THE JOYS OF TEACHING LITERATURE

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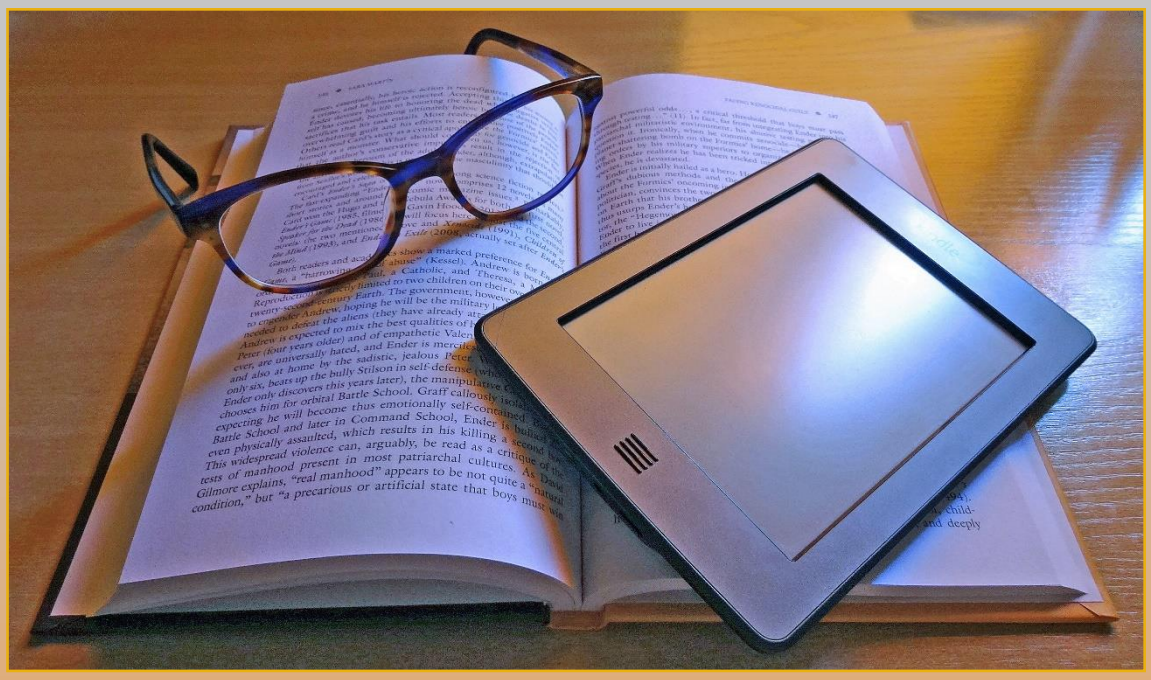

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Contents

PLEASE, NOTE:
These are the posts published in my blog *The Joys of Teaching Literature* (blogs.uab.cat/saramartinalegre/, since September 2010) between September 2019 and August 2020. The nine previous volumes are also available from http://ddd.uab.cat/record/116328.

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2 September 2019 / 'READ, READ, READ AND THEN WHAT?': GOOD QUESTION…

I'm beginning with this post the tenth year of this blog, started back in September 2010, with a certain feeling that blogging is already a thing of the past. As the yearly volumes accumulate (check https://ddd.uab.cat/record/116328), I see how text-based online platforms give way to image-based platforms, with Instagram in the lead, already replacing Twitter in everyone's preferences (the micro-blogging Tumblr is quite dead). I don't know who reads me, or how many of you there are, for I refuse to check my statistics, and anyway, I keep this blog for my own personal satisfaction (and sanity). Whoever you are, you do get my most deeply felt thanks! One more thing: I'm teaching only one semester a year, thanks to my university's fair and legal application of the 2012 Government decree to support research (popularly known as 'Decreto Wert'). This is the reason why the blog offers currently fewer posts about teaching and more about reading (and writing). I have even considered altering the title, but I'll let it be, though I think of it today as 'The Joys of (Teaching) Literature', still with the ironic sting in the tail.

Let's begin. Reading this summer Susan Orlean's non-fiction bestseller *The Library Book* (a beguiling account of the devastating fire at the Los Angeles Central Library in 1986), I was oddly impressed by a small scene. Incidentally, you may watch Orlean's interview with Bel Olid on *The Library Book* at Barcelona's recent Kosmopolis (last March) here: https://www.cccb.org/en/multimedia/videos/susan-orlean-and-bel-olid/231171. In the scene mentioned, Orlean meets a worker (a black middle-aged woman, though this is not much relevant), who spends eight hours a day packing and unpacking books. She tells a flabbergasted Orlean that she never reads any books for you 'read, read, and read, and then what?' This woman's dismissal of reading caught me in the middle of an intense summer reading binge and truly shook me. What, indeed, am I doing reading so much? Even my fellow Literature teachers tell me that I read a lot… because, guess what?, even they prefer watching TV series, which I find unbearably boring. You 'watch, watch, watch, and then what?'

Orlean's candid interviewee apparently believes that reading has a purpose, a teleological function aimed at reaching a target. Naturally, this is only the case in higher education degrees, for, quite rightly, in English it is said that a person 'reads' to obtain a BA or MA (in Spanish we 'study'). Apart from that, reading is a pleasurable habit which simply ends with death: possibly, the most adequate answer to this woman's question is 'and then you die'. She has, however, the intuition of something else. Why do people read at all during personal time which they could employ in many other activities? Several answers occur to me. To be able to claim that they have read this and that book, to enhance their experience of life by adding other persons' experiences (whether real or fictional), to learn about whatever interests them. Fundamentally, out of curiosity and to feel brainy pleasure. It might well be that this woman's life is so rich that she needn't access other persons' experiences (or that ink is a barrier to her in that sense); also, that she is satisfied enough with her knowledge and feels no urge to increase it. Fair enough, though, evidently, that she feels in this way surrounded by millions of books

is chilling. Maybe she is overwhelmed by the riches in the Central Library, which are for others, like author Susan Orlean, paradise on Earth.

But, again, why do people read? The current understanding is that the reading habits acquired in early childhood thanks to devoted parents and educators are lost with the onset of adolescence (which seems to begin at ten these days…) when compulsory reading for school takes times off reading for pleasure. I would say that this only happens in the case of children whose reading for pleasure is never fully established as a habit, for lack of sufficiently strong skills. These deficient skills (we teach children to read too late) make compulsory reading a chore, even a torture, which is not balanced by pleasure reading. Those of us who simply cannot help reading usually develop a bag of tricks to put up with compulsory reading. Thus, throughout my graduate years I used to keep at hand a book I very much wanted to read and allow myself to grab it only as a reward for having read the stuff I hated. What? You really think that Literature teachers love reading ALL kinds of books? You must be joking…

The issue which appears to be much under-researched is what exactly triggers the pleasure of reading in the minority of avid readers. I'm sure that neuroscientists have already proven that reading results in the building up of synaptic connections that make our brain work faster, to speak informally. What we don't know is what causes a child to become addicted to reading and thus begin the life-long process of adding books to the personal list of readerly conquests. Avid readers often speak of compulsion and of the unstoppable need to read anything to satisfy the craving. I do know that chain-reading has little to do with the experience of most average readers, who tend to read just a few books a year. Yet, my assumption is that if you decode what lies behind the most extreme cases of chain-reading then you might help others to feel happier reading. There must be a sort of nicotine in reading, as there is in smoking, if you get my drift. Or, if you want something less toxic, then endorphins like those generated by exercising.

If you read enthusiastic websites, such as Serious Reading and its post "30 Reasons to Read" (https://seriousreading.com/blog/283-30-reasons-to-read-books.html) you will find there a nice collection of the positive consequences brought on by reading, though not a fully tested cause why reading gives pleasure. The authors claim, by the way, that reading acts like callisthenics for the brain and can help prevent mental disease and Alzheimer's, which is not quite true but sounds nice. It is, at any rate, a constant cause of dismay for me to see that the barrage of advice intended to keep our bodies in full health never mentions the benefits of reading from a book thirty minutes every day. Or of listening to audiobooks as an alternative. The brain, I think, is the most neglected vital organ in our bodies, particularly as regards its specific pleasures. You hear plenty about how the brain is the most potent sexual organ, but you never hear about the pleasures that are most intimately connected with our neurons, possibly because they have the word 'intellectual' attached to it. And that is always a downer.

I think that I am calling for an erotics of reading which makes sense of the pleasure that the written word elicits from certain brains, and which must be connected with the language centres. The more conservative kind of reader might say at this point

that, logically, the pleasure of reading is linked to the linguistic artistry of Literature but in my own view (and experience) beautiful verse or prose increases a pleasure that is already there, in the contact with the paper or the screen. Simple prose has its rewards, whereas complex texts offer other rewards. The extremely arid volumes that many students of, say, the Law or Physics, must not just read but also study bring the satisfaction of knowledge gained, which is essential for that 'read, read, and read, and then what?' to make sense. With a caveat: if your pleasure reading tends towards storytelling you will gain great insight into personal experience beyond your own but not necessarily be made unhappy; if you read for knowledge, your habit will take you to a clearer understanding of the world, which usually brings wonder and awe, but that may also bring disappointment and sadness, perhaps a silent fury against the sorry state of Homo Sapiens' decadent civilization.

After about forty years as an avid reader, what I find most engaging in books is their interconnectedness. How one book leads to the next one, and that to a whole new field you had never heard about but want to explore. In fact, I recommend to everyone that you free yourself from narrative, which is what 90% of readers enjoy, and set out to navigate other waters. I had always disliked autobiography and memoirs, preferring the superior narrative skills of novelists, but I have suddenly seen their appeal; the same applies to History books, and to the volumes aimed at making science accessible to lay persons. I don't know whether this is an experience shared by most avid readers, but as I age, I feel more inclined towards the books that bring new knowledge and not only new stories.

You read, read, and read, and then feel ecstatic to discover that there is much more to learn and enjoy reading until your time on Earth runs out. Don't let anyone say that you wasted it.

9 September 2019 / THE DANCE OF TIME: ONE STEP FORWARD, THREE SIDEWAYS, ALWAYS RUNNING BEHIND

Today I begin with a guessing game. You, kind reader, need to guess the gender of the writer who penned the words I am about to quote, and when they were written: "Boys and girls should be taught respect for each other's liberty; they should be made to feel that nothing gives one human being rights over another and that jealousy and possessiveness kill love". More follows: "They should be taught that to bring another human being into the world is a very serious matter, only to be undertaken when the child will have a reasonable prospect of health, good surroundings, and parental care". And this: "But they should be also be taught methods of birth control, so as to insure that children shall only come when they are wanted". Sex education, the author adds, will also prevent the transmission of venereal disease and increase perceptibly the chances for sex to be mutually satisfactory and one of the true foundations of love. And, yes indeed, these words refer to heterosexual relations but are applicable to any person, I think.

Got it? What's your guess? (Don't use Google!)

The author is English philosopher and activist Bertrand Russell (1872-1970) and the words can be found in his pamphlet *What I Believe*, published in 1925. Correct: that's ninety-four years ago, when my late grandparents were young people. Was, then, Russell ahead of his time? No, he was not. Considering that what he asks for, a solid sex education (a gender education we would say today), is what we aspire to but has not been firmly implanted yet, I will argue that we are the ones behind our times. In fact, I want to make a very simple point: since ninety-six years is about three generations, it seems to me that the dance of times moves one step forward and three sideways before a further step forward is taken, though this is possibly four. I don't believe that the younger generation (those between zero and thirty, please bear with me…) have got it right at last.

I blush to acknowledge that I know next to nothing about Russell, except that his name comes popping up every time I read a piece on the growth of pacifism during WWI. I'm currently making a list of men who can be called anti-patriarchal (for a talk I need to give this Autumn) and this is the reason why I have decided to read some of Russell's works. *What I Believe* is supposed to be a good introduction and I certainly recommend it. Next on my list is *Marriage and Morals* (1929) and *Power: A New Social Analysis* (1938). As I write these titles I marvel at when they were written: at the end of the 1920s, when Marie Stopes' efforts in sex education and the aftermath of WWI for the young changed love for good, and the end of the 1930s, when Hitler was getting his armies ready to subdue Europe. You know the curse: may you live in interesting times.

This post is not, however, about Russell but, as I have mentioned, about the shuffling dance of times. It is everywhere. I'm reading Isaac Asimov's thrilling detective novel *The Caves of Steel* (1954) and, in essence, he already gives in that work a pretty complete insight into the threat that humaniform robots will be for human employment in the next two decades. We need to insist that science fiction should be called speculative fiction. Another novel I have (re)read these days, Tanith Lee's romantic *The Silver Metal Lover*, repeats the same Asimovian arguments almost thirty years later (it was published in 1982). Today, the anxiety-ridden articles about the impact of robotics on jobs are commonplace.

You might argue that these articles refer to a completely different situation, for the robots in Asimov's tales (which he started back in 1940) or in Lee's YA romance are fantasies, unlike the ones in our factories and homes, soon to be as humaniform as these authors imagined. But that's not a correct assumption: in relation to what Asimov knew, as a scientist, that would eventually happen, we are behind our own times, as we are in relation to Russell's gender ideology. What we should know, in short, is to a great extent already available if only we knew where to look. The dance of times has more sideways steps than forward leaps.

Why is this the case? The answer is too complex to expose it in under two thousand words, but I'll venture some arguments. I will leave aside the most palpable obstacle: the coercion methods used by those who fear the progressive views defended

by others, and who do all they can to neutralize them. Russell lost important academic jobs and was imprisoned in his native United Kingdom for his views (not in Soviet Russia, to name the villain of his time!); the repression he suffered caused his views to be also repressed until the time was ripe for them to be welcome, about fifty years later. One step forward, three sideways.

In the case of Asimov, and of all those other authors who write about science and technology in fiction and non-fiction, what is at stake is that stubborn streak by which we tend to see their view of the world as irrelevant to the apparently superior matter of the feelings. Go to Japan, however, and see how the spectacular growth of the post-85 demographic is pushing researchers and engineers to develop sophisticated assistential robots–and consider the complicated, unchartered, new feelings of the families involved. The supposition that human feelings are universal and immutable since Shakespeare described them is blinding us to how technology is altering the heart of the species. Let me be corny for once.

The problem with the sideways dance of the times, supposing it is not backwards, also connects with the design of human genetics and of the brain. I hope Elon Musk is not reading this, for the last thing I want is give him new ideas (tremble at Neuralink!!!). In all I have read about transhumanism (that is, the direct intervention on the evolution of Homo Sapiens until we become a posthuman new species), I have never come across the problem of how slow and patchy education is, both individual and of Homo Sapiens. Let's see if I can explain myself.

Think, to begin with, of academic production (and allow me to be a little silly, or obnoxious if you prefer). When I publish an academic article, my feeling is that now the world knows all about the issue I have dealt with, when in fact only I do know about it and perhaps the five people who might read my article (and that's an overtly optimistic outlook). It shouldn't be like this. There should be some magical way of making the whole species take one step forward at the same time, for it takes an awful lot of time and effort to educate yourself.

School is supposed to imprint the young with an overview of the state of knowledge for each generation so that this odd thing called 'general culture' exists. Yet, even persons like yours truly, who are constantly reading and studying, find themselves wondering all the time 'how come I never heard about this?' The solution is endless self-education, but it seems to me that every time I fill in a gap, another one opens beneath my feet and the impression that 'I should know about that' deepens. As a teacher, I can pass onto my students a little of what I know (if they're willing to receive it) but this is very slow-going and by no means uniform for all of them.

It would be great if we could inherit via our genes not only the hardware but also the software, so that if your parent has accumulated a great deal of knowledge about some matter or skill you could have immediate access to it, instead of learning in the same way they did. In a similar crazy vein (I don't know what's wrong with me today), I wish Musk would develop an AI that would constantly update us about what we should know, so that we could download up-dated knowledge straight into our brains. I know,

I know: that's his excuse for Neuralink to eavesdrop on our thoughts. What I propose runs the risk of being a fascistic project for, I grant it, the last thing we need is an AI telling us what we should know. So, no more about it. But still…

On the whole, then, and excuse me for saying once more what is only obvious, the slow march of education benefits those who want to stop its progress even more drastically. Latin 'educare' means to bring forth and I always imagine a path along which people move in their search for knowledge, which is there somewhere beyond the horizon. What I realize is that this path is strewn with plenty that gets left behind because neither the school system nor the individual can adequately accommodate and transmit it. The selection is simply brutal.

Much is abandoned for good reason (thankfully we need not discuss anymore how many angels the tip of a needle can fit) but much is neglected that could speed up progress, by which I mean full access to democratic citizenship and equal rights, not technoscience. This neglect is inevitable but not for this less frustrating. Sometimes, when I tell my students about some key idea which I have just discovered the day before, I feel that I may be short-circuiting the slow dance of time (they know at age 20 an idea which I have discovered at age 53) but I know it's just an illusion.

In fact, things are much worse, for Russell was re-phrasing in 1925 many ideas already expressed by Mary Wollstonecraft in 1798, and by the first feminists calling themselves by that name from 1848 onwards. And what Asimov has to say on robotics comes straight from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, whose pessimism he reverts to a great extent (Elon Musk: please make R. Daneel Olivaw instead of Tesla cars!). In short, we think we live in the most advanced times but, since education works as it does and we are only limited human beings, we actually live about two hundred years behind our times in relation to what the world could be like. Being optimistic.

So much for the idea of progress. By the way, Elijah Baley, the protagonist of Asimov's *The Caves of Steel* comes to the conclusion, after being awed by robot Daneel Olivaw but discovering that he feels no curiosity, that this is the quality that makes us human. Be curious, my friend!

17 September 2019 / WHEN DID THE FUTURE DIE? SCATTERED THOUGHTS ON PALEOFUTURISM AND UTOPIA

Sharing coffee with a friend who also loves science fiction, we end up wondering when the idea of the future died. The media have entered a phase which I can only call 'punk' (after the Sex Pistols' 1977 hit song 'No Future'), for its intense focus on the oncoming climate-change related apocalypse. Perhaps not oncoming but already happening, as the brutal hurricanes in the Caribbean and the devastating floods here in Spain suggest. For the younger generations, like our university students, the perception that the world is doomed, and the future fast shrinking must be commonplace; it might explain their presentism and their reluctance to believe in making plans long-term. But for those of

us old enough to have been children between the 1950s and the 1970s, the impression is that we have been robbed of a better version of the future which we had been promised, above all by science and its fantasy branch, science fiction.

Commenting on this conversation with my husband, he played for me the delicious official video for Pet Shop Boys' "This Used to Be the Future" (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=As5vxxiPRUM). This great song, in which Neil Tennant sings with Phil Oakey (lead singer of The Human League), was released back in 2009, as part of the highly acclaimed double CD *Yes*. And, yes, it encapsulates to perfection what I feel but cannot articulate so succinctly.

The complete lyrics can be found here (https://petshopboys.co.uk/lyrics/this-used-to-be-the-future), just let me quote some stanzas: "I can recall utopian thinking/ bold mission statements and tightening of belts/ demolition of familiar landmarks/ promises made and deals that were dealt (…) / But that future was exciting / science fiction made fact / now all we have to look forward to/ is a sort of suicide pact". The agents of destruction in the song are not rapacious capitalism and environmental catastrophe but religion and nuclear power. The Pet Shop Boys sing that "Science had promised to make us a new world / religion and prejudice disappear" and I suppose that many religious people feel offended hearing this; the fact, though, is that one of the promises of mid-20th century futurism was the disappearance of superstition in all its forms, swept away by science. As for prejudice, as my friend ironized, back in the 1970s the future used to be about constant progress in quality of life but all it has brought in the 21st century is Facebook and rampant online trolling.

Back to the song, these two lines sent a chill down my spine: "I can remember planning for leisure / living in peace and freedom from fear", for I also remember that. The feeling was short-lived, starting in November 1989, when the Berlin Wall fell and ending on 9/11 2001, with the terrorist attacks against the Twin Towers in New York and the Pentagon in Virginia which killed more than 3,000 people. I must spell this out because these tragic events happened already eighteen years ago, which means that the generation now reaching its majority (our first-year students) have no personal memories of them. This factor was the focus of the news around the commemoration this year, which also reported the steady trickle of deaths among first responders and reconstruction personnel caused by poisoning due to the toxic debris.

