fund) and by the London-based Barings Bank, now in the hands of ING. Draw your own conclusions. Anyway, the San Francisco Declaration couldn't be clearer: its general recommendation is "Do not use journal-based metrics, such as Journal Impact Factors, as a surrogate measure of the quality of individual research articles, to assess an individual scientist's contributions, or in hiring, promotion, or funding decisions". What should you use, then?: "assessments based on scientific content rather than publication metrics". As an alternative, Altmetrics is proposed (<http://altmetrics.org/tools/>). For the British view of the matter, see James Wildon's article which, among other matters, announces the establishment of the UK Forum for Responsible Research Metrics (<https://www.theguardian.com/science/political-science/2018/jul/10/has-the-tide-turned-towards-responsible-metrics-in-research>).

I cannot find (sorry) another article in which a scientist working on an emerging field (possibly big data) explained that although researchers have organized themselves competently through open-access networks and publications, a major publisher has announced the launch of a journal specializing in their little patch of the academic quilt. This researcher was positively furious at what he regarded as an unwanted interference. I seem to recall that a number of the leading researchers in his field have signed a manifesto vowing not to publish in that corporate-owned journal but the question, obviously, is whether they will be able to stick to their resolve, or risk being pushed out of the fierce competition for funding and jobs by those who publish in the new journal.

Let me explain something I am doing. Since early 2017 I have been co-editor of the online journal *Hélice* ([www.revistahelice.com](http://www.revistahelice.com)), which specializes in science fiction. My co-editors, Mariano Martín and Mikel Peregrina, and myself had the intention of transforming the journal, originally founded by Asociación Xatafi in 2007, into a proper academic publication. *Hélice* certainly *is* an academic publication because we three are scholars and we publish in it scholarly work. What I mean is that we intended to introduce peer reviewing and bibliometrics into *Hélice*, and publish through my university's online platform. We have decided, however, to post-pone indefinitely the decision for several reasons: one is that we do enjoy being editors in the classic style of many SF-related publications; another is that we are publishing work by rookie undergrad researchers not necessarily interested in an academic career; also, that we simply don't have sufficient time to meet the demands of a university-endorsed journal. This may change in the future but we find ourselves interested in filling in the gap between fandom and academia, and in doing that beyond what counts or not academically speaking. And we need not worry about any major academic publisher wanting to steal the limelight from us. Perhaps we're being Quixotic but, then, why not?

I think I am calling everyone to change the way we make research available. Establish your own online resources through blogs and websites, question your university's investment into expensive subscriptions rather than full-time jobs, cite colleagues' work because you find it relevant not because it is published in A-list journals, use peer

reviewing wisely but also welcome other editorial approaches, don't let yourself be consumed by your CV, that hungry monster. I personally know that I'm doing my most important academic work here in this blog yet, you see?, I have never counted who is reading it and whether it has an impact or not at all. It adds, by the way, zero points to my CV.

Some might think that doing academic work at any level which is not officially measurable is a waste of time but, believe me, though I feel enormous satisfaction when I see my academic work in relevant publications, I also feel much happiness when working outside the rather inflexible lines of current academia. That the words 'inflexible' and 'academia' may appear in the same sentence gives me, and should give you, much cause for concern. Let's vindicate common sense instead and re-imagine how we approach reputation.

#### 14 August 2018 / WHEN CULTURE ONLY INTERESTS WOMEN, PATRIARCHY WINS

A couple of months ago, *El Confidencial* published an interview with former film director and screenwriter Manuel Gutiérrez Aragón ([https://www.elconfidencial.com/cultura/2018-06-15/manuel-gutierrez-aragon-ojo-cielo-libro\\_1577791/](https://www.elconfidencial.com/cultura/2018-06-15/manuel-gutierrez-aragon-ojo-cielo-libro_1577791/)). The occasion was the publication of his new novel *El ojo del cielo*, which focuses on four women in his native Cantabria's Valle del Pas. I saw the interview by mid-July before taking my summer break but some pressing matter prevented me from reading it. Its title, however, "La cultura ya sólo interesa a las mujeres", has kept nagging me these past weeks.