My friend argued that the future did not die on that day but earlier, with the capitalist alliance between Margaret Thatcher (UK Prime Minister 1979-1990) and Ronald Reagan (US President 1981-1989). In his view, their coordinated onslaught against public spending and their enthusiastic privatization of almost everything put an end to the big dreams that can only be financed without benefit in mind. I grant this, but I want to make the point that even so, in the long decade between 1989 and 2001, and especially during the mandate of Bill Clinton (1993-2001), there was a glimmer of hope. I do not forget the first Gulf War (1990-1), which happened during George Bush's Presidency (1989-1993), but at least that horror belonged to a new climate in which mutually assured destruction (yes, known by the acronym MAD) using nuclear devices seemed over. Of course, the 1986 Chernobyl explosion, now brought back to public

awareness by HBO's series, stressed that nuclear power for civilian uses can be as dangerous as nuclear weapons for military use. Yet, I should think that nobody is considering today starting a major nuclear war (I hope this is not the kind of statement that in hindsight will sound totally stupid).

For all these reasons, 9/11 was very difficult to understand at the time when it was happening. As I'm sure I have already narrated here, I spent the morning of 11 September 2001 at the cinema, making the most of the national Catalan holiday. My mind was still haunted by the ghosts of Alejandro Amenábar's atmospheric *Los Otros* when I switched on the TV to watch the 15:00 news on the national Spanish channel, TVE. The attack was timed to make big news in the United States at 9:00 and I think now that possibly Spain must have been the first European country to broadcast it live, as it coincided with our *Telediario*.

I was standing up before the TV, trying to make sense of what presenter Ana Blanco was describing as an accident, after the first plane crashed. By the time we all saw the second plane crash live, it was evident that this was no accident. My legs gave way and I found myself fallen on my sofa, physically scared as I have never been in my life. It was all so eerie and disconcerting that I expected Blanco to announce at any point that an alien invasion had started–that Roland Emmerich's *Independence Day* (1996) was happening in real life. Even when it was understood that two planes had been hijacked and used as weapons against the Towers (another one hit the Pentagon, and a fourth one crashed when the passage repelled the kidnapping), it was impossible to understand who and why had done it. Still to this day, every time I switch on the news, I brace myself for some world-shattering event like that one or worse.

In his 1998 version of *Godzilla*, Roland Emmerich–a German director obsessed with wrecking America on film–had already fantasized with the destruction of New York, offering images quite similar to those from 9/11. The first film he released after the attacks was, however, quite different and certainly worth watching again today. In *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) the villains that end the future as we hoped it would exist are not aliens, monsters, or terrorists but unbridled capitalism, the origin of the unrestrained pollution that starts a new Ice Age. Funnily, this is not global but a phenomenon that only destroys the United States and most of the Northern hemisphere, leaving then some hope for the rest of the world. The first film in the family-oriented franchise *Ice Age* had been launched two years before, in 2002, and I am now wondering whether this was part of the *zeitgeist* or a frivolous reaction to the first warnings issued by concerned scientists. Emmerich's film, already fifteen years old, was, arguably, another nail in the coffin of the future killed by 9/11 or the beginning of the dystopian cycle trapping us today.

Searching for information on the Pet Shop Boys' official video for "This Used to Be the Future", which is an amazing montage of futuristic images from the 1950s and 1960s, I have come across the concept of paleofuturism (see https://paleofuture.com/ and https://paleofuture.gizmodo.com/). This refers to the exploration of the ways in which the future was imagined in the past in order to check what has actually been developed and what has fallen into the limbo of the things never invented. A wonderful

play by Joan Yago, currently on stage at Escenari Joan Brossa of Barcelona, and simply called *The Future*, uses paleofuturism in its opening section to stress how our need to imagine the future clashes with actual events. Yago's play asks the same question as the Pet Shop Boys' song but answers it with a slightly more optimistic attitude. If we cannot imagine utopia again, Yago warns, we're lost. Homo Sapiens needs to look forward to a better life both individually and collectively for without some idea of progress we regress. This connects, oddly, with the new book by educator Andreu Navarra, *Devaluación Continua*, in which he warns that current trends in pedagogy and the pressure of the social networks are creating a new Middle Age in the classroom, meaning a generation of cyber-serfs that do not see beyond the day-to-day. This possibly has something to do with the serious lack of future engineers in our universities (as noted by Spanish newspapers last week) and, what is worse, with the lack of a greater vision for the world that can oppose the messianic plans of Elon Musk and company.

Perhaps, playwright Joan Yago hints, if we checked what the future looked like in the past in a paleofuturistic spirit, we might manage to build a new utopia. The problem, I think, is not only that, as my friend suggested, no public institution has the capacity to engage us in a positive collective future but that our energies are too occupied by the possibility of total disaster to think clearly. Greta Thunberg and her generation should not be using their youth to stop catastrophe but to continue working for a utopia that could have been established for good in 1989, if not before Thatcher and Reagan. I agree with Yago that if we told ourselves 'this planet is going to be marvellous in two decades' instead of 'this planet is going to be dead in two decades' the promise of a better future could perhaps be rebuilt. Or this is just me being nostalgic of what the future used to be.

Let's give utopia a chance…

24 September 2019 / TIME AND J.B. PRIESTLEY: *I HAVE BEEN HERE BEFORE*

It seems that I have started this academic year in a metaphysical vein, concerned about time. Now it's the turn of John Boynton Priestley's suggestive play *I Have Been Here Before* (1937), which I have just seen in La Perla29's effective production. Directed by Sergi Belbel, using Martí Gallén's very good Catalan version, Priestley's play necessarily loses some nuances in translation, such as the distinctive Yorkshire accents of the rural inn where the action takes place. This is inevitable (happily, there was no question of adapting the setting to Catalonia) but I am a tad less happy with the title *Això ja ho he viscut* ('I have lived this before') because, if I am not mistaken, Priestley alludes to a poem by Dante Gabriel Rosetti in his own original title. I mean 'Sudden Light', written possibly in 1854 but first published in 1863. Here it is:

I have been here before,
But when or how I cannot tell:
I know the grass beyond the door,
The sweet keen smell,
The sighing sound, the lights around the shore.

You have been mine before,—
How long ago I may not know:
But just when at that swallow's soar
Your neck turn'd so,
Some veil did fall,—I knew it all of yore.

Has this been thus before?
And shall not thus time's eddying flight
Still with our lives our love restore
In death's despite,
And day and night yield one delight once more?

This is the exact topic of the play: the possibility that our lives are somehow lived again and again and what we call *déjà vu* may be a glimpse into another version of the same events.

J.B. Priestly (1894-1984), a native of Yorkshire, first became quite famous thanks to a quintessentially English novel, *The Good Companions* (1929), of which there are several stage, film, TV, and radio adaptations. He wrote many other novels though never as successfully, including some in collaboration. Beginning with *Dangerous Corner* (1932), Priestly also wrote about twenty plays, among which *Time and the Conways* (1937) and *An Inspector Calls* (1945) are considered to be his best. These three plays, together with *I Have Been Here Before* and some others such as *Johnson over Jordan*, are known collectively as the 'Time Plays' because of the centrality of this question in them. Priestley, a marvellous graphomaniac, also wrote plenty of essays, among which I would highlight *The English* (1973). For a short spell during World War II (before the advent of television and when radio was paramount), Priestley was the most popular BBC broadcaster after Winston Churchill. Rumour claims that Churchill grew jealous and managed to have Priestley's Sunday evening series *Postscripts* (which ran for a few months in 1940) cancelled, on the grounds that the content was too left-wing.

I saw *Time and the Conways* in 1992, in the Catalan-language production directed by Mario Gas, later filmed and broadcast by TV3 (in 1993). I subsequently taught the play within our first-year introduction to 20th century English Literature, though I would agree that its melancholy tone is not something that eighteen-year-olds can easily enjoy. I loved it, anyway. In 2011 I saw another Catalan-language version of Priestly, this time *An Inspector Calls*, as *Truca un inspector*, with the great Josep Maria Pou as Inspector Goole ('ghoul' indeed…). Pou also directed this production. I saw then as well a 1982 version of the original play made for TV, which is still available on YouTube, and which I recommend very much: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yuHvGPpq8TM. I was back then teaching Shaw's *Pygmalion* and published here a post speculating about whether the missing Eva in Priestley's play could have been known to Eliza Doolittle, or be Eliza herself without Prof. Higgins (see http://blogs.uab.cat/saramartinalegre/2011/03/21/eva-and-eliza-mirror-images/).

Everyone who writes about the Time Plays necessarily mentions the two singular men who inspired Priestley with his own view of time. One was Russian-Ukranian esotericist Pyotr Demianovich Ouspenskii (better known as Peter D. Ouspensky). His volume *A New Model of the Universe*, originally written in Russian and translated in 1931 by R.R. Merton (for Routledge!), was an instant success. It caught Priestley's attention and that of many other British readers. The text is here, if you care to take a peek: https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.234054. Ouspensky (1878-1947) belongs in the same esoteric circles as Aleister Crowley (1875-1947) and his own master George Gurdjieff (1877?-1949), men inspired by the success of Madame Blavatsky's (1831-91) Theosophical Society (founded 1875). The other main text that influenced Priestley was *An Experiment with Time* (1927) by J.B. Dunne (1875-1949), which seemingly describes Dunne's own precognitive dreams and 'serialism', the theory of time that Priestley borrowed for *I Have Been Here Before*. Dunne, a pioneering aeronautical engineer and a philosopher, enjoyed a much higher credibility than occultist Ouspensky but his does not mean that his theories have been in any way validated by scientific research.

As I'm sure you're beginning to notice, both Ouspensky and Dunne wrote their books following the development of Quantum Mechanics, from 1900 onward. Priestley may not have known about Niels Bohr, Max Planck, or Albert Einstein but he was shaping in his Time Plays a view of existence that is not so different from current views of the multiverse based on Quantum Theory. I must confess that I seem to be, like most of us, stuck in a backward Newtonian understanding of physics and have not managed to grasp Quantum Mechanics beyond what I read in science fiction. I think, however, that Priestley's peculiar plays still work well in 2019 because, even though Ouspensky and Dunne mean nothing to contemporary audiences, we are increasingly familiar with the idea that ours is just one universe among many other versions of the multiverse.

In *I Have Been Here Before* Dr. Görtler, a German-Jewish refugee in Britain who has lost everything to persecution by his own university students (implicitly Nazi sympathisers), arrives in the inn I have mentioned expecting to meet three strangers whose lives are heading for disaster. Görtler has had a dream in which he has seen the dire consequences of the decisions these three persons are about to make, and he needs to divert them from that specific path so that they may take a better one. Görtler's dream is not a prophecy but, following Dunne, a memory of the version of his life in which disaster strikes. Also following Dunne, Priestley considers the idea that if, like Görtler, you train yourself to pay heed to your dreams, perhaps life can be better understood, and its worst events avoided if not in this life at least next time around.

Both Dunne and Görtler suppose that life is serial, that is to say, that you (or your soul if you prefer) are playing out a script that is repeated again and again each time you are born, and, hopefully, improved on. Not so in the case of dark souls bent on destructive ways. This is not quite the same as the idea of the multiverse, which supposes that infinite versions of the existing universe, including our own personal life, are happening simultaneously though with variations. Both theories make me extremely nervous, even more than Christian Heaven and Hell, but what I like about the Time Plays is that they invite me to think about the possibility that there is indeed a (loose) script in our lives, which might explain recognition. Let me explain…

In the play itself, Dr Görtler refers to *déjà vu* as an effect caused by the temporary dissociation of the two hemispheres of the brain. Current science still goes in that direction, connecting besides this phenomenon with forgotten memories recalled from dreams. What I am arguing is that science has insufficient knowledge of both dreams and *déjà vu*. Typically, all kinds of esoteric nonsense step in whenever science makes insufficiently convincing claims, trying to mask its ignorance, but I am not backing here the paranormal. Priestley forces me to think about events that are strange but that do happen in our lives, mainly that clear impression that you already know some person you have just met. Or the chill you get when you know that the words which you're about to say will introduce a turning point in your own life or that of your interlocutor. As for dreams, I do not believe that they have prophetic value in a magical sense, or even in the far more ordinary sense that Dunne defended (as if they were a preview of the next episode in your life). What I do know is that Freud was very wrong about how they work and that finding symbolic language in them is nonsense. Dreams process everyday life at another level. Or perhaps the other way around. Some mornings I wake up thinking that maybe dreams are the real deal and our waking lives just the secondary part of our existence.

At a scene at the end of act I in *I Have Been Here Before* Dr Görtler explains that he has been studying his own dreams in the hopes of answering two questions: 'what we are supposed to be doing here?' and 'what the Devil this is all about?' Religion offers, of course, a ready-made answer: God knows, even though we don't. For us, atheists, the problem is that science is somehow an obstacle to investigate other answers beyond 'we're the result of a random series of events'. This lazy answer allows the cult of the paranormal to grow with no rational check so that some individuals end up acting more absurdly than if they were believers. I am not saying that we should grow as obsessed as Dr Görtler with our own dreams and with the alleged seriality of time, nor that we should be paralyzed by the fear that strikes if you stop to consider why we are alive at all. What I mean is that, now and then, we should acknowledge that life is a very strange affair and that we, Homo Sapiens, are very odd creatures, dominated by that bizarre need for sleep and dream.

That's what I enjoy most about Priestley's Time Plays: the bold proposition that if we really tried to explain what life is about, we might reach unexpected conclusions. It is a bit scary but, then, the idea of life is scary in its weirdness.

1 October 2019 / LIKE WRITING A MUSICAL SCORE: THE UNACKNOWLEDGED TASK OF THE SCREENWRITER

I came across the name Lola Salvador Maldonado in a recent episode of *Días de Cine*, the weekly report on cinema that TVE maintains since 1991 on La2 (http://www.rtve.es/television/dias-cine/). The occasion was her 81st birthday and the celebration of her extensive career in Spanish cinema, for which she was awarded the Premio Nacional de Cinematografía in 2014, and which she still continues. Surprised by

Lola Salvador's many activities in this art and, above all, by her immense achievement as a screenwriter, I sought bibliography about her. I soon came across Susana Díaz's *Modos de Mostrar: Encuentros con Lola Salvador* (2012, http://tecmerin.es/no-2-lola-salvador/), a delicious publication which sums up many hours of interviews with this exceptional woman. It is hard to say what is more singular about Lola Salvador: that she managed to build a solid career in cinema at a time when relatively few women worked in that area in Spain (excepting actresses), or that she did so leading besides a peculiar life as a separated mother in a long relationship with a married man (producer Alfredo Matas) while enjoying a friendship with his wife (actress Amparo Soler Leal) and collaborating with both professionally. Reading Díaz's juicy text, it seems that Lola Salvador has lived not one but several lives simultaneously.

On the *Días de Cine* report, Lola Maldonado described the screenplay as a text quite similar to a play or, even better, to a musical score. She seems to prefer this second description, repeated in the interview with Díaz. Following that analogy, the film director works, Lola notes, like an orchestra director adding harmony to the performance of the diverse musicians. By the way: if my reader does not mind, I'd rather refer to Lola by her first name, since using the surname Salvador makes her appear to be a man. In fact, she has used the penname Salvador Maldonado to publish autobiographical novels (the trilogy *El Olivar de Atocha* adapted by TVE is based on her family) and others based on her scripts (see below).

That a screenwriter like Lola needs to highlight the similarities between screenplays and stage plays may be baffling, but it needs to be noted that the Spanish word 'guión' (or 'guion' as RAE prefers since 2010) has nothing to do with 'obra' (stage play). I have been unable to determine why 'guión' became the preferred word in Spanish, beyond the obvious fact that early producers must have regarded the 'script' as a 'guide', hence 'guión' (but why not 'guía'?). At any rate, the semantic confusion is also notable in English: the texts on which films are based are called 'scripts' and 'screenplays' and those who write them are 'scriptwriters', 'screen playwrights', 'screenplay writers', or 'screenwriters'. At least in English, there is a clear suggestion that those who build the scripts are *writers* working on something rather similar to *plays*. Incidentally, American silent film produced Thomas Harper Ince (1880-1924), founder of the first studio that can be described as such, Inceville, is credited with being the inventor of the screenplay. If I interpret his many writing credits at IMDB correctly, the word scenario, imported from French, was used before script or screenplay appeared.

Back to Lola, you might be familiar with the enormous scandal caused by *El Crimen de Cuenca* (1979), the film directed by Pilar Miró, and based on a serious miscarriage of justice back in 1910. Two peasants in a village of the province of Cuenca were sentenced to 18 years in prison for the murder of a shepherd, who had gone missing. As the film explained in all its gory detail, the two accused had been tortured by the Guardia Civil and produced in this way false confessions. Even though the real-life events depicted in the film had happened 70 years before, the then Minister of Culture Ricardo de la Cierva left the film in the hands of military justice, which processed Miró for offenses to the Guardia Civil (a military body) and retained her film for 18 months until the Tribunal Supremo decreed it should be shown in cinemas. The case

against Miró was dropped and her film, the only one censored in this away after the end of Franco's regime in supposedly democratic times, was released to great critical acclaim and notable box-office success, just the opposite of what the authorities had tried to prevent.

Why am I mentioning all this? Because even though Miró bore the brunt of the scandal and endured much personal suffering, she also reaped merits that were not hers: producer Alfredo Matas had hired Miró to work on a script by Lola, also the author as Salvador Maldonado of the 1979 best-selling novel based on the Cuenca crime (Ramon J. Sender had published in 1939 on the same case *El Lugar de un Hombre*). Miró got a script credit as well for the film, to increase her earnings (a habitual practice, it seems), but the whole idea was from the beginning Lola's (see Díaz 72-84). You might say that she and Matas, and not Miró, should have indicted by military justice, but this is not my point: everyone came to know Miró por her boldness in dealing with torture on the screen, but few connect Lola with *El Crimen de Cuenca.* This is like attributing the whole merit of, say, the film *Hamlet* (1996) to director Kenneth Branagh, without mentioning Shakespeare (he does appear in the credits as screenwriter…).

To put it plainly, neither films nor TV series can be made without a screenplay but both directors and producers tend to downplay as much as they can the role of the writer. I include myself among the film lovers who are totally unable to mention a favourite screen writer, even though I can certainly mention favourite authors in all other literary genres. Yes: literary genres. As theatre specialist Martin Esslin has explained, the script is a branch of the tree of drama, with the peculiarity that whereas plays are written to be staged as many times as possible the screenplay is used in just one production, for this is filmed. To those who object that screenplays can hardly be read as plays, I would reply that this is not true: the conventions may be different (there are all kinds of technical regulations about the look of screenplays on the page) but the essence is the same one –both are dramatic texts to be performed by actors. And if the screenplay is still struggling for literary recognition, this is because it is a type of writing open to constant interference by studio executives, producers, directors and actors for control of the final film. When a writer sells a screenplay, s/he does sell that right to interfere, which no other writer is forced to sell. Just imagine!

Logically, the best way to guarantee the control over your screenplays is to be also the film director but this is not a road all writers can take or care to take. In the theatre, few playwrights also work as directors, for there is a clear understanding of what each job consists of. Not so in movies, or in series (or in videogames and documentaries, which also use scripts). Check, as an example of the situation I am describing, *Vulture*'s list "The 100 Best Screenwriters of All Time, As Chosen by Working Screenwriters" (2017, https://www.vulture.com/2017/10/100-greatest-screenwriters-of-all-time-ranked.html), edited by Stacey Wilson Hunt, and you will see that most names correspond to film directors.

At this point whenever I write or lecture about this issue I like to run a little test: a) who wrote the script for Steven *Spielberg's Schindler's List*, adapted from Thomas Kenneally's novel *Schindler's Ark*?; b) who wrote the script for Ridley Scott's *Thelma and*

Louise? Answer a) Steve Zaillian (currently a film director) and answer b) Callie Khouri (with also some credits as director). In case a) Spielberg got all the merit, being who he is (well, Zaillian got an Oscar); and in case b) that was even worse, for Scott was credited with showing a fine understanding of the dynamics of female friendship and few recalled in the ensuing feminist debate about his film the name of Callie Khouri (at least she got and Oscar for her efforts, and is among the few women included in the *Vulture* list). Arguably, the cases of Callie Khouri and Lola Salvador Maldonado suggest that there is something even worse than being a screen playwright to be acknowledged as a talented writer: being a woman screen playwright (or a non-white male heterosexual screenwriter…).

Julia Sabina Gutiérrez argues in her article "El guión cinematográfico: su escritura y su estatuto artístico" (*SIGNA*, 27, 2018, 523-539) that "El estatuto artístico del guion todavía no ha sido bien definido ni por los teóricos ni por los propios profesionales del audiovisual" (524), hinting at a certain failure on the side of the writers themselves to defend their work. She also notes that the tasks contributing to the creation of the screenplay have been increasingly fragmented, a fact which is possibly most visible (I would add) in animated cinema. Thus, writing recently on *Trolls* (2016), I could not determine at all what aspects of the plot had been the invention of Erica Rivinoja, credited on IMDB for the story (the script is credited to Jonathan Aibel and Glenn Berger). Besides, as the beautiful volume about the artwork in this film notes, some interesting turns had been contributed by the animators. As Gutiérrez points out, even in the cases in which the screenplay has been published, there may be differences with what appears on the film which are impossible to account for.

It appears, then, that the question at stake is authorship, or, rather, the extremely questionable application of this literary concept to audiovisual work, which is by nature a collaborative effort. As the author of the novel called *El Crimen de Cuenca* Lola Salvador can be certainly called a writer, but as the author of the eponymous script, what is she? For all purposes, including censorship, the author of the film *El Crimen de Cuenca* is the late Pilar Miró, even though the idea for the film did not originate with her at all but with Lola, who developed it together with the producer. In fact, producers are acknowledged above anyone else when the awards to the main films are given, whether these are the Oscars or any other. That there is a separate category for the director should be sufficient evidence for audiences to understand that directing a film is, as Lola stresses, like directing an orchestra but by no means like composing the music. I very much doubt that Zubin Mehta or any other outstanding director feels that s/he is above the composers whose work the orchestra plays.

So, to sum up, and once again: do try to remember the writers behind the films that you love, and let's change for good their status as unacknowledged authors.

8 October 2019 / A VISIT TO THE LIBRARY: THE SAD LOOK OF YELLOWING BOOKS

I recently read an article about some matter connected with a university library, I forget which, and I noticed, to my surprise, that readers' comments mostly supported the idea that students need not buy books for study. Any decent college library, a reader stressed, should supply all students' needs. I was flabbergasted, for, no matter how good the library may be, you can hardly expect it to have, say, seventy copies of *Pride and Prejudice* (the number of students enrolled in my second-year course). I would expect the library to have one copy of Austen's novel, perhaps two or three, no more. And I would expect each student to buy their own copy, as I did and still do. This is the reason why my own use of our Humanities library is so erratic: whenever I borrow a book I need for study, I end up returning it in a short time to buy my own and feel free to underline text and add notes. I tend to borrow, therefore, only those books I can read more superficially: the essays usually in search of quotations for my own research, the literary works for pleasure.

I must clarify that in my university the usual practice is to buy the books which teachers ask for, though the library treats them as any other publicly available volume. Research groups are often allowed to keep the books they pay for in their own seminar office but anyone with a library card can borrow them as well. In practice this means that I order for the library the books that I believe the institution should have but not really the books I personally need for my job. These come out of my pocket, whether they are academic or literary. When once I expressed my frustration about this, a colleague in the Language area of my Department guffawed that I could hardly expect public money to go into buying me novels. I should say that it should certainly go into buying the books we teach in our Literature subjects but this is, as I know, a lost battle.

This state of matters means that, in practice, we teachers, pay for own job as we invest part of our salary into our professional library. This usually runs to thousands of books, requires plenty of space at home and, thus, further decreases our income since we need to buy expensive properties to place our books in (and when a square metre is on average 4400 euros, enlarging one's personal library is just too costly). My own solution to this problem has been demanding more office space (as a reward for being Head of Department), giving away plenty of books, and downsizing my purchases. I have the advantage of loving books but not being a bibliophile, which means that I feel no compunction to regularly cull a number of volumes from my not too big collection and give them away. Mind you, this has become harder and harder for no public library, university or otherwise, accepts books as they used to do. So, now and then, I carry books to class for my students to take or place them in the bookcrossing space I myself opened in my Department (but that nobody else seems to use).

I must confess that whereas some people are in love with the smell of old books, I dislike it almost as much as I dislike the smell of popcorn in cinemas. I love bookshops, where every book is new, of course; and as you may imagine, my oldest paperbacks are the first to abandon my library every time I go through it with murder in mind. I would never go as far as Marie Kondo and keep just a dozen books (or is it six?) but I agree with

her that you should only keep the books that are useful and/or that provide you with some emotional connection. Even in that case, though, I might consider buying new editions when the ones I have start yellowing and generally falling apart. Paperbacks have, as we know, a shortish shelf-life.

I don't know if this also happens to you but I find myself going to the campus library only when I need a specific book, and never with enough time to browse. A few days ago, I found myself with one hour to spare between activities (that was a miscalculation!) and off I went to the library. This is why I'm writing this post. I first enrolled in my university back in 1986, and I have seen the library move to two newer buildings, progressively growing all the time. One of these buildings is now the journal library and I must say that this is the one slowly dying for, thank God or the stars, journals are now digitalized. I marvel at the beautiful change this has introduced: I collected for my MA and PhD dissertation masses of photocopied articles, which I hated having around, and now all I have are neat folders of digitalized texts in my computer. Not only the journals have gone that way, of course. Also the magazines: I am writing an article on Isaac Asimov and I almost cried with pleasure when I saw that you can check all the scanned copies of the magazine *Amazing Stories*. It took me just a few clicks to download the 1951 issue where a story by Asimov I very much wanted to read was printed. Pre-internet, this would have been slow and expensive.

I keep on writing and I still haven't got inside the library… Since, as I have noted, the library buys the books which teachers order, the English Literature section is a palimpsest. As happens in that kind of manuscript, there are layers and layers, each corresponding to the different teachers' interests (all those books by Anita Brookner…). The UAB was founded in 1968, which means that pre-1970s books are rare (for this you need to visit the library of the Universitat de Barcelona). The problem is that since we are chronically underfunded and tend to stretch our budget by buying paperbacks, now we have mostly that type of yellowing book that is asking for a replacement. What I like about the old books, though, is that they appear to have been read frequently, which is not at all the case for the 21st century purchases. This means, clearly, that up to the 1990s many students read many books in our collection but since then few students read any books, not even the newer books. As much as I like new books, it hurts my heart to see books bought five or six years ago (by me or others) glaringly untouched, never taken off the shelf.

Something that always makes me smile is how the library purchases clash with our own selections. What I mean is that the librarians also buy books for our English Literature collection but just a few and with a very different criterion. For instance, we never buy translations but the library does, on the grounds that not everyone interested in English Literature can read English. The funny thing is that these translations are often of best-selling fiction either from the past or the present. We have a copy, in Spanish, of Howard Fast's *Spartacus* (1951), a handful of translated novels by Donna Leon, and so on. I notice this because I am the one buying fantasy and science fiction, and I always wonder who bought the other popular texts (or donated them). I was happy to see that someone is reading volume one of Neal Stephenson's *Baroque Cycle*, which I ordered, but quite dismayed to see the seven volumes of *Harry Potter* (adult edition) on the shelf

–perhaps, I comforted myself, most students have already read *Harry Potter*, and those who haven't would never think of our library having a copy, for this is not Literature… right?

I have no idea how students use the library but I would say that very little. I know our collection quite well because years ago I took a good look at it and made a list of what was missing (which we tried to correct, at least regarding the classics). My impression in this recent visit was that 90% of the collection is on the shelves. Looking at some of the classics, I wondered when they had been borrowed last. Supposing that, for instance, nobody borrows Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) for fifteen years, which might happen (or has already happened), should the library retire it to the depot where the less wanted books are stored? Only the librarians truly know how many readers each book has and, though we were once tempted to ask, we decided not to do so in case we get too depressed. How different this is from local public libraries, with their constant stream of older readers and having to wait two-months to borrow a popular volume!!

I used to order books for the library on the basis of what our collection should have to awaken interest in some research areas. I bought, for instance, many contemporary plays and academic studies of drama in case somebody wanted to write a paper or a dissertation on this genre. Then I stopped. Our budget was drastically diminished and we were told to purchase mostly what was required for our subjects and our research (I go back in this way to my first paragraphs). I keep a wish list but I must say than in the last two rounds I have ordered no books. I felt that nothing I wanted for the library would attract more than five readers at the most, and it suddenly seemed to me that this was a waste of public money and of shelf space. I must also say that some of these books are overpriced volumes at almost one hundred euros a piece. That is another lost battle: academic publishers have raised the price of books to absurd heights, so that neither researchers nor libraries can afford them. If for the price of one academic hardback I can have ten paperback novels, I will buy the novels. And this is in the end what we have: ten yellowing paperbacks for each better-preserved hardback. Well, except in the Postcolonial section, started relatively recently. From my biased point of view, I wish the whole library looked that crisp and enticing.

I read recently that videotapes are dying, particularly those used for domestic movies. Many people who never bothered to have the videos of important family events transferred to a digital file may find themselves with nothing. The Spanish National Library has warned that the tapes are so frail that they often break when they're played to be digitalized. The beauty of the ageing paperback is that, unlike the videotape, it can be replaced (I'm not talking about unique old volumes) but if this is not done in time many university libraries with limited income and few hardbacks might find soon find themselves with literally crumbling collections in their hands. Limited shelf-life is here the key problem. I don't know whether the solution is, as for the videotapes, digitalization; it might be. What I feel is that a library full of fast ageing books is not a place our young students enjoy visiting; that could be a factor in the decreasing numbers of borrowings. I myself will borrow a dying book if I have to, but I find the sight of any strips of cellotape quite dispiriting. Ah, for the smell of new books… how pleasing.

22 October 2019 / LUNCH WITH A WRITER: NECESSARY ENCOUNTERS

I have had the good fortune of sharing a few lunches followed by a long afternoon conversation with author Care Santos, whom I met thanks to my good friend Isabel Santaulària. Care has a long, accomplished career both in Spanish and Catalan, which includes major awards Planeta, Ramon Llull, and Nadal. Since 1995, she has published, I'm quoting from her official web (http://www.caresantos.com/index.htm), twelve novels, six short story collections, two poetry collections, and countless books for young adults and children. Her books have been translated into twenty-three languages. I personally love her novel *Desig de xocolata*, which I have read in Catalan but is also available in Spanish. That's another singularity of her career: Care self-translates most of what she writes and has what might be called a true bilingual career.

I read recently one of those articles that questions the role of criticism (in relation to cinema, not that it matters) and a critic defended herself in it arguing that 'you don't have to be a hen to discuss eggs'. I'm not sure that this is the best possible analogy but it's a useful starting point to consider the odd relationship between writers and academic literary critics. I find it odd on many fronts: authors (hens) write the books (lay the eggs) which we the literary critics praise or condemn but a) analysing a literary text (examining the egg) is not the same as reading it (eating the egg) and b) we also produce texts (we are also hens). If, as a literary critic, I write a book, am I an author as well, like the ones I analyse? We also get reviews and care about sales (well, impact). But what kind of writer am I? Try to imagine what it would be like to produce art criticism by creating a painting, or to discuss ballet by dancing, and you might get the idea of what worries me.

For these reasons, I am a bit embarrassed whenever I meet any writer who makes a living by selling their storytelling. I admire Care very much because she has the capacity to construct character and plot, and can do that book after book. That is the kind of admiration that leads most of us to read fiction and that may inspire whole academic careers. At the same time, I feel embarrassed that there are tenured positions like the one I enjoy (despite my occasional ranting) to teach Literature, whereas writers must struggle at all times to make a living. A few years ago British author China Miéville suggested there should also be state-sponsored positions for writers, and he created quite a stir. A negative one, for questions such 'who would decide the appointments?' soon came up. Funnily, nobody objects to the fact that writers with long, brilliant careers, like Miéville or Care, must constantly seek other activities to complement their income. You might think that Care's frequent visits to secondary schools to discuss her own YA fiction with readers is part of her job, but while she is doing that she is not writing, which is her real job.

I am very grateful when a writer patiently replies to my questions about their methods. I find that even those with a fearsome reputation for being very rude enjoy discussing their craft. I had the chance to ask James Ellroy publicly in a recent post-interview Q&A session whether he agreed that sometimes characters dominate the narration and he didn't bite me. 'Bullshit', he said, but he meant that in relation to writers who claim they have no control over their fictional people: 'Whenever a writer

says that the characters have taken over', Ellroy explained, 'he lies. He would have reached that same point anyway' (yes, Ellroy used 'he'). Care allows me to ask many questions, which is wonderful, and she is also eager to comment on what helps her in her task; for instance, she finds attending courses on writing plays extremely helpful to improve dialogue in novels. That's for me a very valuable insight into the links between drama and, well, novels.

If I don't have the chance to ask authors in the flesh, I try to read what they have themselves written about their careers. Stephen King's *On Writing* is indispensable. Isaac Asimov's memoirs (*I, Asimov*) provide inquisitive readers with plenty of information about the writer's relationship with editors and publishers, and about the market. For instance, Asimov was amazed to discover that whereas the short fiction he sold to magazines did not produce royalties, books did. Since he had so many in the market simultaneously (he published 440!!!) Asimov became a wealthy writer before really being a best-selling author. He only realized that he could be one when his publishers Doubleday offered in 1981 a 50000$ advance for a new science fiction novel that would end his long absence from that genre. *Foundation's Edge* became indeed Asimov's first top of *The New York Times* book list publication after more than forty years as a writer.

I have read someone criticise Asimov's memoirs (which, by the way, Care knew very well) for offering too much information on his business deals. I must clarify that Asimov also offers very candid insights into his straightforward style and into the difficulties of adapting to new times in such a long career: by the time the 1960s revolution in science fiction happened, he felt his work to be outmoded. Hence, the importance of the 50000$ advance for him to feel self-confident again. I personally feel that learning about the material conditions of production should be an integral part of literary criticism, but not to further uphold the idiotic principle that texts written for money can be no good. What I mean is that how writers progress financially (or not) is also part of their career; actually, for them the most important part, now and in the past. I have already praised here Edward Copeland's *Women Writing about Money: Women's Fiction in England 1790-1820* (1995) as a crucial volume to understand Jane Austen, Mary Shelley, and the other female writers of their time. Read it and marvel that even Austen worried about contracts rather more than about her reputation in posterity.

Logically, I would not ask any writer point blank about their income but I'm not above asking whether they consider their financial rewards sufficient. What I cannot bring myself to ask is what they think of the existence of teaching positions in the field of Literature. Things were perhaps easier when the author we taught were mostly dead people, but I have many doubts about how we relate to living authors. Care was mystified regarding the obstacle course that any academic career is today but this is the same for all fields, whether you teach Literature or Nuclear Physics. What I often have difficulties justifying is that, again, the concept of tenure exists for teaching but not for writing. I want to believe that we teachers are a sort of adoring mega-fans at the service of the writer and, so far, every writer I have contacted has thanked me for my interest. Still, I'm not sure this is a relation among equals, not out of anyone's fault but for structural reasons.

One aspect that could be easily remedied is making the link between authors and academic literary critics more public. Let me give you an instance. The public session with James Ellroy which I have mentioned here took place last month, when he visited Barcelona to present his new novel, *This Storm*. He's not an author I know well as a reader (I just know his *L.A. Confidential*) but, given his world-wide popularity and his personality, I expected the presentation to be stimulating. And it was, very much so, except for the presenter...

Typically, nobody thinks of academics for this type of act and Ellroy's publishers Random House (I assume) chose fellow *noir* writer Carlos Zanón (not to be confused with Carlos Ruiz Zafón) as his presenter. Zanón coordinates now the literary festival BCNegra devoted to detective fiction and is himself a well-known author in the field. I have not read any of his books, though. I just will tell you what I saw: a man uncomfortable with his role as presenter not because Ellroy was not receptive (he was extremely friendly!) but because (this is my hunch) perhaps Zanón felt he should at the receiving end of the homage his American colleague was getting. Zanón warned that Ellroy had refused to answer politically-oriented questions and seemed frustrated that the interview would be thus limited. The fact is that I subsequently read an interview bounded by the same parameters and it was brilliant. Actually, the audience's questions were far more exciting than the presenter's. And, by the way: I was the only English Studies specialist in the room, unless I missed some younger colleague I have not met yet. (I am myself constantly missing visits by authors because I'm too busy writings about authors…).

Thanks, Care, for your time and attention (and thanks Isabel for the introduction). Ours are very necessary encounters for us, academics in literary criticism, a salutary reminder that in the end we know little about the writer's day-to-day worries. Hopefully, this also helps you as a writer!!

29 October 2019 / WHAT AN UGLY IMAGINATION IS ABOUT (TRYING TO MAKE SENSE OF MY OWN IDEAS)

I am currently a member of the Ministry-funded research project led by Dr. Helena González of the University of Barcelona, *Parias y tránsfugas modernas: género y exclusión en la cultura popular del s.XXI* (http://www.ub.edu/adhuc/es/proyectos-investigacion/transfugas-y-parias-modernas-genero-y-exclusion-cultura-popular-del-s-xxi). We had a seminar last week, which opened with my presentation of six characters that, in my view, are either outcasts ('parias') or dissidents ('tránsfugas'), or both. They are Katniss Everdeen in Suzanne Collins's trilogy *The Hunger Games*, Djan Seriy Anaplian in Iain M. Banks's Culture novel *Matter*, Emiko in Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Windup Girl*, Birha in the short story "Ruminations in an Alien Tongue" by Vandana Singh, Breq in Ann Leckie's trilogy *Ancillary Justice* and Essun (a.k.a. Syenite and Damaya) in N.K. Jemisin's trilogy *The Broken Earth*.

The research group should eventually produce a database with entries for about 100 female characters, and others for theoretical aspects, and I have volunteered to be the Guinea pig (oops!) in charge of writing the first six entries. So, I was trying to explain to the audience in the room that although I am very much interested in expanding my work on Banks and Singh (I have already written about Collins), I will not touch the novels by Leckie and Jemisin because I find their imagination 'ugly' ('fea'). I have nothing against Bacigalupi but others have already written about Emiko, to my entire satisfaction.

I used 'ugly' in that informal way one uses intending to amuse the audience but I was the one amused when the presenter, my good friend Isabel Clúa, suggested that I should turn the label 'ugly imagination' into a fully theorized concept. This is the task I have given myself this week, not an easy one. Another very good friend in the audience, Felicity Hand, asked me why I was mixing my negative personal impression of the authors with my dislike of their works, and whether I would do the same with Shakespeare: I don't like what goes on in *Macbeth*, therefore, I would never have dinner with its author. I replied, quite confusedly, that I knew I was being obnoxious but that what I have against Leckie and Jemisin is how they had forced me to endure not for one but for three novels their extremely unpleasant stories, with no relief whatsoever. In contrast, I said, Banks would treat his readers to some clever Scottish humour whenever he noticed he was going too far with any violence or cruelty. My admired Vandana Singh aims in all her stories not only for literary excellence but for engaging the mind and all senses in plots that are, simply, beautiful though by no means silly or sentimental.

Obviously, all that was improvised and I have been asking myself for the last few days what I mean exactly by accusing some writers of having an ugly imagination. I don't think I know yet but I'm making an effort here to think hard.

Let me begin with one example. In Jemisin's trilogy there is a human species whose flesh is of stone. They are called, not too imaginatively, the Stone Eaters (guess what they feed on?). The author herself explains that these living sculptures are "me playing around with the idea of mythological creatures" (http://nkjemisin.com/2015/08/creating-races/), which should be fine except that whereas the people of the Stillness, where her tale is located, "have heard many tales about stone eaters (…) the reader doesn't have that bank of cultural capital to borrow against". The Stone Eaters are, however, quite real also in the context of the novels, which means that they are doubly scary: for the characters in the tale, who see the monsters of legend become living persons among them whom they must accept, and for the readers, who do not catch until very late in the trilogy what is going on. "Without the cushioning effect of folklore, the creatures" Jemisin grants, "become too alien and frightening, or pitiful, to embrace as fellow people. I've seen other writers manage it, though, so here's my chance to see if I can do as well".

My reply is that 'no, you don't quite manage it', for (spoilers ahead) the feeding habits of the Stone Eaters may be fine for monsters but not for characters that carry the weight of the whole story as narrators. Faced with the scene of Essun's former lover Alabaster becoming stone and a major character/narrator eating his arm, I jumped off the sofa and almost threw the book out of the window. What kind of ugly imagination

(well, sick person) would come up with this concept? Same about Leckie and what her girl Breq really is (you find out!). I realise that I still haven't explained myself, though: Banks is also much capable of offering some truly distressing stuff (think of Zakalwe, if you can without hyperventilating, or of the digital hell which an alien civilization builds) but one knows all the time that we are not supposed to sympathize. Jemisin asks me to accept as a cool character someone who simply horrifies me and the same applies to Leckie. I do not mean that Hoa and Breq are evil or villainous in any way, poor things; what I mean is that the villainy that made them what they are is not sufficiently characterized as 'Other' in relation to them, or alternatively that they are too 'Other' for me to welcome them as my nexus with the text. There is something awfully cold in the way their tale is told so that the massive destruction from which they both emerge overwhelms any ability I may have to connect with these two and care for them, knowing besides they're not even human.