I got the impression from that title that Gutiérrez Aragón was showing his bitterness about how his very manly work is only appreciated by us women, those inferior creatures. It turns out, reading the interview as I should have done, that he's expressing the opposite belief: regrettably, men are no longer interested in culture and, so, it's thanks to women's generous dedication that culture survives. Blame the journalist (Marta Medina) for distorting the interviewee's words, hoping to catch more clicks on the link.

Gutiérrez Aragón (Torrelavega, 1942) has an illustrious career as film director and screenwriter, spanning the four decades between 1969 and 2007. He announced his retirement from cinema in 2008, winning the following year the prestigious Premio Herralde with his novel *La vida antes de marzo*. The new one, *El ojo del cielo*, is his fourth title. As an artist devoted to cinema, Gutiérrez Aragón has been the winner of an impressive list of major awards, among them a Festival of Berlin's Silver Bear for *Camada negra* (1977), two Festival of San Sebastián's Conchas de Oro for *Demonios en el jardín* (1982) and *La mitad del cielo* (1986), and a Goya to the Best Adapted Screenplay for *Jarrapellejos* (1988). He has a Medalla de Oro de la Academia de las Artes y las Ciencias Cinematográficas de España and the Medalla de Oro al Mérito en las Bellas Artes (both 2012). Why is all this information worth transmitting? A simple

reason: if he feels pessimistic about the present and the future of culture because of its low allure for men, we need to listen, for he is a *man of culture*, and no doubt about it.

In the interview, Gutiérrez Aragón acknowledges that the great dreams of the Transition generation are gone, and that the youngest generation (the ones we call Millennials) must feel very frustrated. He's very critical of directors like J.A. Bayona and Alejandro Amenábar and of their anglophone fantasy films, and quite bitter with a film business environment that would deny the likes of Ingmar Bergman any chance to direct. Even if winning the lottery allowed Gutiérrez Aragón to make a new film, this would mean nothing, he says, as nobody really cares for culture. Except women. "Right now," he explains, "theatre, cinema and the novel are dominated by feminine consumption. I don't think women have a particularly feminine and exclusive outlook; rather, they are keeping the flame of culture alive, women care about reading and going to the cinema. They are the ones in the book clubs, the ones you see on the seats". Well, thanks for noticing!!

Another article in *El Confidencial*, "Todos los museos vacíos de España" ([https://www.elconfidencial.com/cultura/2018-08-05/museos-vacios-espana-plan-desarrollo-publicos\\_1601237/](https://www.elconfidencial.com/cultura/2018-08-05/museos-vacios-espana-plan-desarrollo-publicos_1601237/)) presents the average visitor as a woman in her forties. She alone is maintaining most Spanish museums open while, above all, male teenagers, families with young children and senior citizens above 65 (unless they visit as part of a group) stay away from them. I recently saw the excellent exhibition on Auschwitz in Madrid (open until 7 October) and I did notice that there were some pairs of teen girl friends visiting but not of teen boys. Of course, this was no place to see families with young children and, so, there were few but I would say that there was a majority of women, many on their own. Most men were accompanied by a woman friend or partner.

This is a common pattern whenever I attend any cultural activity: all are full of ageing ladies like yours truly, and conspicuously empty of young men. I will also stress that whenever I see two or three men together you can bet they are gay, which shows that the ones fast losing interest in culture are not all men but, specifically, heterosexual men. If you push me a little, it will come out: the individuals with little interest in culture are the patriarchal men who, realising that they cannot control it and that their opinions are not revered, reject culture as the territory of women and gay men. Hardly a new idea, but there it is.