Still not there, I know, but I may be getting closer.

By qualifying some writers' imagination as ugly I don't mean that I only like pretty tales. Perhaps I can explain myself better if I refer to what horror cinema used to mean to me. Like everyone who enjoys a well-told horror tale, I accepted the pact by which I would agree to put up with some measure of terror caused by the monster until some kind of order was restored by the hero. Progressively, though, horror filmmakers came up with the idea that the pact should be broken, terror maximized, and no final return to order allowed, on the grounds that this is more realistic. There have always been gothic stories with a sting at the end, hinting that the vampire will return once more, or that the creature is not quite dead. However, when I stumbled upon the slasher film *Hostel* (2005) I just opted out of the pact. That is a most salient example, I think, of the purely ugly imagination that has swallowed whole what many of us used to like in horror cinema –reality is ugly enough for me to enjoy the full panoply of what then emerged as body horror, nor do I need any tales in which there is no relief and no way out. It is fine to avoid ex-machina solutions and be done with villains that spin long justifications rather that kill their foe, but I still loathe the type of storytelling that is relentless in its assumption that the whole world is a monster, and only the silly victims killed one by one have failed to notice this. I no longer watch horror movies for, following my theorizing of the concept, I can no longer put up with their extremely ugly imagination.

I am beginning to sound like one of those snowflake students who demand from lecturers trigger warnings for even the minutest conflict in the stories they must read for class (Glasgow University, it seems, is now giving modern language students trigger warnings… for fairy tales!). This is not where I am going. What worries me is the admiration that the ugly imagination is garnering in our times: the trilogies by Jemisin and Leckie have earned many major awards in the SF field, and so has Chinese SF star writer Liu Cixin, possessor of an even colder ugly imagination (at least in *The Three Body Problem*). I won't even mention *Game of Thrones* –oh, I did! Concepts such as 'awe', 'sense of wonder', 'enchantment' have abandoned fantasy and SF, which means that they are now nowhere to be found. I stand corrected: they are still perceptible in some children's film and fiction, though not everywhere. I had the same impression of ugliness in Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* regarding what villainess Mrs. Coulter does to

children, not so much because she is a very cruel person but because she is hero Lyra's mother. Again: too close for comfort, not Other enough.

So, to sum up, and leaving plenty of room for further speculation: in the tales arising from an ugly imagination there is too little distance between the persons we are supposed to sympathize with, and the Other. Terrible things happen in many of our favourite stories but no matter how close hero and villain get (Harry and Voldemort, Katniss and Alma Coin) there is some margin for hope. Imagine Harry living for decades in the Dark Lord's regime, or Katniss having to face Coin's renewal of the Hunger Games, and I think we get closer in this way to what I mean by ugly imagination. If, as happens in Jemisin's and Leckie's tales, this hope appears after an overwhelming deluge of terrible events, then it is of no effect. Many readers enjoy this deferral of expectations, just like many readers enjoy watching *The Handmaid's Tale* on TV, but not me, I'd rather be told a hopeful, though not a silly, tale.

Now back to reading Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe*, of which more next week. To be continued…

4 November 2019 / IN SEARCH OF CHIVALRY: WALTER SCOTT'S *IVANHOE*

The admirers of Sir Walter Scott will find nothing but commonplaces in what follows regarding his novel *Ivanhoe* (1820). Yet those who wonder why anyone would want to read this once very popular romance might find, hopefully, something of interest in my choice. This is motivated by my interest in understanding how the old values attached to chivalry conditioned the rise of the 19th century gentleman. Others, like Mark Girouard in *The Return to Camelot* (1981), have told this story but not from a feminist perspective like mine.

Scott is credited with having re-introduced the values of medieval chivalry into Romantic Britain as a model of civil masculine conduct, and not just as a code for the upper-class men engaged in military action as officers. In his "Essay on Chivalry" (1818), published two years before *Ivanhoe*, he gives a most thorough account of the origins and development of this code, to claim that it survives "in the general feeling of respect to the female sex; in the rules of forbearance and decorum in society; in the duties of speaking truth and observing courtesy; and in the general conviction and assurance, that, as no man can encroach upon the property of another without accounting to the laws, so none can infringe on his personal honours, be the difference of rank what it may, without subjecting himself to personal responsibility". This is chivalry in a nutshell but also gentlemanliness.

Unfortunately, Scott adds, the barbaric custom of duelling, a relic of Gothic times, he notes, still persists. This kind of interpersonal violence is a sign of the palpable tension between the ideal and the practice of chivalry which colours both Scott's analysis in the "Essay" and his novel *Ivanhoe*. You might assume that both are an

enthusiastic celebration of this code of manliness but it is quite surprising to find that this not at all Scott's attitude.

In case you are not familiar with *Ivanhoe*, allow me to explain that the central subplot narrates the constant threat of rape that Rebecca, the beautiful daughter of the Jewish moneylender Isaac of York, must endure from the lascivious knight Templar Brian de Bois-Guilbert. In his article "Irresolute Ravishers and the Sexual Economy of Chivalry in the Romantic Novel", Gary Dyer stresses that in *Ivanhoe* "Scott's attraction to chivalric ideology must confront its inadequacies; for a sceptical reader, analysing the 'resolutions' in the novel serves to delegitimate the narrative resolution that results, one that the novel needs in order for its ideology to cohere" (343). Seeing how Bois-Guilbert is lapsing, the master of his Order has Rebecca judged as a witch (also because she is a very competent healer). She is given the chance to ask for a champion to defend her innocence in combat against Bois-Guilbert but when Ivanhoe appears this is, Dyer adds, "an attempt to rescue the novel from its drift into this cynicism" (347). In fact [SPOILERS AHEAD], Scott cannot solve the dilemma of how chivalry and the misogynistic violence of rape connect and he has the villain die of a mysterious mortal seizure (perhaps apoplexy) and not because of Ivanhoe's blows.

Actually, there is very little in *Ivanhoe* of the civil code of chivalry that fed gentlemanliness but plenty about the military version. In the "Essay" Scott informs us that chivalry originates in the ancient German forests, where the Gothic tribes that fought the Romans started giving privileges to the combatants rich enough to fight on horseback. Once the Roman Empire fell, the French (actually the Franks later conquered by the Normans of Viking descent, who eventually conquered England) codified the tribal system established to honour violent men into what became chivalry (which meant "merely cavalry", Scott points out). The 'chevalier' mixed on English soil with the Saxon 'cnicht', a similar type of feudal soldier, to produce the knight. The institutions of chivalry and knighthood merged thus in a single code, which was increasingly idealized through the French romances, epic poetry in different languages and (later) drama. Don't forget *El Quijote*!

As Scott further points out, the knight was no patriot but a lover of personal freedom. "Generosity, gallantry, and an unblemished reputation were no less necessary ingredients in the character of a perfect knight". The problem (as Scott shows with a mixture of melancholy, impatience, and disappointment) is that the Order of Chivalry was founded on principles too pure and unrealistic. Unable to comply with it, "the devotions of the knights soon degenerated into superstition, –their love into licentiousness, –their spirit of loyalty or of freedom into tyranny and turmoil, –their generosity and gallantry into hare-brained madness and absurdity". Bois-Guilbert is supposed to embody this degeneration, with his lusting after Rebecca being attributable, besides, to the vow of celibacy he must obey as a monk. On the other hand, Scott is very clear in *Ivanhoe* that King Richard I the Lionheart was a disastrous monarch because in him "the brilliant, but useless character, of a knight of romance, was in a great measure realized and revived"; his "feats of chivalry" inspired bards and minstrels, but brought "none of those solid benefits to his country on which history loves to pause, and hold up as an example to posterity".

This is possibly the clearest instance of the cynicism which Dyer sees in *Ivanhoe* but there is far more. Scott's comments on the famous tournament of Ashby-de-la-Zouche which occupy so many pages in his novel are not at all positive. Honourable chivalry is expressed in a horrifying bloodbath which "even the ladies of distinction" see "without a wish to withdraw their eyes from a sight so terrible". The values are reversed: instead of the women refining the men's sensibility through the conventions of courtly love, the men's ruthlessness debauches the women. In this competition, "one of the most gallantly contested tournaments of that age", Scott writes, "only four knights" died, "yet upwards of thirty were desperately wounded, four or five of whom never recovered. Several more were disabled for life; and those who escaped best carried the marks of the conflict to the grave with them. Hence it is always mentioned in the old records, as the Gentle and Joyous Passage of Arms of Ashby". If this is not cynicism and contempt against the brutal old ways of chivalry, then I don't know what it is.

It seems that many women readers of *Ivanhoe* were disappointed [SPOILERS AHEAD] because the hero Wilfred of Ivanhoe marries his childhood sweetheart, the Saxon Lady Rowena, rather than the real protagonist of this novel: Rebecca. Scott defended his choice in the prologue of the second edition, claiming that the marriage of a Christian knight and a Jewess would be just unthinkable. As Rachel Shulkins points out, however, "Though Scott portrays Rebecca as charitable and self-sacrificial, the acute rendering of her sensuality sets her apart from the aspired ideal of English femininity, advocated during Scott's time" (5). This is a judgement with which I agree and disagree, for Shulkins sexualizes Rebecca even more than Scott. Unlike the bland Rowena, Rebecca is a spirited lady but, despite her crush on Ivanhoe, she never really tries to seduce him, aware as she is of the religious barrier. She heals him from his wounds very proficiently, which requires close intimacy with his body, though not of a sexual kind. By describing her as a sexy woman, Shulkins sees her through Bois-Guilbert's eyes, as a woman who elicits desire despite herself and who acts out on it, which she never does. Even Bois-Guilbert sees eventually that her courage and intelligence are more outstanding than her beauty, which is why he proposes to Rebecca that she becomes his mistress with her consent, rather than his victim without it. Logically, Rebecca cannot give that consent for the obvious reason that she cannot love her would-be rapist.

Ivanhoe is not up to her standard, either; theirs is a love story that could never happen but for other reasons. I find that the most interesting scene in *Ivanhoe* is the conversation they have in the middle of the siege in which Wilfred cannot participate because he is wounded. Rebecca cannot understand why he wants to inflict on other men the violence that has hurt his own body and he replies that it is "impossible" for a man "trained to actions of chivalry to remain passive as a priest, or a woman, when they are acting deeds of honour around him". Wilfred continues enthusiastically: "The love of battle is the food upon which we live—the dust of the 'melee' is the breath of our nostrils! We live not—we wish not to live—longer than while we are victorious and renowned—Such, maiden, are the laws of chivalry to which we are sworn, and to which we offer all that we hold dear". He names glory as the knight's greatest reward, she speaks highly of "domestic love, kindly affection, peace and happiness". Increasingly irritated, Wilfred complains that, not being a Christian, she cannot understand "those

high feelings which swell the bosom of a noble maiden when her lover hath done some deed of emprize which sanctions his flame. Chivalry!—why, maiden, she is the nurse of pure and high affection—the stay of the oppressed, the redresser of grievances, the curb of the power of the tyrant—Nobility were but an empty name without her, and liberty finds the best protection in her lance and her sword".

Scott closes the scene with some rather vague comments about how Rebecca's feelings are conditioned by the sad situation of the Jews, and the lack of military heroes to admire in the midst of their diaspora. But, and in this Dyer is absolutely right, if a reader is minimally sceptical of chivalry s/he will easily side with Rebecca's view–supposing this is not what the author himself unwittingly defends, or even Wilfred of Ivanhoe. Desperate to have his master King Richard expel his brother Prince John from the throne he has usurped but unable to persuade the wayward monarch, "Wilfred bowed in submission, well knowing how vain it was to contend with the wild spirit of chivalry which so often impelled his master upon dangers which he might easily have avoided, or rather, which it was unpardonable in him to have sought out".

To sum up: Walter Scott, the author who re-introduced chivalry into society and thus caused Romantic and Victorian gentlemanliness to borrow traits from the knight, was himself unconvinced by his preaching. Either that, or the fault lies with his readers, who could not see that Richard I was a deplorable king, Wilfred of Ivanhoe a rather silly young man (besides being a traitor to his Saxon family), and Brian de Bois-Guilbert the very embodiment of knightly corruption. There is not in this novel any solid model of manly behaviour (even the Saxon claimant to the throne Athelstane is a dim-witted glutton), whereas Rebecca offers in contrast a womanly model of resistance. Lady Rowena may please Scott's fantasies of wifely submission (though she also resists as much as she can her guardian Cedric's plans to marry her off to Athelstane), but Rebecca is the one who dismantles the fabric of chivalry. Her defence of civil rather than military virtues, her talent as a healer, and her ability to defend herself against the attacks of Bois-Guilbert and of his Templar master are far more likely to attract contemporary readers than any knight.

The women readers of Scott's time wanted to see Rebecca rewarded with a happy ending linking her to Wilfred for life, but Rebecca would soon have found her husband too basic an individual for the depth of her mind. Scott dispatches her to the Kingdom of Granada, "secure of peace and protection, for the payment of such ransom as the Moslem exact from our people", she tells Rowena–make what you wish of this comment. Since there are no Jewish convents, Rebecca intends to withdraw from ordinary life (that is to say, from the search for a husband) by becoming one of those Jewish women "who have devoted their thoughts to Heaven, and their actions to works of kindness to men, tending the sick, feeding the hungry, and relieving the distressed". Scott intended Rebecca's future to be a sort of penance for her sexual feelings towards Ivanhoe, but her fate reads today as freedom to a much higher degree than married Lady Rowena might ever enjoy. If it were up to me, I would rename Scott's novel *Rebecca of York*, and if I had the talent, I would write the tale of her adventures in Granada. William Makepeace Thackeray's spoof *Rebecca and Rowena* (1850) goes apparently in a

very different direction–but no, it's not the story of how the two ladies abandon Ivanhoe to set up home together…

One must always marvel at how texts suggest what authors never intended, as Jacques Derrida defended. I have never been a fan of deconstruction but it does have its uses indeed. The pity is that by subjecting Scott's *Ivanhoe* to this method I'm tripping myself up: if Wilfred is not a true manly ideal, where is he to be found…? I mean in men's fiction, don't you dare mention Darcy now.

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12 November 2019 / THE COMPLEX MATTER OF CULTURAL APPROPRIATION (WITH THOUGHTS ON THE NATIVE AMERICAN CASE)

Working these days on an article about speculative fiction author Vandana Singh, I tried to find an American-born, white woman author to whom I could compare her case. Singh was born in Delhi but lives in the USA since the late 1980s, where she works teaching and researching Physics. The collection by Singh I am examining –*Ambiguity Machines and Other Stories* (2018)– has been published by Small Beer Press, an independent publisher, and I found among their books one that appears to be the perfect comparator I need: Kij Johnson's *At the Mouth of the River of Bees* (2012). Johnson, a white Iowa native born one year before Singh, has a higher reputation, based on her having received more nominations and awards and having published novels. Yet, this is also useful as I am looking into the causes why Singh is not better known. I was not looking specifically into the thorny question of cultural appropriation but it has surfaced, hence my post today.

In three stories of her collection –"Fox Magic", "The Empress Jingu Fishes", "The Cat Who Walked a Thousand Miles"– and in her novels *The Fox Woman* (2001) and *Fudoki* (2004) Johnson uses ancient Japan as her background though she has no direct personal link to this country. Scholar Joan Gordon (white, American-born) defends her choice on the grounds that "Rigorously researched historical narratives enable [Johnson] to avoid trivializing or exoticizing the complexity of another view of the world, and it may be that casting one's narrative into the remote past, as Johnson's stories do, avoids some of the difficulties of power inequity". However, I came across a review in GoodReads by Minyoung Lee, an American female reader of Korean descent, who has a very different opinion. She is deeply offended by "The Empress Jingu Fishes" because,

Lee claims, Johnson's research is inadequate, and this leads to serious mistakes in the representation of still unsolved, complex conflicts among the Korean, the Japanese, and the Chinese.

Apparently, Lee even exchanged letters with Johnson about this but far from feeling appeased her impression that outsiders "not immersed in the subtle nuances" of the foreign culture they describe will inevitably offend insiders was confirmed. Lee wonders why anyone would "write about another person's culture and history that you only superficially know about when you have a rich and fulfilling story of your own that cannot be told in the fullest by someone else?". This suggests that rather than speak of cultural appropriation perhaps we should speak of cultural depletion in the case of white authors who feel no strong attachment to their own cultural background and use parasitically other cultures. Just an idea. I didn't expect, however, to come across a case of (possible) cultural appropriation within the context of the Native American cultures of the United States…

On Friday I finished reading Jack Fennell's edited volume *Sci-Fi: A Companion* (Peter Lang, 2019, https://www.amazon.com/Sci-Fi-Companion-Genre-Fiction-Companions/dp/1788743490) to which I have contributed an essay on the aliens in Iain M. Banks's Culture novels. The book has an article called "Indigenous Futurisms" (by Amy H. Sturgis), which was a total eye-opener, for I know nothing about Native American literature beyond having read a couple of novels by Louise Erdrich. Sturgis deals among other authors with Rebecca Roanhorse and what I less expected is that I would meet her the following day, Saturday. She was a guest of honour at the 'Seminari de Gèneres Fantàstics I', beautifully organized by Ricard Ruiz Garzón of the Associació d'Escriptors en Llengua Catalana. Roanhorse's Hugo and Nebula award-winning short story "Welcome to Your Authentic Indian Experience" was offered as a souvenir in the excellent Catalan translation by Miquel Codony. Independent publishers Mai Mes presented the Catalan version of *Trail of Lightning* (as *El raster del llamp*), the first translation into another language of Roanhorse's first novel. Later, I had lunch with the author, an activity which as you know from a previous post is a 'necessary encounter', and I learned a few things, for which I am very grateful.

Rebecca Roanhorse (https://rebeccaroanhorse.com/), born in Arkansas and raised in Texas, is the daughter of an Ohkay Owingeh Pueblo mother and an African-American father. She lives now in New Mexico, together with her Navajo/Diné artist husband, Michael Roanhorse (https://www.truewestgallery.com/michael-roanhorse), and their pre-teen daughter. Both were present in the seminar and the ensuing lunch. I was very much surprised to read that *Trail of Lightning* has been criticized as a very negative example of cultural appropriation by Saad Bee Hozho, the Diné Writers' Association, mainly on two grounds: Roanhorse is not Navajo herself and the values presented as Navajo in her novel are not acceptable as such because her work is violent whereas Diné culture is peaceful. The extensive open letter published online created quite a controversy, extended to other websites, mostly siding with the critique.

I was, therefore, very curious to see how Roanhorse would approach the matter in her talk with interviewer Alexandre Páez. When he asked about cultural

appropriation, without alluding to this episode, Roanhorse simply replied that this kind of accusation is inevitable and one must face it as best one can. However, since she had not explained to the audience that she is part of the Navajo nation by marriage but not by birth her reply somehow suggested that the problem was white authors' appropriation of Native American heritage. To be honest, I was not very happy with her reply and, although I feared very much stirring a nest of hornets, I was getting ready to ask the really uncomfortable question I had in mind when Catalan author Víctor García Tur asked Roanhorse again about cultural appropriation. Only then did she explain how she connects with Navajo culture, noting that about 30% of the readers were fine with her choices, 30% had criticised her and the rest had problems to make up their minds. She did not allude to the Navajo authors' letter.

My personal opinion is that writers should be free to explore any topic and culture they feel germane to their interests. However, I think that they should make their own position as clear as possible (why not write a preface or a note?), and I certainly believe that respect for the culture visited is fundamental. Also, impeccable research. What was worrying me in Roanhorse's case is that she was not clarifying her position before the audience and, so, most were assuming that she is Navajo. For me this is the equivalent of, say, someone from Catalonia writing about Extremadura and concealing this vital information from a foreign audience meeting someone from Spain for the first time. This type of nuanced information is very important. Authors, whether they write fiction or academic work, should avoid any misconceptions about who they are and must totally avoid, in my humble view, speaking for a whole collective to which they do not belong or only are members of in part. This can be a bit ridiculous, if you see it that way, but in my own article about Vandana Singh I have included a paragraph detailing my own position (colour, gender, nationality, age, occupation) so that readers know from which position I speak. Even so, I think, there is a world of difference between Johnson's choice of ancient Japan, which is exoticizing no matter how lovingly done, and Roanhorse's choice of Diné culture, which she knows through her personal experience. Or maybe I'm wrong.

I asked Roanhorse about something completely different also on my mind these days. If you read academic work on non-white authors (how I hate this adjective!...) it might seem that they are progressing following traditions isolated from white authors' work. In Vandana Singh's case she has often referred to Ursula le Guin as a mentor, writing in her tribute following le Guin's death that "it is safe to say that I would not be the writer or the person I am without the deep and abiding influence of who she was and what she wrote". Le Guin not only personally encouraged Singh to publish her first story, she also provided her with crucial instances of non-white characters she could identify with. Indeed, in le Guin's masterpiece, *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), there is not any white character, a point often missed. During the seminar there was some comment about whether le Guin could get away with this choice today, or would she be accused of cultural appropriation… Anyway, Roanhorse noted that Frank Herbert's *Dune* (1965) was a major influence for her as a writer. I asked her how she connected with other white male writers, whether they read each other and so on, and she explained that fellow New Mexico resident George R.R. Martin had helped her very much, and so had John Scalzi, possibly the most popular SF author right now. Scalzi, she told me, is

particularly generous in promoting the work of non-white authors. Other white male authors, Roanhorse added, are going in the right direction in their fiction by being more inclusive (paying no attention to cultural appropriation issues…) or placing women in the role of the protagonist. I must say that this is what I missed in the *Sci-Fi Companion*: an overview of what the 'white boys' are up to these days. For they are still there, dominating sales and pleasing readers –including non-white women.

Allow me to recommend Rebecca Roanhorse's "Welcome to Your Authentic Indian Experience" (https://www.apex-magazine.com/welcome-to-your-authentic-indian-experience/), an uncomfortable story that has plenty to say about cultural appropriation and what it is like to be a dispossessed Native American (man) today. Don't miss the readers' comments! I have not read *The Trail of Lightning* (yet) but I'm told it is an exciting novel. You may not like its hero, Navajo monster-slayer Maggie Hoskie, whom Roanhorse herself describes as an "unlikeable woman", but what is there not to like in the opening up of fantasy and science fiction to as many cultures as possible?

19 November 2019 / WOMEN'S PATRIARCHAL COMPLICITY: ABANDONING THE AREA BEHIND THE SCENES

[This one is for Adriana and Violeta, with thanks for reading me]

I have always been of the opinion that one of patriarchy's psychological masterpieces is the division of women into complicit collaborators and struggling feminists. It might not be a very good idea to publicize in any way the words of the servile collaborators but I'm still in shock, caused by Alicia Rubio's declaration that "feminism is a cancer". She is a regional MP in the Madrid Asamblea and a member of fascist party Vox. The photo illustrating her speech at newspaper *La Vanguardia* is worth checking for what it says about the patriarchal control of women in public positions: https://www.lavanguardia.com/local/madrid/20191115/471620395270/diputada-vox-feminismo-cancer-alicia-rubio.html. Funnily, this woman, and that is a respectful name she does not even deserve, has not applied her own lesson to herself, and there she is, spouting nonsensical bile instead of staying home to serve husband and kids. Amazing what one can hear and see in 2019.

I'm often asked these days why women have joined the ranks of ultra-right-wing, patriarchal Vox and I have two answers to that. Some women find it easier to play subordinate roles in patriarchy rather than be as active and in command of their life as feminism requires. Other women are power-hungry patriarchs who, ironically, are respected by their misogynistic male peers because, essentially, they share the same outlook on domination. Some of these patriarchal women, I must say, are also found on the left-wing parties and the feminist organizations, but they tend to be mostly right-wing and see life from a privileged upper-class position. I know that what I'm saying calls for some explanation, so here we go.

I may have already mentioned that I'm looking for texts by anti-patriarchal men who have aided in the struggles for liberation for a variety of reasons. They are hard to find. Instead, I have come across a book by Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace which considers an issue not really dealt with in depth by current Gender Studies: the volume is called *Their Fathers' Daughters: Hannah More, Maria Edgeworth, and Patriarchal Complicity* (1991). The author follows Juliet Mitchell's *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (1975) and quotes a key passage we all should consider carefully: "The longevity of the oppression of women *must* be based on something more than conspiracy, something more complicated than biological handicap and more durable than economic exploitation (although in different degrees all of these may feature)"; the italics are original. Oppression "maintain[s] itself so effectively" because "it courses through the mental and emotional bloodstream". Mitchell does not quite say that women are willingly complicit with patriarchy but there is that "something more" hinting that this might be the case.

As for Kowaleski-Wallace, her research is split between two fronts. On the one hand, she highlights class issues as the reason why, unlike Wollstonecraft, More and Edgeworth did not want to see education extended to all women (that was their own class privilege). On the other hand, she offers a psychoanalytical reading of why these women's strong bonds with their patriarchal fathers made them patriarchal women (with great distress, as shown by their constant ill-health). As for the fathers, Kowaleski-Wallace does not present them as the enlightened anti-patriarchal men I thought they might be but as patriarchs very much scared when they discover that their little girls are absorbing their education like a ton of sponges; they react, therefore, by making their wise daughters emotionally dependent on their appreciation to the highest possible degree (which is another cause for their ill health). Despising their uneducated mothers, Kowaleski-Wallace argues, educated, privileged women despise all other women. I think that this analysis possibly explains the collaborator: she is a woman who is dependent on male/patriarchal approval, even when she is a successful professional, and is, therefore, incapable of showing any solidarity towards other women. See the MP above.

The other type, the aspiring patriarchal leader, is even more problematic. I'm in the middle of reading Bertrand Russell's volume *Power* (1938) and it is really amazing to see that when he writes 'men' he really means 'men' even though he never mentions patriarchy. Women are seldom discussed, on the assumption I guess that they are collectively disempowered, but Russell does name us among the groups of subordinated individuals manipulating the powerful men behind the scenes. We are all familiar with the figure of the wife or mother who lives a vicarious patriarchal life by encouraging husband and sons to excel in the military, politics, the Church, business, etc while hampering the progress of their daughters. I have been arguing for a while that feminism has allowed these women to abandon the uncomfortable area behind the scenes to claim a share of power for themselves instead of pouring their patriarchal energies into the careers of the men in their families. I have also been arguing that patriarchy will gradually evolve towards a gender-neutral construction regulated by sheer power.

This does not mean that power-hungry women are necessarily masculinized but that they will converge with their like-minded male peers into a hierarchical structure

that will discriminate other persons on the grounds of the degree of individual power they possess, not for gender reasons. The fictional example I have chosen to explain my theory is that of Alma Coin in Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games*, whose transition from rebel leader to anti-democratic villain is facilitated by the gender equality of the faction she leads. Reading the trilogy one may think that Katniss is fighting patriarchy as embodied by the sinister President Snow but she soon realizes that her worst enemy is Coin, a woman like herself but an even worse patriarch than Snow.

An important problem is that patriarchy is still too widespread and too dominant for us to use new vocabulary. Since the suffix -archy is used in combined words that name who is in power (patriarchy, oligarchy) or the desire that all forms of power cease (anarchy), I don't know what to call the social construction based on power itself unless I call it 'archism'. If you follow my drift, an 'archist' would be the individual who supports the idea that human beings should be organized socially on the basis of their empowerment or disempowerment, regardless of any other identity factor. The 'ideal archist' (take a deep breath…) would be a person who would not care for gender, race, ethnicity, age, nationality, ability, etc but who would favour any individual interested in power. This is why I find the idea of empowerment so suspicious, particularly when it is endorsed by feminists, for it smacks to me of archism.

I have already mentioned here, I think, how J.R.R. Tolkien distinguishes between power for domination (accrued by the villains Morgoth, Sauron, and Saruman) and power for creation (enjoyed by the Elves until they discover possessiveness). I quite like the idea of power for creation because it is fundamentally a celebration of positive individual and collective expression of an artistic kind. Even so, I want to celebrate instead another concept, which is not at all popular these days: service. In Spanish my title is 'funcionaria', which means that I'm a public officer carrying out specific duties (or 'funciones'). I much prefer the English label 'civil servant', a concept introduced in 1767 (according to Merriam Webster) at the same time as 'civil service' (I assume that by opposition to 'military service' but who knows…?). As a 'servant' privileged with a tenured position it is my duty to give back to society what I am paid to produce: knowledge. Sadly, I see around me much ambition for personal empowerment (much archism) rather than a genuine wish to serve.

I'm probably writing nonsense at this point in the post but, for me, service is the antithesis of power and, as such, a potent anti-patriarchal tool. I mean service not in the sense of being subservient to a higher power (though I do work for the Spanish Government) but in the sense of putting yourself at the service of the community for its improvement and its good. Possibly many patriarchal tyrants have told themselves that they were serving the community, and many patriarchal women have convinced themselves and their daughters that (domestic) service should be their goal in life. I don't mean that. What I mean is that the only way to break away from hierarchy and the dominant notions of power is by aiming at collaboration based on unselfish service. "How can I be of service?" seems to be a far more positive question for the common good than "How can I empower myself?" And, yes, I know I'm ranting and sounding very much like a lay preacher, convinced atheist as I am.

The women who are complicit with patriarchy tell the other women that they should be happy to serve but they want to be themselves on the side of the masters. Some are happy to act as the villain's minions, and others want to be villains themselves, but with their attitude they uphold not only patriarchy but what I am calling archism. The doubt I have is how they explain to themselves their position within the current patriarchy. Kowaleski-Wallace reports that Hannah More lost her own home because of the riotous behaviour of her servants. She concludes that "The fact that More did not command the respect and obedience that would have allowed her to remain mistress of her own home highlights the vulnerability of all women who shelter themselves within a patriarchal discourse" as "privileged guests"; their position will always be "provisional, subject to arbitrary interruptions or cancellation". I believe that she is right: not even Maggie Thatcher was safe from sudden dismissal from power. Seeing, however, how abruptly some men have been expelled from top positions in Spanish politics (from Mariano Rajoy to Albert Rivera) perhaps that is the very nature of archism: a constant struggle for empowerment under constant threat of sudden disempowerment. But, then, I'm sure that patriarchal collaborators like that woman I started the post with will be happy to return home and do what women are supposed to do in a well-ordered patriarchal regime if they are suddenly disempowered.

The better I understand the world, the less I like it. That a woman should question the very feminism that has allowed her to have a career is really beyond me but, then, these are dark times, my sisters (and brothers).

25 November 2019 / WORKING ON EMPATHY ON THE INTERNATIONAL DAY FOR THE ELIMINATION OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN: "IT COULD HAVE BEEN YOUR DAUGHTER"

In my previous post I argued that as feminism progresses the women already interested in power will claim it for (patriarchal) domination, and not at all to help other women. I also spoke about the women who are complicit with patriarchy from subordinate positions because they seek male approval, on which they are dependent. Today, International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, it's the turn of the women victimized by the patriarchal abusers. I aim to explain here how patriarchal masculinity, power, and entitlement work in order to try to raise empathy among the good men (and the complicit women), which is the best tool in preventing misogynistic violence.

Like many people today, I'm thinking of Diana Quer, who had the terrible misfortune of attracting the attention of a sexual predator when she was walking back home alone on a summer night, a few years ago, in a small town of Galicia. Her patriarchal abuser is being tried these days, and faces a life sentence. Yet, he is still lying about how he kidnapped, raped and killed Diana, and about how he later dumped her abused body inside the well of an abandoned factory. He kept silent about his appalling crime for 500 days, leading a normal life with his family, and was only caught after trying to kidnap another girl. During this self-confessed murderer's declaration a few days ago,

Diana's father was expelled from the courtroom for telling him (not yelling, not screaming) "It could have been your daughter". He has been himself accused of being an abuser by his ex-wife, a matter I will not consider if you allow me. I want to focus on the words he used to have his daughter's brutal killer see what he did. As it turns out, this awful individual had re-tweeted an image of a t-shirt with the message (in Spanish) "Warning! Regardless of age, place, or job my daughter will always be my little angel. If you hurt her, I will take your life". He has a young daughter aged 11. Diana was 18.

Men find themselves very often on opposite sides of the patriarchal divide, as perpetrators of violence and as secondary victims of the damage done to the women they love. The cry 'It could have been your daughter' can be certainly read from a patriarchal perspective, coming from one man telling his Other 'come, we're both men! How come you did this to me?" Bertrand Russell reminds us in *Power* (1938) that most so-called civilizations have treated women as property so that if a man's wife, daughter, sister, or mother was killed by another man he could demand that the corresponding female relative be killed in revenge. This monstrosity is no longer endorsed by extant legislation, though, of course, it is still practised in obeisance to codes of honour routinely applied by recalcitrant patriarchs. Yet, going back to Diana's father, I want to read his cry as a desperate attempt to appeal to the only feeling that his daughter's killer might have: the capacity for empathy for any young girl, based on imagining another man harming his daughter in the same way he hurt Diana. This is not patriarchal, and the cry can be rephrased as 'if you love your daughter, how can you hurt any woman?' This is about feeling empathy.

I can hear some radical feminists raising sharpening their tongues against my argument and claiming that all men are patriarchal and none is capable of full empathy for women. If that is the case, then we women are doomed and campaigns like the one being run today all over the world are useless. Women alone cannot rescue women from patriarchal violence without increasing men's empathy for our plight, there is no other way. Repressive legislation does not work, preventive education is not producing the expected results, and it's now men's turn to develop a mechanism to shame the patriarchal abusers. Telling the perpetrators of violence that they are abject monsters is not solving the problem, for many are proud of their patriarchal monstrosity. Sentencing them to prison is useless: placing them among men for long years can hardly teach them to value women. And that is the whole point: patriarchal abusers commit violence against those they despise, who are also those they consider weaker and inferior–mainly women and children, but also, of course, other men.

Patriarchal violence is, then, the expression of a feeling of superiority which emanates from a sense of entitlement to the power promised to all men by patriarchy. Many men reject that promise and never use violence, often suffering it themselves from the patriarchal men. Other men have so much actual power that they need not use violence directly, though they might exert colossal violence through the institutions of power, which include war. We tend, however, not to think of this kind of patriarchal man when speaking about the violence against women but of the men in the circles of family and friends surrounding the victims of patriarchal violence. Or the strangers who,

like Diana's abuser, strike at random, though they are rarer than the news and the abundant fiction about serial killers might make you believe.

Misogynistic violence stands out because it is, no doubt, gendered, regardless of what the deniers claim: women are killed by patriarchal men because they hate women, particularly those whom they see as a reminder of their inability to control their life. Why are so many of the victims women going through a process of separation? Because the patriarchal perpetrator hates them for making a decision affecting their lives, over which they have no longer control. Why do other strike at random? Because that is their chance to show who is master and act out their sense of entitlement to women's bodies and lives. The patriarchal man is always afraid of being exposed as a powerless non-entity with no control over his life and so he uses violence to impress himself with his mastery over others, to the point of depriving them of their life. It has nothing to do with evil (which is anyway a patriarchal construction sustained by religion), uncontrollable urges conditioned by testosterone (please…), evolutionary hang-ups, psychopathologies, human nature and so on. It's the patriarchal obsession with power.

Those who maintain that women are also capable of great violence against their partners and who complain that this is made invisible because a) men do not report their abuse, b) the feminazi media overreport violence against women, have a tiny point in their favour: violence is caused by an imbalance in power, with the victim being powerless and the victimizer feeling powerful. The question is that currently 95% of the victims are powerless women and 95% of the victimizers are men trying to feel powerful (mostly, these are men with no actual power in patriarchy). There is couple-related violence in lesbian couples, indeed, which proves my point: this is a question of power. Yet, as long as the figures are what they are we need (we MUST) speak of misogynistic violence. Just try to imagine a woman perpetrating the kind of crime Diana was a victim of, but with a young man in her place and you will see immediately that patriarchal violence is gendered on both sides: the perpetrators are (mostly) male, the victims (mostly) female.

Empathy for women will grow only if women stop being presented and represented as objects. The perpetrator of patriarchal violence always dehumanizes his victims, so that he can feel no remorse: the Nazis believed all Jews were sub-human, which enabled them to carry out the Holocaust. It is far harder to kill human beings that you respect as such, though it is always possible. In any case, the rapist, the abuser, the killer already sees women as sub-human objects and it takes just one more step for him to see women as mere objects to be used and discarded. This is where entitlement comes into play: I don't believe for a second that patriarchal abusers ever consider matters of right and wrong, personal freedom, etc. Most likely, they only think of their own sense of entitlement: Hitler thought the German nation was entitled to conquer most of Europe and eliminate the Jews, and he acted accordingly; all other patriarchal abusers act within their own sphere following a similar sense of entitlement. Whether they know the women they attack or not is immaterial: the main point is that the victims are seen as objects to which the attacker thinks he is entitled. To abuse, use, even kill, regardless of the possible personal cost in years of imprisonment. That's how strong the pull of patriarchy is.

The men who reject patriarchy are usually capable of a high degree of empathy, which makes them see that women are human beings like them. Yes, I know: it's really sad that half of mankind does not automatically feel that the other half belongs to the same species, and has the same rights. But please bear with me. Suppose for the sake of my argumentation that one third of all men feel genuine empathy for women, another feels less empathy but is little inclined to using any kind of violence, and the rest are the patriarchal abusers. Can these men with no capacity whatsoever for empathy be re-educated? And who should re-educate them? I really think that the hypothetical third who are empathetic and at heart anti-patriarchal should bear the main burden of re-educating the others by developing mechanisms based on persuasion, which also include shaming. I know that I am terribly old-fashioned but we need a new vocabulary that shows patriarchal perpetrators that they are not acceptable as men and as human beings. Monster, psychopath, madman and so on are not useful.

In the middle of his duel with Voldemort, Harry Potter tells this patriarchal villain 'Be a man… Try for some remorse' and these words, Rowling writes, make the Dark Lord angrier than ever. Remorse can only be felt out of empathy for the victims and is the foundation of repentance, which is a step necessary for re-education. Obviously, Voldemort cannot be re-educated and, so, Rowling plays a nice trick by which the villain technically eliminates himself, not understanding how he has been disempowered by Harry. Please, notice that since Harry cannot appeal to Voldemort's better nature, for he has no good left in his split soul, he appeals to their shared masculinity. 'Be a man' does not mean here 'be a patriarch' but 'be a human being capable of empathy and with no interest in power' as Harry himself is. I do not care if I sound naïve but this is what we urgently need: more good guys willing to challenge the patriarchal abusers to be 'men' in the sense Rowling uses the word. Unfortunately, all too often 'be a man' means be brutal, callous, violent, homophobic, racist, misogynistic… patriarchal in one word.

Empathy, to sum up, is our most precious value: if you put yourself in the other's shoes, if you shift perspective, then you can see the other as a full human being. The women trapped in violent situations are in no position to teach empathy to their victimizers but the rest of us, both women and men, need to work in that direction. Punishment is necessary and so are the measures for immediate protection, but education in basic humane values is far more important in the long range (not too long!). Today's campaign seems a step forward but I hope that we soon see it abolished, in a very near future with no misogynistic violence thanks to much increased empathy.

3 December 2019 / CLIMATE CHANGE DENIAL: PATRIARCHAL SYNERGY AND THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF PRIVILEGED SURVIVAL

In my previous post I argued that the solution to the widespread problem of misogynistic patriarchal violence is working to increase the empathy for women by seeking allies among the good men and by re-educating the less recalcitrant segment of the perpetrators. The case that occupies me today, climate change denial, is far harder to

solve even though it is also due to patriarchy's lack of empathy. I wrote that it is very difficult to understand a species in which a remarkable percentage of the male half hates the whole female half. Yet, this might be a minor problem in comparison to how that hate-filled male minority is about to destroy the planet and all its species following their deeply rooted sense of entitlement and the wish to protect their privileged position. The current Madrid UN Climate Summit (2-13 December) has highlighted who the 'fanatics' (as President Pedro Sánchez has called them) are: there is a complete overlapping between the worst patriarchal men in power and the major absences from the conference. You know the names.

I attended last Friday a workshop organized by my good philosopher friend Marta Tafalla on climate change and, to begin with, allow me to tell you that things are much worse than what the media is saying. A scientist in the room declared that he has no courage to tell his three young children what is coming soon, most likely in the next 10 to 15 years. I have a certain sense of déjà vu remembering the many warnings against the use of nuclear weapons back in the 1980s but also a certain hope that if WWIII was then avoided perhaps we can avoid environmental apocalypse. The Fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 might have soon an equivalent toppling down of the current patriarchal-liberal regime if the younger generation, now led by Greta Thunberg, manages to find the weak spots. The problem, in any case, with the scientists' dire warnings is that they do not know with certainty how civilization will collapse, and thus suffer collectively from Cassandra's curse. Recall how Apollo gave this Trojan princess the power to issue exact prophecy but sentenced her to never being believed (she had rejected his sexual advances).