In contrast, back in the 1980s when I was a young girl, I doubt that any secondary school lacked a pair of male heterosexual friends who knew everything about culture, and often used a snobbish approach to flirting with the less enlightened pretty girls. You could see that these guys were not really interested in culture since they would not discuss it with the better learned girls, pretty or otherwise. It seems that as more and more girls started exploring culture on their own, the patriarchal male snobs stopped seeing the point of erudition. There is, by the way, a delicious mockery of the type in this wonderful film, *Lady Bird* (Greta Gerwig, 2017). Interestingly, odious Kyle is played by Timothée Chalamet, who did a great job of playing the only truly cultured

teen boy of recent fiction (novel and cinema): Elio in *Call Me by Your Name*. His story with Oliver, a young learned scholar in his twenties, is set in the 1980s. You can tell that today Elio would face a very hard time in high school, not so much for his sexual choices as for his truly amazing thirst for knowledge.

Culture, of course, comes in many manifestations and teen boys play a major role in many of its aspects, such as sports (including e-sports), music, comic and illustration, videogames, design, and so on. I assume that some teen boys still feel the urge to write Literature in any of its levels and genres, paint and sculpt, play classical music, sing opera, dance ballet... and all the many aspects of fine culture. I will also assume that increasing homophobia and misogyny are making it harder than ever for heterosexual teen boys to pursue careers which require great erudition in one aspect of high culture, unless their families, of course, are equally erudite. Despite *Billy Eliot* (2000), every time I attend my nieces' dance festivals I see two boys for every forty girls, and you can tell which one asked his parents to register him for ballet school and which one did not (and was possibly forced by his mum).

I think I'll blame in particular the obtuse masculinist sub-culture we import from the United States for the current terrifying transformation of European young men into active snubbers of culture, which is worse than being ignorant for no fault of your own. Constant bullying into patriarchal illiteracy is fast undermining young men's contact with ambitious creativity and fast spreading the idea that learning can only appeal to women and gay men—never mind that some gays are also patriarchal and that not at all are highly sensitive, as the stereotype goes. The same applies to women: not all are eager to visit museums or jump at the chance of going to the theatre. I would say that the ones more interested in culture are a sub-set in each social class, with, perhaps, the main group in the upper working-class and the middle-class but not really in the upper classes. Just an educated guess.

A reader reacted to Gutiérrez Aragón's comments complaining against political correctness and its imposition of a general mediocrity; despite the neutral nick, you can easily see that this is a man complaining against the production of culture by women, which is telling because Aragón refers specifically to women's consumption, not production, of culture. Women have always been, one way or another, great consumers of culture, even when they were allowed to approach it only in small numbers. What is happening, then, is not really that women are flooding the territory of culture but that men are withdrawing at a ridiculous fast pace that will leave them stranded in the tiniest possible corner.

The Japanese universities that have fraudulently limited female students' presence in their Schools of Medicine, with a 20-30% cap, (<https://www.ft.com/content/54e98c1e-9c54-11e8-9702-5946bae86e6d>) have been protecting, obviously, men's entitlement to this area of knowledge. In the School of Humanities where I work, in contrast, young men have withdrawn willingly, leaving culture in the hands of their female peers in an 80%-20% proportion, or worse (for them, not for the young women). Funnily, many universities are running campaigns to increase the presence of female graduates above 20% in degrees like Engineering but nobody is telling young men that they should be

interested in culture and in the Humanities. And they should, if only because a truly thriving culture must integrate a diversity of voices, and the male ones are also needed—without the patriarchal discourse. This is not mere political correctness but an active anti-patriarchal stance and plain logic: diversity cannot be built on a hierarchical basis, and this is what patriarchy is about, maintaining power-hungry hierarchy and privileging just a few.

The problem is that we are importing, also from the United States, a paralyzing model of male behaviour. Gutiérrez Aragón himself declares that, although he has written about women in some of his screenplays, he would not have focused on us if he had started his new novel after the #metoo campaign. The point of the campaign, however, is to out the harassers secretly dominating all areas of public life, including culture, not to gag all men into silence. You might like to see John Oliver's interview with Professor Anita Hill (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dHiAls8loz4>), the woman who was so appallingly ill-treated back in 1991, when she outed U.S. Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas as a sexual predator. When Oliver tells her that many men are positively afraid of making a mistake which women might use against them, she coolly replies that only harassers should be afraid. The #metoo campaign has its dangers but the men who feel harassed by it should start considering how harassment has curtailed women's lives, also in the domain of culture.

I bring this topic here up because there are many U.S. men claiming that the only solution for the #metoo 'problem' is a total separation of the gender spheres, not at all what is needed. This sounds, rather, like a poor excuse to retrench into ultra-patriarchal circles and end up creating new mutually exclusive cultures. They already exist, of course. As I have already written here, you don't see middle-aged women queuing to see the latest Hollywood blockbuster or yelling with excitement at gamers' conventions. But we all know this is not a problem because we are not wanted there anyway. The problem is the opposite: the increasing absence of (young) men in the kind of culture appealing to values which are not male-centred and patriarchal.

The article about the empty Spanish museums mentions a programme by the Museo Nacional de Escultura in Valladolid to attract male visitors: children visiting with their schools are given free tickets to visit the museum again with their father (not their mother!). I know what you are all thinking: most little girls will propose the plan to their fathers and charm them into accepting it; fewer little boys will try and even fewer will succeed. You can imagine their fathers. The day this Valladolid museum is crowded with father-son pairs will bring a victory for culture and a loss for patriarchy. This may sound odd, but, then, these are odd days in the anti-patriarchal frontline.

## **21 August 2018 / 46 VOLUMES, 200 HOURS: BENITO PÉREZ GALDÓS' *EPISODIOS NACIONALES***

I have now completed the project of reading Benito Pérez Galdós' five series of novels generically known as the *Episodios nacionales* (1872-1912), which I started back in

January 2017. I could have finished earlier but I have delayed reading the last series about half a year because I wanted to keep attached to Galdós' lucid view of 19<sup>th</sup> century Spanish History for as long as possible. It has been an immense pleasure, though also a disheartening lesson about who we are here in this corner of Southern Europe.

To my surprise, when I told a colleague in the Spanish Department that I was about to finish the *Episodios*—a big smile on my face, hoping the revelation would bring a torrent of positive comment—he asked me with total puzzlement ‘but why? You’re a specialist in English Studies!’. I must have looked so confused that he added ‘I mean, few researchers in Spanish Literature have read the *Episodios*, so why have you put yourself through the task?’ This left me utterly flabbergasted. If a colleague in the Spanish Department announced to me that s/he had read the complete works of Charles Dickens, I would offer congratulations, not commiseration. Poor don Benito, everyone still believes he is a ‘garbancero’—a chickpea merchant!—as Valle Inclán maliciously called him. Or perhaps with a little bit of envy, who knows?

I have read the *Episodios* using my Kindle (the 46 novels are available from dominipublico.com in a rather nice edition) and, so, I cannot tell how thick each paper volume is. The 2005 Alianza paperback edition is about 200 pages per book. Considering that I read fast, each episode has taken me between 3 and 4 hours, a bit longer in some cases. To round numbers, that's 184 hours or, if you want to stretch it a bit more, let's say 200 hours. That would be the equivalent of about 100 films or 267 TV series episodes (45 minutes each, American style). This is like watching all of *The X-Files* (150 episodes) and *Lost* (118), which I have done, to my immense regret in the case of *Lost* (because of its moronic ending). I'm offering this information, silly as it may sound, in case you might consider joining the club of the *Episodios*' admirers, whether you're a specialist in Spanish Literature, in Quantum Physics, or a plain reader.