One of the talks that interested me most was given by Núria Almirón, from the Department of Communication of Universitat Pompeu Fabra. She heads a research project that studies denialism and advocacy communication by looking into the texts issued by the main European think tanks sponsored by right-wing individuals and organizations (see https://www.upf.edu/web/thinkclima). Prof. Almirón demonstrated that there is a clear overlapping of economic liberalism and right-wing policies in those think tanks and showed a very complete map of the international alliances operating below the radar of the media. Typically, she mentioned the gender factor as a prominent feature, meaning that all these thinks tanks are headed by patriarchal men, but quickly put it aside, stressing instead the question of privilege. I will insist again that patriarchal power also appeals to women but that right now all our serious problems are caused by power-hungry men and, so, gender is indeed a factor in the trouble they cause. Anyway, Almirón explained that there is no conspiracy linking the European think tanks with each other and with their counterparts elsewhere but an enormous synergy which makes their efforts collectively even more dangerous than if each acted alone.

According to Almirón, climate change deniers take their inspiration from the policies of the tobacco industry. Tobacco manufacturers had known for decades that their product is potentially lethal but that didn't stop them from denying scientific evidence and glamourizing the ugly habit of smoking. Cynically, they put the survival of the tobacco corporations before the survival of their clients, sowing the seeds of doubt and even convincing smokers that they had a right to invoke free choice to defend

themselves from negative pressure to stop smoking. The question is that, despite the devastating impact that smoking has on the human population, its damage is limited. Homo Sapiens is not at risk of being wiped out by tobacco, animal and vegetal species are not significantly damaged by smoking, and the planet can survive the hurt inflicted on its addicted human inhabitants. Claiming, in contrast, that pollution is not causing temperatures to rise is a totally different kettle of fish for, as the slogan goes, 'there is no planet B'. This is the reason why the mentality behind the patriarchal denial of climate change baffles me. One thing is putting profit before the lives of a few million people (excuse me) and quite another putting profit before the whole planet. This is like nuclear war: it cannot be won because even if you win, most of life will be gone forever. How will you claim victory?

I asked Almirón about this strange state of affairs: do climate change deniers, either individuals or organizations, truly mean what they say? Don't they know that an altered Earth will be home to no one? She replied that it might well be the case that most individuals in those circles truly believe that their privileged position will protect them from general disaster (remember the billionaires buying properties in New Zealand for safety against apocalypse?). Others, she added, possibly know the truth but must obey higher interests and few, she mused, perhaps already feel remorse. I heard in another talk that one of the most important ideas that needs to be abandoned is the expectation of constant economic growth. That might explain the resistance of patriarchal capitalism to accept the evidence gathered by the scientists: if it is just the Earth doing its natural thing, then there is no reason to stop economic growth, they argue. At this point nobody can deny that something is going on and so deniers stress that the changes we're witnessing are not human-made. However, even this position is hard to maintain: can they be possibly defending the right to pollute the planet before we are anyway killed by its atmosphere? Does this make any sense?

I confused Prof. Almirón very much over lunch following her talk when I told her that there is another strand of denialism at work: the refusal to see that Homo Sapiens is not worth saving. She and many others, including myself, are asking for an ethical approach to this pressing problem which places the needs of the species above individual needs. There is much trust that, with the right tools of persuasion –with the right rhetoric– the majority will be convinced of the urgent need to abandon many comforts of our privileged life and welcome a necessary rationalization of consumption. There is, then, a fundamentally optimistic belief that people in general can be persuaded to do their best for communal survival which is totally at odds with our polluting habits so far.

Take as an example the campaign Stay Grounded, which was also presented in the workshop, and that calls for a gradual elimination of short-distance flights and a progressive elimination of long-distance unnecessary travel by air. I told the speaker a bit peevishly that she should eliminate Instagram to begin with and convince the low-cost generation that taking holidays locally as their grandparents did is cool. In fact, it's quite funny, because I interpreted the label 'stay grounded' as 'stay punished' instead of 'stay rooted to the ground and try to be a sensible person'. I hate flying and have no problem with taking local holidays but I'm part of a tiny minority, currently not that

popular. Tell frequent fliers that they need to stop for the sake of the planet and see how they react. Is let Homo Sapiens rot, then, my solution to climate change? To be honest, it is, except that there are younger generations to think of and they deserve a chance to survive. I just don't think that we're fair-minded enough to think of the children first. When have we, as a species?

I started by claiming that empathy is the main tool to end misogynistic violence and I'll claim now that empathy is also instrumental to end the violence done to the planet. The cause of all trouble, I stress, is the worship of power, which leads to the defence of privilege based on a sense of entitlement that knows no bounds. The threat of total wipe-out after a nuclear war already showed between the 1950s and 1980s how far patriarchy was willing to go in the pissing contest between the capitalist and the communist blocs. Now the blocs at war are different: we have shameless patriarchy on one side, ready to destroy the planet with an impressive array of polluting weapons, and the rest of us, trying to defend it with blades of grass. This is not even a civil war but a most uncivil onslaught by the privileged few against the rest of Earth. I have no idea how one convinces the elite destroying the planet that they should stop, if only for the sake of their children but it seems to me that there must be some empathy at work there which can become a bigger flame. Or I'm ranting and we are all doomed.

I saw yesterday *The War Game*, a documentary film commissioned by the BBC to show the British public the effects of nuclear war. Peter Watkins, the director, made such a good job of it that his extremely scary film was never shown (funnily, it won an Oscar after a few clandestine screenings). Take a look, it's only 50' long: https://archive.org/details/TheWarGame_201405. As I watched, terrified, it occurred to me that this is what we need to shake us out of our complacency. Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth* (2004) is crystal-clear but too elegant and no cli-fi (whether novel or film) has offered a convincing picture of what the future might be like. This is a job for someone like Quentin Tarantino, and I am by no means trying to be flippant (maybe I am). I would call the movie *Before it Gets Worse* though, at the pace we're going, it will probably be called *The Unavoidable End*. Sorry, bad black humour might be the last thing we need but I fail to find a more positive note to end.

16 December 2019 / MARY SHELLEY'S (HIDEOUS) FILM PROGENY: A LEGACY IN NEED OF RENOVATION

Last week I skipped my weekly appointment because I was extremely busy finishing the edition of my latest e-book project with students. Here it is, finally!: *Frankenstein's Film Legacy* (https://ddd.uab.cat/record/215815). Since 2013-14, when I taught a monographic course on *Harry Potter*, I have been developing a series of projects with undergrad and postgrad students, consisting of publishing e-books based on their course work. The new e-book is my seventh project (you can see the complete list at http://gent.uab.cat/saramartinalegre/content/books) and I'm already at work on the eighth, which will be an e-book about how the United States are represented in 21st century American documentary. In fact, I have started to think of my elective courses as

a space for new teaching projects. Thus, I'm already thinking of next year's MA course on Gender Studies as a chance to explore gender issues in recent fantasy films, after producing already an e-book on science fiction (https://ddd.uab.cat/record/206282). By the way, I was immensely pleased to present this e-book both at Llibreria Gigamesh (in June) and in our recent national conference of English Studies AEDEAN at Alicante (in November).

Frankenstein's Film Legacy is exceptional in my collaboration with students because it has been based on work by second-year students. So far, I had only worked on the e-books in third/fourth year BA electives and in MA electives. A little bit too rashly, I decided to include an e-book in our exercises for the BA course on 'English Romantic Literature', in which we read the 'six males' (as a co-teacher calls them), that is, Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley and Keats, and the 'two females' as I should call them –Mary Shelley and Jane Austen. The reason why I used many entries in this blog last semester to discuss these authors, and the reason why I thought of the e-book is that I assumed mine would be a temporary incursion into Romanticism and I would soon return to teaching Victorian Literature. The e-book was meant to mark, then, a singularity in my teaching.

In fact, this is not what has happened and I'm teaching Romanticism again next Spring, but with no plans for a new e-book. The reason is that, although the students have followed quite well my guidelines (I wrote a model factsheet they were supposed to imitate), my intervention in their writing has been more intensive than usual. The main reason is that their essays were too focused on comparing specific aspects of each of the films with Mary Shelley's novel (as I had asked them to do, indeed) and in this way, the larger picture was missing. In some cases, simply because they are young and little used to watching films released before 1999, when they were born. In other cases because only I had the complete picture of the e-book and could connect the dots (yes, *The Island* and *Never Let Me Go* share exactly the same Frankensteinian topic). The good news is that most of these students will be soon participating in the e-book about the US documentary, and now have a basic training to do so. Incidentally, if you're thinking that I have used too much time for this project, the answer is 'not really': the time I did not use to prepare lectures (thirty students did class presentations based on the films), is the time I have used for the e-book. My own writing and my constant other deadlines have just delayed publication (though obviously the course marks were awarded punctually in June).

So, what's this e-book about? I selected 75 films, beginning with *Metropolis* (1926) and ending with *Mary Shelley* (2017), which dealt with the topic of artificial life and connected, indirectly or directly, with *Frankenstein*. The final list is down to 57 because I got work from fewer students than I expected, and also because I finally discarded a few factsheets that were incomplete. Here are the films, in the same order in which they appear in the e-book:

- 1920s to 1970s: *Metropolis* (1927), *Frankenstein* (1931), *The Bride of Frankenstein* (1935), *Godzilla/Gojira* (1954), *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), *Young Frankenstein* (1974), *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975)

- 1980s: *Blade Runner* (1982), *WarGames* (1983), *The Terminator* (1984), *The Bride* (1985), *Weird Science* (1985), *The Fly* (1986), *Robocop* (1987), *Akira* (1987), *Making Mr. Right* (1987)
- 1990s: *Bicentennial Man* (1990), *Edward Scissorhands* (1990), *Jurassic Park* (1993), *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* (1994), *Ghost in the Shell* (1995), *Mary Reilly* (1996), *The Adventures of Pinocchio* (1996), *Alien Resurrection* (1997), *Gattaca* (1997), *Gods and Monsters* (1998), *Deep Blue Sea* (1999), *The Matrix* (1999)
- 2000s: *Hollow Man* (2000), *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence* (2001), *S1mOne* (2002), *Hulk* (2003), *Van Helsing* (2004), *I, Robot* (2004), *The Island* (2005), *WALL·E* (2008), *Splice* (2009), *Moon* (2009)
- 2010s: *Never Let Me Go* (2010), *EVA* (2011), *La Piel que Habito* (2011), *Rise of the Planet of the Apes* (2011), *Hotel Transylvania* (2012), *Frankenweenie* (2012), *Robot and Frank* (2013), *Her* (2013), *The Machine* (2013), *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes* (2014), *Lucy* (2014), *Victor Frankenstein* (2015), *Chappie* (2015), *Morgan* (2016), *Blade Runner 2049* (2017), *The Shape of Water* (2017), *Logan* (2017), *Mary Shelley* (2017) and *Alita: Battle Angel* (2019).

A mixed bag, yes, undeniably. By the way: the e-book ends now with *Alita* because a student suggested that we include this title. At first, I believed that it would diminish the coherence of the e-book, which I intended to finish with Mary Shelley's biopic. But, then, I finally saw that *Alita* works as a sort of 'to be continued…'. My aim, as I hope you can see, was to teach my students that the influence of *Frankenstein* is indeed colossal, even though in many cases the films depended on an intermediate source or made no direct allusion to Shelley. The moment, however, you see these 57 films from a perspective that takes *Frankenstein* into account, interesting things happen. Pedro Almodóvar can now be said to be a science-fiction film director. Both *A.I.* and the live action version of *Pinocchio* force us to consider what Mary Shelley's novel would have been like had Victor made a young boy rather than an adult male. The presence of women, or females, in films such as *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935) and *Ex Machina* (2014) also raises the question of how Mary's dark tale would have differed had Victor made a woman originally, or finished making the female mate for his monster.

There are many films I like very much in the list and I think it is necessary to highlight once more the turning point marked by *Blade Runner* (1982), the first film to hint, albeit quite confusedly, that our future replacement at the top of the animal hierarchy might be flesh-and-blood artificial humans rather than mechanical constructions. I'll clarify once again that the Nexus-6 replicants whom Detective Deckard must 'retire' are not robots but adult individuals made like Victor's monster out of separate organs. The difference is that Victor scavenges the organs for his Adam from dead people (and animals) and the replicants are assembled using living organs tailor-made for them, using genetic engineering. This is the same method used to make the 'robots' of Karel Čapek Shelleyan play *R.U.R.* (1920). In its original Czech 'robot' means 'slave worker' and this is what caused the confusion. November 2019, when *Blade Runner* is set, has come and go and we are not closer to seeing replicants in our streets. Yet, what is already being discussed is whether the humanoids soon to be our companions will be fully mechanical or fully organic. In just two hundred years, then,

since Mary Shelley published her Gothic novel, what was pure fantasy is now almost reality.

The films examined in the e-book tell the same story which Mary Shelley told but with variations on the main roles (the creator, the creature) and the background. What is frustrating is that none of the direct adaptations of *Frankenstein* is minimally good as a film. James Whale's 1931 version is iconic because it did literally provide popular culture with a major icon in Boris Karloff's performance and looks, but it cannot be said to be a great film. Kenneth Branagh's *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* is not what its title promises, though it comes a bit closer. There are more embarrassing attempts at transferring the tale onto the screen: *Victor Frankenstein* (2015) is a mess, full stop. My first intention, in fact, was to focus the e-book exclusively on direct adaptations of Mary's novel but I did not see what the students would learn by seeing tons of bad movies. This is why I opted for the indirect adaptation, the *Frankenstein*-themed film if you wish.

The other major disappointment is Haifaa Al-Mansour's recent biopic, *Mary Shelley* (2017). I had included Ken Russell's eccentric *Gothic* (1986) in the list for the e-book but this is one of the movies that was finally not covered. I thought, anyway, that Al-Mansour's feminist credentials (she's the first Saudi Arabian female film director ever) made her a very good choice to lead the team behind the film. Then I saw her biopic in the middle of teaching *Frankenstein* and I couldn't have been more disappointed. Trying to compress the eight years (1814-1822) of Mary and Percy's romance in just two hours did not work well at all. Biopics, as a matter of fact, work best when they focus on a single central episode for there is no good way you can summarize real life. I come to the conclusion that a documentary would have served the same purpose but much better; yet, the fictional representation of reality still dominates over the non-fictional.

I don't know if I am here projecting my own fatigue but after seeing *Alita*, yet another disappointing film, I have the impression that the topic of artificial life needs an urgent renewal. To begin with, this is a strange case of knowing, yet not knowing Mary Shelley, which possibly explains the failure of Al-Mansour's biopic (and Jeannette Winterson's inclusion in *Frankissstein* of yet another retelling of Mary's creation of her monster). The treatment of Mary's person is too superficial for fans to be content and for non-fans to be recruited to the cause of vindicating her genius. Next, her novel still lacks a good audio-visual version, whether this is for cinema or for TV. I don't mean by this one that is faithful down to the last detail but a version that gives a better impression of that peculiar thing called the 'spirit' of a novel. In the third place, the new tales need to get closer to actual science or to actual scientific speculation (in the vein of the first *Jurassic Park*) and not just be vehicles for shallow plots with skinny girls beating the hell out of bulky male villains. Or with artificial women playing *femme fatale* or unexpectedly having babies (doesn't anyone know what a tubal ligation is?). The plotline "scientist makes creature that goes berserk" is, let's recall it, two hundred years old already. We need to start thinking of a new angle –but just don't mention the word 'reboot'… Except for *Planet of the Apes*!

Enjoy, in any case, the collective effort that my students and I have made to show you the way into *Frankenstein's* immense film legacy. And celebrate Mary's powers of creation, always vastly superior to Victor's.

13 January 2020 / THE ELUSIVE MATTER OF THE IMAGINATION: TOO FRAIL TO TOUCH?

This post is going to sound a bit cloak-and-dagger since I have decided not to name the author whose opinions I'll discuss here, in order to respect 'their' privacy. The art of sending emails to persons one has not met is a delicate one and in this case it has failed me totally, for which I'm very sorry indeed. I read during the Christmas break a most beautiful volume on creative writing aimed at budding authors interested in fantasy, science fiction and gothic. By beautiful I mean that the volume has an amazing design, with plenty of illustrations, but also that the content is a gem, for it has contributions by an exciting list of authors and insights by the volume coordinator into the practice of writing fiction which must be eye-openers for all of us, teachers of Literature.

For a long time now, I have been taking any chances that come my way to ask writers about the technical aspects of their craft which, I think, we are overlooking in our obsession with identity matters and, generally speaking, content rather than writing in narrative. Author Richard K. Morgan posted in his website my interview with him about his novel *Black Man* and someone sent in a positive comment calling it a 'making of' style document. From that I got the idea of actually using this concept and I asked my good friend Carme Torras to let me interview her on her novel *Enxarxats*. She was extremely patient and gracious with my many questions. The resulting interview has been made available this week as a bonus feature of the e-book edition of her novel. Of course, a 'making of interview' needs to be read after the novel it explores has been read, since it is full of spoilers. I think of it as the kind of information that many readers are curious about just as spectators are curious about how movies are made. The idea is going beyond 'where did you get your inspiration for the novel from?' that journalists ask in promotional interviews and into much deeper waters.

Well, I sent the author I will not name an email praising the volume I had just read to high heavens. I described my 'making of' approach, and expressed my frustration that there are no volumes from writers exploring in more depth where the capacity to fantasise comes from, and why authors are divided into realists and fantasists. I do not mean following Freudian or neurobiological methodologies but as a matter of sitting down and considering the sources of the strange daydreaming which is the foundation of their work. I must say that the author in question does offer a notable amount of reflection on how the technical problems attached to writing specific scenes are handled but not about why fantastic storytelling is a skill that only a minority of human beings possess. In short, there is in the volume plenty of great advice once you know what kind of fantastic story you want to tell but no interest in examining why and how the authors of fantastic fiction come up with their singular plots. As a reader I would like to know, for it seems to me that departing from the mundane to risk narrating the imaginary takes

a lot of courage. Coming up with Elizabeth Bennet and Darcy is far easier than making Victor Frankenstein and his creature plausible, if you get my drift.

Alas!, my email message did not go down well. I was told by the author that if the imagination is dissected (original wording) it might resist being summoned up. My mission, this person told me, cannot help anyone to produce better writing because authors should never compromise the organic construction that novels are and readers should be satisfied with the immersive experience of reading. What needs to be discussed, I was lectured on, is not the imagination but the technique and the conscious impulses it transforms into good narrative. I replied that I totally disagreed, and thanked this person for the time used in replying to my email. I come to the conclusion that I have ruffled feathers already ruffled most likely by a pro-Freudian academic, hence the emphasis on the *conscious* impulses.

What I would have explained if the chance had arisen is that that is precisely what I am interested in: how authors go from 'I have this crazy idea, who knows where it comes from?' to 'now, this is the structure I need to tell the story'. I very much respect the mystery of the imagination, hence my interest in it, but if you think about it I am simply following what William Wordsworth and Samuel Coleridge did in the famous preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, or Mary Shelley in the preface to the second edition of *Frankenstein*. I firmly think that many authors and many readers would welcome the chance to have 'making of interviews' accessible, and many academics would be keen to produce them. The imagination cannot be such a frail flower that its bloom is lost at the merest touch, excuse the corny metaphor.

So, now that I have let steam off, let me tell you about a few constants in fantastic authors' declarations about their craft that scholarly work is not addressing at all, either from a formalist or a political perspective:

1. (my favourite): the best writing feels as if you're a medium channelling a story that tells itself (a constant from Tolkien to Gaiman, etc). This is often followed by a disquieting 'as if': as if the stories come from a parallel universe authors tap into. You may invoke Jung at this point but that still would not explain why only some persons are gifted with that ability to connect with this suspected multiverse.

2. the authors of the fantastic (fantasy, sf, gothic) tend to be far more prolific than realist authors. This has nothing to do with lower quality standards but with the potency of their imaginations. Many speak of being happiest if left alone with their fantasy world and of writing every single day of the year, as if (another 'as if') losing touch with their inner storytelling sources would cause withdrawal syndrome.