Galdós' *Episodios* are a *series*, and although they were published along four decades (which means that original readers in their twenties finished them in their sixties!) they can be read as a single story, as I have done, in the same spirit we watch series on the screen. Reading, of course, is more demanding than watching, no matter how easily Galdós' prose can be followed (which does not mean it is simple), but, on the whole, I get the impression that writers like Dickens and Galdós prefigure somehow current TV series. Today perhaps they would have been series' screenwriters, something quite easy to imagine because both loved the theatre and were proficient at writing dialogue, on which all screen writing logically depends.

Reading the *Episodios* is a double experience in readerly endurance (and satisfaction) and in historical awareness. Galdós had an obvious didactic intention, expressed on these two fronts: he combines the specific lives of his attractive characters (I mean as rounded creations, not as physically beautiful persons, though they often are) with his cleverly managed History lessons. Instead of directly placing well-known historical figures at the centre of each episode, his protagonists are fictional characters in touch with their real-life counterparts one way or another. This creates a wonderful effect,



for the *Episodios* deal both with the History shaped by the great figures and with the history of the more ordinary people around them—the novels are not a dry lesson enlivened by using historical characters in a puppet-like fashion but a slice of life. At the same time, Galdós' technique incites you to consider what it would be like to turn current political life into fiction in this way, with the likes of King Felipe VI, Carles Puigdemont or Pablo Iglesias in the pages of a novel focused on someone very much like any of us, working as our delegate in the texts.

Most likely, the *Episodios* are best appreciated in a second reading, for the cast of characters is simply impressive and I suspect that many connections between them are missed in the process of simply getting on with the long reading. Many things have surprised me, above all that Galdós' is far more open about sexuality than one may imagine for a late 19<sup>th</sup>/early 20<sup>th</sup> century Spanish writer, not only regarding his male characters but also the women. Another strong point is his ability to connect high and low, so that as readers we get to meet monarchs but also many marginal characters, with some even rising from rags to riches along several episodes.

The historical span is, of course, also enormous, for the series opens with *Trafalgar* (the battle took place in 1805) and closes with *Cánovas* (Antonio Cánovas del Castillo was the Spanish 'Presidente del Consejo de Ministros' several times between 1875 and 1897). This also means that whereas in the case of the first novel Galdós was writing about events happened 65 years before, the time lag had been reduced to 15 years when he wrote the last one. Incidentally, it must be noted that the fifth series is incomplete, running only to six rather than ten volumes, though I have been unable to find an explanation for why Galdós abandoned the *Episodios*. His last decade (he died in 1920) was particularly intense, specially after being elected an MP for his native Gran Canaria in 1914 (as a republican) when he was an ill, blind man past 70. That might be explanation enough.

The main doubt I felt before embarking on my reading of the *Episodios* was whether they demand from the reader a sound knowledge of Spanish History. I have not done any systematic study of this area since my years in secondary school and I'm far more confident naming the periods and monarchs of British History than of Spanish History. Our 19<sup>th</sup> century is, besides, an unbelievable chaos, with constant changes in the Government and administration, the series of civil wars provoked by the absolutist ultra-Catholic Carlists, and the love-hate relationship with the reigning Borbón dynasty. This resulted in the exile of Isabel II, the crowning of Italian Amadeo de Saboya as her unlikely replacement, and the disastrous first Republic—a complete shambles. Galdós, as I soon saw, has a transparent informative style and, so, I needed no textbook on the basics of 19<sup>th</sup> century Spanish History. I have used Wikipedia often, sometimes to check that specific events happened as Galdós narrates them (they did), other times to take a look at portraits of real-life characters. A scant knowledge of the 19<sup>th</sup> century complex political background is, then, no excuse but perhaps even an advantage to follow Galdós' excellent History lessons.

As I have noted, the *Episodios* cover basically the whole 19<sup>th</sup> century. Read at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup>, with the memory of the calamitous 20<sup>th</sup> century still recent and



with Pedro Sánchez' Government struggling to bury Francisco Franco's remains elsewhere (an anonymous ditch on any lonely road seems ideal), Galdós' voice sounds poignant and ominous. The mere presentation of the pathetic, backward Spain he describes is depressing enough but the occasional authorial comments about, for instance, the absurdity of the carnage caused by the Carlist wars, highlight how we are collectively condemned to repeating the same mistakes. You see the Civil War (1936-39) coming already in the first Carlist War (1833-40), and I marvel that the Borbón monarchs have managed to stay on the throne in view of how their ancestors misbehaved.

Although the fifth series was never finished, as I have noted, the last novel, *Cánovas*, contains an often quoted pseudo-conclusion. Once Parliamentary monarchy had been installed under Alfonso XII and a democratic two-party system set, with Cánovas on the conservative side and Práxedes Mateo Sagasta on the liberal one, Galdós concludes: "Los dos partidos que se han concordado para turnar pacíficamente en el poder, son dos manadas de hombres que no aspiran más que a pastar en el presupuesto. Carecen de ideales, ningún fin elevado les mueve, no mejorarán en lo más mínimo las condiciones de vida de esta infeliz raza pobrísima y analfabeta. Pasarán unos tras otros dejando todo como hoy se halla, y llevarán a España a un estado de consunción que de fijo ha de acabar en muerte. No acometerán ni el problema religioso, ni el económico, ni el educativo; no harán más que burocracia pura, caciquismo, estéril trabajo de recomendaciones, favores a los amigos, legislar sin ninguna eficacia práctica, y adelante con los farolitos..." (original ellipsis)

The death foreseen in this passage, caused by the inaction of the two parties which these men headed, gave me a terrible chill, for, of course, this is the Civil War with its million dead, still 25 years ahead on the horizon when Galdós wrote these words. At the same time, the same ills still abound in current politics, though Spain is today richer and less illiterate. For all these reasons, I certainly would make the *Episodios* compulsory reading at least for aspiring politicians and then for the rest of us. As historian George Santayana once stated, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it". It is less than one year ago that I read the words 'Civil War' in relation to current Spain in the pages of *The Guardian*. An exaggeration, hopefully, but also a reminder that we are locked in the same conflicts that Galdós narrates and that brought so much misery 80 years ago.

Among recent academic work on the *Episodios* I'd like to mention Mary A. Kempen's PhD dissertation *Concepts of the Nation and Nationalism in Benito Galdós's Episodios Nacionales* (2007, U. Wisconsin). The same American university awarded a PhD to Glenn Ross Barr back in 1937 for his pioneering dissertation *A Census of the Characters of the Episodios Nacionales of Benito Pérez Galdós* (618 pages!). Checking Worldcat and other sources, it is easy to see that a great deal of the academic analysis of the *Episodios* has been produced in English by Hispanists in the United States. I'll add, for good measure, Mary Louise Coffey's *The Episodios Nacionales: A Sociological Study of the Historical N* (1997, Northwestern University).

In contrast, TESEO only offers three titles of dissertations on the *Episodios* written in Spain, all on partial aspects such as the press, communications and the most recent one, youth and childhood (2017). Happily, there is at least one notable collective volume, *La historia de España en Galdós: Análisis y procesos de elaboración de los Episodios nacionales* (U Vigo, 2012), edited by M. Dolores Troncoso Durán, Salvador García Castañeda and Carmen Luna Sellés. It seems, however, very little homage, on the whole, to Galdós' magnificent achievement from his fellow Spaniards. Perhaps he makes us feel uncomfortable with our shortcomings and he is easier to approach from other cultures, such as the United States.

Trust me: if you're minimally interested in understanding Spain, the *Episodios nacionales* are what you need. They're not a dried-up mummy but a living body, worth the effort of reading them—if that is an effort at all. Stay away from Netflix and use the 200 hours you were going to waste on all those series going nowhere to read Galdós' own unique series. Or bully Netflix into adapting the *Episodios*...

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