3. most authors in this genre are 'travellers' rather than 'planners': they usually start their journey when a scene or a character command it, and sometimes work without knowing how the novel will end though they prefer knowing in advance. Authors who have it all planned down to the last comma and just fill in the dots are frowned upon. Writing is understood as a process of self-discovery: 'Fancy what my mind has come up with!' would approximate the feeling I am trying to describe, which is (I think) the root of the pleasure in (fantastic) writing.

4. this does not mean that the writing is not subjected to plenty of revision, including the throwing away of whole intermediate versions; I will name again the

matter of plausibility: if making characters and situations convincing in realist fiction is hard enough, try to imagine what it is to give credibility to what simply does not exist in real life. Many authors note that a major frustration is how the final result, no matter how good, can never approach the mental impression produced by the original daydreaming.

5. characters are, obviously, the key to this process. Two 'mysteries' about characters (in all kinds of fiction): what do authors mean when they say that characters make autonomous decisions? And, this is a caveat: in order to be a storyteller you really must be interested in people, for without a set of solid characters you cannot engage your reader's interest. In fact, a constant complaint against contemporary fiction of any kind is that characterization is weak, or that protagonists are not likeable people –at worst, both. I would add the matter of description. In the novel which I have just read (Colson Whitehead's zombie tale *Zone One*) we learn that the male protagonist is black only in the last 35 pages. We never know his name and he goes by the nickname Mark Spitz (a white American star swimmer of the 1970s). This has wreaked havoc with my visualization of the story for I could see in all detail the zombies chomping on their poor victims but not the person I was supposed to sympathise with. On the other hand, I was much surprised by author David Weber's declaration that he didn't *choose* a woman as the protagonist of his Honorverse, the space opera series about Honor Harrington: "I didn't set out to do it because I thought that it was especially politically sensitive on my part or because I thought it was likely to strike a chord with female readership or be a financial success. It was just the way that the character first presented herself" (http://www.wildviolet.net/live_steel/david_weber.html). Fair enough, and I'm sure Weber does not want to know where Honor comes from but, still, he can be asked about specific aspects of her characterization as a military hero with no risk to his imagination.

6. dramatized scenes are the backbone of novels – this is obvious, isn't it?, but do we really see novels in this way? In essence, then, a novelist is that little kid with a figurine in each hand voicing each invented character in turn against the background of a plot that grows as their interaction expands. Narrative is a lot like puppetry, then. I find, however, that while the narrator's voice interests many scholars, the construction of scenes and dialogue is not a major source of interest. This may get worse because conversation is dying out, pushed to the sides by the constant use of social media. In science fiction novels set in the future people still communicate face to face, which suggests that authors do not think that social media will gobble up dialogue – but maybe that's the wrong representation of the future…

In the volume I so much admire but will not mention there is a strange moment. An author reports a conversation with a friend who is a neurologist and who claims she has no imagination whatsoever and could never tell a story. The author cannot understand this deficiency and somehow thinks that the friend is wrong about her own lack of storytelling abilities. Some teachers of Literature are also narrators but most of us lack the ability to tell a story, which is why we are in awe of those who can perform the feat (well, of the best ones whose work we love). What the email I got reveals, though, is that not at all authors enjoy our interest in their craft and even see us as a danger because of our insistence on offering 'clinical' analysis. This makes me feel quite nervous, to be honest, concerning what we are doing in our research. I thought I was working to send the message that the fantastic is one of the best creations of the human

mind but perhaps I am the middle-person writers and readers can do without, thank you very much. I hope not…

20 January 2020 / WHATEVER HAPPENED TO CLOSE READING?: A CALL TO BRING BACK TEXTUAL ANALYSIS INTO LITERARY CRITICISM (AND PLOT SUMMARY)

My latest misadventure in peer reviewing has possibly marked a turning point in my career. I had written with much effort and in all loving detail and care an analysis of robot Daneel Olivaw's masculinity in four novels by Isaac Asimov: *The Caves of Steel* (1954), *The Naked Sun* (1957), *The Robots of Dawn* (1982) and *Robots and Empire* (1985). I am aware that the novels are well known in SF circles but I wanted to examine a series of points that would highlight Asimov's clever handling of gender issues. I also wanted, indeed, to show where he had lost control of these issues though in ways that, paradoxically, turn out to be productive. For that I found it necessary to make comments on plot turns that connect the four novels and which, I argued, had been missed by previous scholarship.

To my complete mortification my article was rejected outright, with no chance of peer reviewing, by a journal editor who had published my work before, on the grounds that it had too much plot summary. My defence, arguing that this was close reading and not mere plot summary, was dismissed and I was (very kindly) told that perhaps my article should be placed elsewhere. It is not the first time I am accused of the same heinous crime, and of others even worse, though usually by the peer reviewers and not by an editor. Needless to say, I spent a couple of days smarting under the effect of the rejection (much more so because it came from someone I deeply respect and admire), but after 25 years in the publishing circuit my skin is thick enough. Or just thickish, otherwise I would not be writing this post. I have found another home for the article and have proceeded to write something quite different for the same journal, with less plot summary and more theory. But even so…

This was a few months ago. A little bit later, I was asked to peer-review an article on a science-fiction novel in Spanish, which I will not name to protect my secret identity as academic informer. Very cloak-and-dagger, like my last post. My co-reviewers and I agreed that the article was well written and well researched but needed serious revision. Why? Because the novel analysed was buried under a mass of theorisation which, besides, was only tangentially related to it. If, suppose, you come across an article on *Hamlet*, you have more room for theory since you can safely assume that all readers know the text as a matter of general culture. If, however, you read an article on a relatively unknown text–old, new, minor, foreign–then I should say that an introduction to the author and their work is mandatory. At least, I teach my tutorees that their dissertations should include that type of material. I must add that the comments on the novel analysed in the peer-reviewed article were so oblique that I had to check a few reviews to understand what was going on. I was amazed to discover that this is a

technically dashing novel, of a post-post-modern kind, an aspect on which the article author did not comment at all!

Pure close reading with no use of a theoretical framework is no use, for it assumes a total consensus on the nature and values of the text analysed which can only lead to a rather bland reading. On the other hand, excessive theorisation suggests that the author is actually uncomfortable with literary criticism and would like to be writing something else. The author I peer-reviewed was very clearly far more interested in climate change than in the novel they was analysing but, for some strange reason, had decided to publish their work in a journal about Literature and not about, say, Environmental Sciences. As a peer reviewer, then, I had to highlight this discrepancy between interest and aim, hence the request for revisions. When I told a colleague about this, he told me that it was about time we returned to a more traditional style of doing literary criticism but I'm not sure that I am defending any traditionalism. I believe that I am asking for a new balance.

When my article on Asimov was rejected, I was told that I should consider rewriting it from a perspective that emphasized the main cultural issue raised in it (sex between humans and robots, or robosexuality). I had tons of bibliography dealing with robosexuality but all this refers to events that have been happening after Asimov's death in 1992 and that he could not have been aware of. I could have written an article about how these recent developments colour our reading of Asimov today but I very much wanted to deal with how he built his four novels, and why he had to stop between 1957 and 1982 (the time was not ripe until the 1980s for a story about a woman who falls in love with a humanoid male robot). I wanted, in short, to explain to my potential readers how Asimov had worked as a *writer*, not as a cultural prophet, for (believe me!) nobody has used that angle before in relation to his novels. I honestly believed that any SF reader would enjoy the exposure of the electric homoerotic current accumulating around Daneel Olivaw's beautiful non-human male body but this was not wanted. Too old-fashioned, perhaps, too fannish, maybe. I don't know. I can only say that as a literary critic I care very much for how authors put stories together, although as a cultural critic I also enjoy writing about the context from which they spring–as I build my own theorization.

When the discussion about how much theorisation literary criticism should absorb started, sometime in the mid-1980s I think, most sided with theory but also with a style of writing I have never been comfortable with. Just then I was being trained as a second-language undergraduate student in the techniques of close reading, which were necessary for a person learning at the same time a non-native language and the texts written in it. As an undergrad I was woefully lacking a training in theory, which I only got, in fits and starts, as a doctoral student and, later, through my own reading. I have never, however, got rid of the instinct to dissect and explain the text, which I need, anyway for my teaching. I can hardly teach my own second-language students any Literature if I don't teach them how to read first. This entails plenty of close reading and, yes, even plot summary.

Anyway, whenever I allow myself to go into the texts I am analysing in depth, as I like doing, my academic work is rejected –usually by Anglo-American native speakers who were trained in a completely different tradition and circumstances, which allowed for theory to have a much bigger impact and presence in their academic work. I have never heard anyone voice the same concern I am expressing here but I frequently hear among my Spanish peers the same complaint: 'I don't get it, I'm offering theorisation built on my own close reading but I'm told that this is not theoretical enough and has too much plot summary'. Beyond my own faulty scholarship, could it be that there is some kind of cultural clash at work that remains unexamined?

Just consider this anecdote. Since I am a serial committer of the same crime, I had been already told about one of my articles that it had too much plot summary. In that case, my focus was Anne Brontë's *The Tennant of Wildfell Hall*, which I 'retold' following the thesis that it is actually articulated by the love story between Arthur Huntingdon and his mistress Anabella, and not just by his marriage to Helen. For that retelling to be convincing, I had to provide a detailed alternative reading of the novel, which my American peer reviewers rejected as unnecessary. So, I uploaded the rejected article onto my university's repository and just the following day I got an e-mail message from a Spanish academic congratulating me on it. I have now submitted the article to a new (Spanish) editor, who has welcome it. Is this beginning to look like a pattern?

Let me insist on plot summary from another angle. When my PhD supervisor asked me to include in my dissertation an appendix with brief summaries of the 75 novels and the 125 films it covered he did so on two grounds: a) my examiners would need a quick guide for reference, b) summarising each text would help me to focus on what I wanted to say about them. He was 100% right. I later used the same technique for the 200 episodes of *The X-Files* which I explored in my book *Expediente X: En honor a la verdad*: I first wrote the summaries, then I wrote the book (still out there, see https://ddd.uab.cat/record/118437).

Re-reading these days Brian Attebery's *Decoding Gender in Science Fiction*, I came across yet another argument in defence of plot summary (he alludes here to "Rapaccini's Daughter"): "Having now summarized the same story four times, with four radically different results, I can conclude that there is no such thing as a simple plot summary. The very thing literature teachers tell students to avoid, as distraction from real critical work and a waste of the reader's time, may actually be at the heart of critical interpretation" (2002: 26). The question is that I have never heard any teachers in all my years as a student or an academic in Spain to dismiss plot summary–look at what my (English) supervisor taught me! That Attebery felt the need to defend the link between plot summary and literary criticism in the early 21st century is an indication that something precious was lost in the 1990s.

Actually, I'll stake the claim that two things were lost at the same time: not just the ability to produce and enjoy engaging close reading, but also the ability to generate new theorisation. The sequence 'close reading of beloved literary text > critical insight > new theorisation' was replaced by the sequence 'choice of theory by big name > application to random text which is not really appreciated as writing > production of by-

the-numbers paper with no new critical insights'. This is a model that, if you ask me, seems designed to do two things: 1. curb down any spark of critical originality, 2. offer the mass production academic model required by the hyper-productive but empty Humanities of the 21st century. I'll add something else: when I started working on popular fiction in 1994 one of the arguments I insisted on is that plenty of Gothic, fantasy and science fiction is presented in very solid prose, and in elaborately complex narrative structures. What I meant is that the writing in those genres deserves the same attention to detail as the writing in literary fiction –I never meant that they could only be studied from a Cultural Studies perspective because they lacked literary quality. It seems to me, though, that many of my colleagues show a certain failure of nerve in that defence while, simultaneously, shying away from making negative judgements whenever they are required. Hence, the overwhelming use of theory.

I'll stop my ranting here, or I will end up hurting myself…

30 January 2020 / TEACHING THE CONTEMPORARY: CHALLENGES AND METHODS

This post is inspired by two presentations offered yesterday during the sixth TELLC (Teaching English Language, Literature, and Culture) Department workshop, a series of meetings which I have been organizing since 2014 (see the *Sharing Teaching Experiences* notebooks at http://ddd.uab.cat/record/132688). My colleagues Felicity Hand and Andrew Monnickendam dealt with the issue of how we are supposed to teach contemporary culture and Literature from extremely different but complementary perspectives and here is my chance to comment on both.

Felicity's presentation was focused on the most recent edition of the third/fourth year elective course 'Postcolonial Studies'. She shared with us her worry that, to begin with, it is hardly possible to offer undergrad students any meaningful introduction to a completely new field based on a selection of just three or four volumes. Since, however, students do not seem willing to read more, what other methods can we choose to expose them to a much wider-ranging experience of the subject taught? She had opted for class presentations (in groups of two) on any aspect of the postcolonial world but this had led to a bit of chaos since many students had failed to check with her in advance the suitability of their topic (as they were supposed to do) and their understanding of the concept 'postcolonial' did not totally overlap with that of their teacher. Besides, although they were supposed to speak about today's world, some referred to past issues or events.

I teach contemporary fiction and film, and share with Felicity the preoccupation with how to select any relevant texts in the midst of so much abundance. When I teach Victorian fiction, I do not feel the same anxiety because there is a far more limited list of works which students are supposed to know about (and can read with their still limited command of English). But when dealing with living authors it is truly hard to decide who to include, much more so when the choice is limited to a maximum of five and can be down to three at most. An obvious solution is abandoning classroom close

reading for traditional lecturing, and taking it for granted that students will read independently the set books. That's how I was taught Spanish 18th and 19th century Literature over a year in which our lecturer never addressed any of us by name in class. She just droned on, though her droning, I must say, was quite interesting. The other solution I have used, and will continue using, is similar to Felicity's –using class presentations by students– but on the basis of a closed list. I'm about to start a course on the American documentary (under our 'Cultural Studies' label) and this is how it'll work. We have no set texts; instead, all of my 45 students will present each two documentaries in class. They'll write next a factsheet, with a short essay considering how the USA is represented in the films, and we'll produce a joint e-book. Presumably, they will read each other and will feel interested in seeing at least half a dozen documentary films.

I grant that in this way the students will not get deep insights into any of the films they will hear about but at least they'll hear about 90 films. I also grant that listening to your classmates can be boring, but a) I have the experience of having taught an MA course in this way and it was fun indeed!, b) students are anyway bored in class, and much more so if they just listen to the same person for 90 minutes. If (or when) I teach the electives I've been thinking about for a while (one on non-fiction, another on autobiography) I will use the same approach. And if (or when) I teach the new compulsory fourth year course Contemporary English Fiction, I will also rely on this method but in this case, since students are already used to reading novels, I'll train them to write reviews –a critical practice much necessary but that we never include in our teaching. Working on a closed list, incidentally, is still hard when dealing with the contemporary for not even 20, 30, 40 or 50 titles can be enough. If we assume, for the sake of my argumentation, that the contemporary is the 21st century that's already 20 years of writing –now try to choose just one volume per year and you will see how difficult that is.

Andrew's presentation was, as he called it, 'abstract'. He took as his departure point Lionel Trilling's classic essay "On the Teaching of Modern Literature" (1961) to consider how we understand Modernity today, also to reflect on whether the problems Trilling pointed out have changed. I have not been able to read this short essay because it is not available online, legally or illegally, always a sign that it is at risk of disappearing from view (yes, there are copies in my library…). There are many online pieces on it, from academic analyses to blog posts, in any case. Trilling, Andrew explained, was very much reluctant to teach Modern Literature, as his institution, Columbia University, finally asked him to do after much dithering. This reluctance sprang from his impression that students feel too much at home in the present world and would, somehow, produce smug, self-congratulating, vapid work on the contemporary which would, besides, belittle the importance of History. Hence, he devised for them a gruelling reading programme which comprised the intellectual foundations of Modernity: they had to read Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, Freud, Nietzsche, etc in the first semester before addressing any Literature at all.

Andrew didn't not describe the students' reactions but raised the issue of what is meant by Modernity, and whether, as Trilling suggested, teaching it leads to falling

into a dangerous ahistoricism. He unfairly blamed, I think, the rise of identity politics after 1990 for that. In my view, it's the other way around: identity politics destroyed a view of History in which minorities had been absent because hegemonic patriarchal circles had decided that the Culture produced by them was universal. In fact, the teaching of Modernity started by Trilling and company is what set the ball rolling. Students used to be monolithically male, white, and middle-class but when students started being more varied and we were taught about Modernity, which we were living through in person, then the question arose of why our identities were missing in the teaching of the present, call it Post-Modernity or whatever. Then, the slow process of bringing back from oblivion all the authors that were not male, white, and middle-class started. Methinks that Trilling and company were not interested in that still ongoing rescue.

Anyway, if, as Andrew argued, the keyword to understand our own Modernity (post-post Modernity?) is cruelty, and perhaps anxiety, can we teach the texts that express this irrationality from a rational post-Enlightenment point of view? Can our academic pedagogy in the classroom and our academic rhetoric in our writing truly make sense and illuminate our own Modernity? I wonder about that. My new doctoral tutorees of this year have chosen topics that perhaps demand that we break down standard rhetoric: one wants to write about humans as animal prey in fiction, the other about climate-related anxiety (yes!) also in fiction as a sign of our times. I think that this will require, funnily, a return to the academic essay in the personal way that Trilling and company practised it, and not a continuation of the rigid scholastic methods introduced with theory in the 1990s (see my previous post). I'm also thinking that perhaps my inclination to expose students to as many titles as possible is a way of approaching our own Modernity by acknowledging its formidable noise and granting that it cannot be reduced to a single sound. Welcome to fuzzy academia!

In the question time following Andrew's intervention, our colleague Carme Font raised a very interesting issue: we should teach each historical period, she said, not as what has survived from the past but as its own Modernity. In this way, she suggested, we would stop worrying about our own Modernity, which would simply be placed along a continuum which our students could more easily recognize and learn about. This makes perfect sense to me, at least I do try to present the British Victorian Age as the product of cutting-edge technology and a rabid sense of Modernity, and not at all as a quaint time of impossible crinolines and dishevelled Dickensian urchins. Still, I worry very much about the smugness which the "attitudinizing present", using Trilling's words, has brought to our classrooms. The students' presentism is harder and harder to fight because it is fuelled by the social media, which reject all authority and thrive on a cacophony of voices. By authority I mean here the person who can offer a wider-ranging vision of the times, not someone who imposes their opinions. I find it particularly difficult to teach students where they belong in History and that their generation is not the centre of the universe, but just a tiny notch (like mine) in the millions of years Homo Sapiens is spending on Earth. Modernity, I would insist, is not a confirmation of presentism but the opposite: an awareness that the generation that represents it now will be superseded soon by other ways of understanding Modernity. This will happen increasingly faster: reading this week about Billie Eilish (aged 17) I have come to realize

how old one can be at 30 (Taylor Swift's age) and how forgettable at 60 (Madonna). That's Modernity for you: a sense of the quick passage of time and of how History's present peak time is always rushing forward.

By the way, TELLC 7, which will hopefully be held next January 2021, already has a title borrowed from a student's comment on one of our courses: 'It was supposed to be fun, but it's overwhelming'. This is a feeling I share at all levels about what we read, teach, and think about in our cruel, anxious Modernity.

3 February 2020 / WRITING A PHD DISSERTATION: AN EXERCISE IN RESILIENCE

My husband told me recently that he expected my academic life to include plenty of socialising with postgrad students at home, as we see in American films about campus life, and was a bit perplexed about why that is not happening. I was the one perplexed… That was funny! I wonder whether US academics socialize much with students today in view of the minefield that campus intergender relationships have become after #MeToo. In Spain I think that teacher-student socialising was rather more common up to the 1970s. At least, I recall my beloved teacher Guillermina Cenoz reminiscing in the 1980s about the times when she would invite home her whole undergrad class for dinner. That meant just about a dozen persons!!! In my case, I use a variety of cafeterias as my second office because my postgrad students often have working schedules incompatible with my office hours but this is still tutoring, not proper socialising. Now and then, though, I try to get a few PhDs together for lunch, for I know first-hand that being that type of postgrad student is very lonely and that networking is important.

Last Saturday, then, I organized lunch (in a restaurant, not at home…) with quite a varied group of PhD students (and one MA student) and I must say that sharing time with younger persons is a real pleasure. I notice that in our national conference on English Studies people tend to remain within their age group and make no new contacts, unless they are part of a research group, of course. I find myself greeting people I've known for ten or twenty years, and feeling quite shy to approach younger researchers. This is why I enjoy better this type of small gathering. I hope it was useful for the students, too.

During lunch, one of my students, Laura Luque, told me she had just read my last post and found the slogan I had chosen for next year's teaching workshop –'It was supposed to be fun, but it's overwhelming'– quite appropriate to describe how it feels to write a doctoral dissertation right now. I asked then everybody why they had chosen to put themselves in that quandary and most replied that they want to be academics, like myself. Other students tell me whenever I ask the same impertinent question that they want to prove that they can do it (to themselves I mean, not to anybody else). That was my own case, for I never really believed that I would eventually get the chance to start an academic career (I must thank Guillermina for that). I was happy enough with my project of being a Doctor in English Literature one day.

The pity is that whereas PhD dissertations were supposed to be a sort of culminating point in one's studies and a rite of passage into a second more mature phase as a scholar, they are now quite devalued. A Doctorate is still the highest degree one can obtain but the new habit of following this by years as a post-doc, with no final degree to mark the end of the process, has diminished the weight of the PhD dissertation in any academic career. A 'doctor' is someone certified to become a source of knowledge with no need for further training, but now it seems that doctors are not real researchers until at least three (or even five) years after obtaining their degrees. On the other hand, having a PhD is no longer a guarantee that one will eventually become tenured, as it used to be the case back in the 1980s when the Spanish university grew so massively. We are now interviewing for badly paid part-time positions persons with a doctorate and an extensive list of publications who would have been immediately hired for full time positions a few decades ago.

Now, is a doctoral dissertation supposed to be fun? It didn't feel like that at all when I wrote my own PhD, plagued as I was by a profound hypochondria that has never really vanished and that resurfaces with the writing of any other important text in my career. Of course, I had a deadline to meet tied with my contract as a junior, full-time teacher and that was a constant source of tension. I suppose that Laura means that, unless you're enjoying a grant, most doctoral students write now their dissertations while they work outside the university, which means they are not in the same hurry I was. On the other hand, many other doctoral students are working towards their PhD as they combine two or more university positions as part-time lecturers. I don't know how they manage, really!!! Anyway, I believe that academic work only really becomes fun when one is very senior and can get away with publishing texts that have been a real pleasure to write. I told everyone that I am uncommonly pleased to have just published an article defending Poppy, the hero of animated children's film *Trolls*, as a feminist heroine (in *Contemporary Fairy-Tale Magic: Subverting Gender and Genre*, https://brill.com/view/title/56407). That was great fun to research and write. My recent book *Masculinity and Patriarchal Villainy in the British Novel: From Hitler to Voldemort* (2019), which is a sort of second doctoral dissertation (see the chapter summaries at https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/9781003007951) has been fun to write. But not my dissertation, no.

If that was overwhelming for me, a full-time university teacher who enjoyed besides a year-long leave to write it, imagine what it is like for the students I met on Saturday, who work (usually teaching English) between 17 and 36 hours a week. I mean teaching hours, apart from preparation. A dissertation, for those of you who are wondering, is a 300-page long book, about 110,000 words, which is quite substantial – and much more difficult than writing any other kind of book. You might manage to write a novel by writing 300 words every day (as Stephen King claims he does) but, no matter how thoroughly planned a novel is, this is a type of autonomous book that needn't refer to any other. What is overwhelming about dissertations is that they seem to be bottomless as far as bibliography is concerned. This is pressing enough for each individual article but when you write a dissertation you need between three and five years for research (that is, for reading), during which the academics in your field

continue producing tons of new bibliography. My main nightmare, and I know this is a common one, was that someone would produce ahead of me a dissertation on exactly the same topic. The other recurrent nightmare is that by the time you finally submit your PhD the examiners might find it already old-fashioned, or even worse, obsolete. At the pace we're going, three to five years may mean a complete change of paradigm indeed.

What takes so much time –what overwhelms any PhD student– is the need to read so many secondary sources, of course. In the field of Literary Studies the primary sources are not really the problem, for a good dissertation can be written even about just one book (novel, play, autobiography… you name it!). Even supposing you're dealing with, say, twenty-five primary sources, they can be read and annotated in one semester. What takes ages is the slow-going, painful gathering of possible quotations. In my case, I ended up with gigantic folders full of passages I scavenged from perhaps two hundred sources, despite knowing that I could by no means use more than 10% of all. By the way, nobody has managed to create a programme or app to manage the quotations which any scholar quickly accumulates. There have been more or less failed attempts at managing bibliographies in more efficient ways but not clever ways of indexing quotations for later use. Or I'm just an ignorant scholar who has no idea that everyone is using a magical app except she herself.

Is there any way, then, of making a PhD more fun and less overwhelming? I'm afraid not –I know as a tutor how I would make my students' dissertations less time-consuming, supposing they were my own books. But I can offer them no shortcut because PhD students need to become experienced scholars and this is done through a process of trial and error (including wasting time). I think that the best a tutor can do is insist on having a chapter list as soon as possible, and try to stick to it for as long as one can, rather than spend three years reading and only then sit down to think of a structure. That's a recipe for disaster. It is always much, much better to invest time on writing a solid table of contents than simply amass long lists of bibliography. The lists are also useful, evidently, but they need to be subordinated to a plan, which must be as clear-cut as possible. A PhD student who works many hours a week, or even one on a scholarship, cannot afford investing all their energies in a text that should have very clear boundaries. A novelist can ramble on, change tack mid-writing by introducing new subplots, and end with 600 pages but this is not a luxury which a PhD student can afford today. It's all about planning, and the sooner the better.

The hardest part of my PhD dissertation was actual writing. I had a very useful chapter list practically from the beginning, time to read primary and secondary sources, time to copy quotations into my computer, and not one but two tutors willing to discuss my progress with me. The difference is that one used bi-weekly tutorial sessions, whereas the other demanded to see written work. The tutorials worked fine and I would return home with a clearer idea of what I was doing, but I always found myself unable to hand in written work of any value. I think that I blocked myself by wrongly believing that I could only start writing at the end of the process of reading. That is a mistake, I see now retrospectively. I never press my students to hand in written work if they prefer conversation in a tutorial setting but I still think that it would be best for PhD students to start a blog and write a weekly post to practice writing and, why not? find kindred

souls. If it were up to me, I would have the students I met for lunch run a collective blog, perhaps there are already doctoral programmes doing that. My impression is that talking to other PhD students, sharing some kind of intellectual space, would make the whole process more fun, less overwhelming. Or not, but it would certainly be less lonely.

I realise now that I have not used the main word in my title, resilience. Well, this sums all I've been saying here: it takes much resilience to write a doctoral dissertation and only truly resilient people are up to the task. You may be resilient and still feel overwhelmed, but at least you'll be in a better position to aim also at having fun!

10 February 2020 / THE END OF LITERARY CRITICISM?: ON GEORGE STEINER'S PASSING

George Steiner passed away a few days ago and the culture sections in the media have been abuzz with contrary opinions about his immense influence. Together with Harold Bloom (who died last October), Steiner was one of the last voices left from the time when literary criticism was not subservient to literary theory, which often means in practice to other disciplines such as philosophy or sociology. I cannot have much personal sympathy for Steiner as a patrician intellectual who seems to personify the ivory tower protecting privileged white men, but I mourn with his passing the death of a type of intellectuality connected with deep reading that will never return. His was the class of mind I was asked to admire by the scholars who trained me as an undergraduate student in the early 1980s, and something of my youthful awe remains, even though his academic style was at odds with my own scholarship.

I did see Steiner in the flesh, though my memories of the event are very poor. This must have been at the Universitat de Barcelona, possibly in 1985, and I recall being in the first row of a very crowded room, amazed at how deftly he moved his withered left arm (a birth defect) with his right hand. I remember being impressed by his lecture, but I don't recall the topic (the Greek hero Cadmus?). It was clear to me that I was in the presence of one of the Minds in ways that I have hardly ever felt listening to other big names, for he commanded immediate respect. That feeling is now still intact but also, paradoxically, altered because I am much better aware of the academic context than I was then. Today, I would listen to him with more scepticism.

If you read the diverse articles which *El País* has published these days you get a sort of snapshot of that old-style European intellectualism that Steiner embodied, the kind I was told to bow down to, which exalted reading the classics at the cost of ignoring all of Modernity, and which did not take into account each reader's background. In his last interview, with Nuccio Ordine, Steiner claims that he regrets not having understood the depths that the best cinema can reach, and not foreseeing the impact that feminism would inevitably have on all fronts of life (at least, he claims to have supported it). How, I wonder, can a person be one of the greatest cultural critics without understanding these two crucial elements of the 20th century and beyond? But, then, it seems to me that the ability to ignore whole areas of cultural experience was also part and parcel of

what fine literary criticism used to be. It was a dialogue among the peers of a very exclusive circle, who never really wanted to invite outsiders in but to perpetuate their own conservative view of literature.

While Bloom was at war, precisely, with the American academia emerging in the 1970s after the establishment of identity politics, in Steiner's case a rather more subtle war against him was waged by the rather provincial British academia (yes, Oxford and Cambridge) that never accepted him and his multilingual, comparative, pan-European approach to literary interpretation. Indeed, his longest-lasting position as a lecturer was at Geneva. His own personal war was fought against American culture from the 1960s onwards, in which he overlapped in many ways with the American Bloom as the last defenders of a world quickly collapsing around their respective pedestals. Both, incidentally, were Jewish though the one to have been most vocal about the importance of understanding the Holocaust was Steiner (and no wonder, since his Austrian parents were exiles from Nazism). By the way, let me recommend the obituary at *The Guardian*, not so much for the obituary itself but for the readers' comments; some were Steiner's much daunted students at Cambridge! ((https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/feb/05/george-steiner-obituary).

I am much divided in my views of what someone like Steiner meant. On the one hand, I miss the presence of voices like his in defence of reading and of the need to think as deeply as possible as critics. Where are the true intellectuals today, I wonder? I have been complaining loudly about how any chance of using a truly personal voice that resonates with a wide readership has been killed by the cookie-cutter paper and by shallow, hyper-productive scholarship. On the other hand, Steiner (much more so Bloom) did not have a voice I associate with dialogue. Obviously, I don't know enough about Steiner (or Bloom) to discuss his achievements and opinions but, in essence, his literary criticism consisted of analysing the conversations that literary texts have with each other, according mainly to his own uniquely cultured criteria, ignoring all the rest. Authority can be built on the basis of only listening to one's fine voice but, as it is happening with F.R. Leavis (or has already happened), this may mean a quick posthumous outmodedness. I have very rarely come across quotations from works by Steiner in thirty years as a literature researcher. Either that is already a sign of his obsolescence, or I am not reading the right bibliography.

Among the comments by *Guardian* readers that I have mentioned before there was an exchange that caught my attention. "These scholarly, deeply educated people" a reader claimed, "are almost extinct. It is impossible today to achieve the level of deep learning Steiner acquired. The future is very bleak". Someone else replied "That's simply untrue; there will always be a genuine old-fashioned elite". Here is in a nutshell what irks me: the connection between being 'deeply educated' and belonging to an 'old-fashioned elite'. The collective aim of any society should be having as many deeply educated individuals as possible, so that there would be no need for any elites in possession of the one and only true culture. What I imagined as a young girl listening to Steiner, among others, was a future in which erudition of the kind which he possessed would be as coveted as being slim is today –this was not as naïve as it sounds, for you should recall the quite high cultural level then of public television in Spain (at least the

second channel) and of the post-Francoist new media. I supposed that the intellectual elites would inspire a constantly rising level of education among all classes as access to education grew but, instead, we have youtubers and influencers who lack any understanding of intellectual training and, possibly because of that, are the opposite of humble. We also have unexpected kinds of narrow erudition, such as the erudition of the football fan or that of the tabloid reader interested in Kardashian-style celebrities Of course I was stupid, I should have known better than suppose that people really want to be educated, for they don't, and this includes many university students of working-class roots who are not really doing their best. Not that the upper classes are doing much better, I should say, and they have all the opportunities. Where is the Steiner of the 'genuine old-fashioned elites' now? Busy with their Instagram accounts most likely.

Having said that, it would be very wrong to assume that the conservative teaching and research model passed on by Bloom, Steiner and company is over, despite the high impact of theory and identity politics on literary studies. It is really hard to say who is in the minority since we tend to gravitate towards those who share our academic viewpoints. When we need to mingle –as happens in Department workshops– it's easy to see that the divisions run very deep. There is still a prevalent view that texts can be analysed on their own, without context or politics, for we do *literary* criticism and so what matters is only textuality. This extreme formalism is accompanied by the misguided impression that if you take context into account, then textual analysis is contaminated and, thus, invalidated. I also marvel at how my colleagues (all over the Spanish university I mean) manage to function without paying attention to what articulates current Western and even global culture, whether you like it or not. Can one really claim to be in the world without knowing the basics of *Star Wars*, I wonder? And I say this despite being guilty of ignoring whole fields of culture that matter today (rap, which I dislike) and also the fields that are specialised interests but part of high culture (opera, out of pure ignorance).

I am beginning to feel stranded between Scylla and Charybdis, between old-school literary criticism and post-theory, post-identity politics scholarship. I do not think we can ever go back to that elite scholarship based on reading the classics, though I'm sure that many scholars are happy with it, because we have known for decades that in this way the experience of most readers alive today is ignored. I don't see any sense in that and I will certainly dispute the claim that reading Dante is essential for any living person. On the other hand, I very much miss the fine writing of the old school of literary criticism, a feature that explains why the sales figures for the books by Steiner, Bloom and company were so high. Their prose appealed to many outside academia, whereas most of the academic work we write today is full of unintelligible prose, an unforgivable sin when dealing with any type of literature. As a doctoral student I much embarrassed myself when one of our teachers introduced the works of Mikhail Bakhtin (in English translation, I mean) and I asked him why the prose was so ugly. I expected the fine prose I had been reading as an undergrad to be extended to all topics of interest for literary and cultural criticism, not ugly prose to flood all corners of academia but this is what has happened.

I mourn, then, Steiner, as one of the last big figures who saw a direct link between fine reading and fine writing in literary criticism. We are all writers but we seem to have forgotten how to write essays, conforming instead to the rules of a straitlaced rhetoric that feels like a Victorian corset. I grant that few people, if any, still have the capacity for deep reading that comes from a bottomless erudition but ours is a different time which calls for different skills. I don't see, however, why the skill of producing elegant prose transmitting a personal voice should be neglected, but then of course this would call for a revolution in academia which I don't see happening right now, or in the near future.

17 February 2020 / "WE ARE ALL MARXIST": A CONVERSATION WITH TERRY EAGLETON

A malfunction of my website forced to retrieve the folder where I keep the .pdf of the interview with Terry Eagleton which I did for the literary magazine *Quimera*, back in 2003. To my delight, the whole transcript of the original English version was still there (we published just a selection, in Spanish). After a quick revision, it is now available from my website (in the section http://gent.uab.cat/saramartinalegre/content/other-publications). Journalists must be used to keeping full records of their most interesting conversations but I'm just an amateur interviewer, and this is for me the rarest of documents. I hope you enjoy it as much as I have enjoyed rediscovering how amazingly generous Prof. Eagleton was to me (as I assume he must be to everyone). Incidentally: the interview took place in a hotel in downtown Barcelona because Prof. Eagleton's talk at my university was cancelled due to one of our many students' protests. He was delighted that this was the reason for the cancellation!

This post completes, in a sense, an improvised trilogy on the matter of how theory and literary criticism fused around the 1990s. I mention in the interview that the most recent edition at the time of the *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (Leitch et al., eds., 2001) excludes Erich Auerbach, I.A. Richards, F.R. Leavis or Lionel Trilling, but includes Homi Bhabha, Helène Cixous, Stuart Hall and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and this helps to date with precision when the new model was fully institutionalised. Eagleton comments that "some of those critics who are today fashionably excluded were actually far more radical than some of the fashionably included". The third edition (2018), though, appears to be far more comprehensive, with 157 authors, 48 of whom contribute texts written in the 21st century (the book is 2848 pages long!). The liberal classics I missed in 2001 are back in and, of course, Eagleton is present. The youngest critic included in this hefty volume is Ian Bogost (b. 1976) with a piece called "The Rhetoric of Videogames". Please, note that the *Norton* does not carry the word 'literary' in its title.

Terry Eagleton made an extraordinary contribution to the establishment of theory within literary criticism with his handbook *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (1983), which has gone to countless editions and has sold close to 750000 copies –not really to common readers but to students in need of a reliable guide. This is just one volume in Eagleton's astonishing oeuvre, which runs to forty volumes so far (including a

novel and memoirs). In the interview he tells me that he finds "writing criticism enormously creative, fulfilling" and that "I'm one of those strange people who are probably for good or bad just called 'writer' in the sense that what I write is far less important to me than the fact of writing. I happen to have ended up writing about culture and tragedy, but I might have ended up writing about something else". This confirms my view that academic writing can indeed be seen as a genre, though Eagleton is privileged in having a voice of his own that expresses itself with complete freedom. He thanks feminism for "showing me a new style of approaching some subjects" but also mentions the Irish working-class background of his family (in England) as a major influence. "Perhaps almost unconsciously", Eagleton says, "I've plugged into that tradition in my own writing" albeit he did so only as a fully established scholar. "[W]hen you're younger and you are establishing yourself you have to play by the rules of the game and I look back on some of my early radical works and I'm shocked by how conventional they're in their methods, or their tones, or their styles".

Eagleton (b. 1943), grew up in Salford, in Greater Manchester. He graduated from Trinity College, Cambridge, but wrote his doctoral dissertation at Jesus College, under Raymond Williams' supervision. Later, he moved to Oxford, where his career developed for the following three decades (1969-2001) until he accepted the John Edward Taylor chair of Cultural Theory at the University of Manchester. The label 'Cultural Theory' was, he told me, of his own devising. When I met him, Prof. Eagleton was combining his Manchester chair with a position in the other Trinity College, in Dublin. He is now Distinguished Professor of English Literature at Lancaster University, apparently with no thoughts of retiring. Do recall that Eagleton comes from a working-class family. He is a wonderful case of a person pulling themselves up the bootstraps of boots that don't even exist (at least, he had access to grants which would hardly be the case in other nations).

When he was a student at Cambridge, he reminisces, "everybody around me was an aristocrat. They were all about seven foot tall –I was quite small a student– because they had generations of good food and good breeding. They looked distinctly different from ordinary people, they spoke differently". Oxbridge students later became "anonymously middle-class" though working-class students are still too few. His own job consisted of creating "a space in which these different people could come together". In his view, "most conservative institutions create their own internal opposition, and there has to be someone there to organise it and that's what I really tried to do" in an atmosphere that was in fact "incredible receptive" to new syllabi and topics. "The place I left was very different from the place I joined. But that wasn't just because of me", he concludes. Inevitably, Eagleton also absorbed the patrician culture surrounding him and, as you can read in the interview, he writes predominantly about canonical texts. We need not assume, he declares "that if everybody takes to writing their master's thesis on *The Simpsons* it's going to be more revolutionary than writing about Jane Austen". The revolution that interests him is, rather, the "very subversive effect" that canonical texts may have; this is the method he followed at Oxford.

It's quite funny for me to see that the questions I asked Prof. Eagleton about close reading, literary criticism, and theory in 2003 are exactly the same questions

worrying me seventeen years later. I was then a recently tenured lecturer (2002), with already an experience of teaching for twelve years at UAB and it might seem that since 1991 much should have changed. I see, however, that basically I caught the beginning of an academic wave still swelling and far from breaking point, hence the recurrence of the same worries. I should have disliked Eagleton's work, as he was one of the main defenders of the introduction of theory in the English classroom but he was also Raymond Williams' disciple and, as such, he had a very British awareness of the relative values of culture, which is often missing in American criticism. This feels, to my mind, more straitlaced, puritanical, and humourless. I'm comfortable reading Eagleton but uncomfortable reading other theorists and there must be a cultural explanation for that.

What is then the function of theory, according to Prof. Eagleton? For him, the rise of theory between 1965 and the 1980 responds to students' demands: "They don't want to be taught the novel by teachers who never even stopped to ask themselves what a novel is (…)". Theory pushes "questions a stage back: it doesn't just say 'is this a good poem?', it asks 'what do we mean by a good poem?'; it doesn't just say 'is this a moving tragedy?', it asks 'what is it to be tragic?'. It's not replacing criticism, it's asking questions that go one level deeper". Close reading without that kind of question is valueless, but "any theory which can't read the text closely is not for me a very valid theory", Eagleton points out. He also worries about the commodification of theory, mostly an effect of ultra-competitive US academia, and declares his wariness of post-structuralism, presenting himself insistently as a Marxist. In fact, I called the interview "We Are All Marxist" because for Eagleton "Marxism as a theory is part of the modern mentality as much as Darwin or Freud or Nietzsche" and "we're all Marxist now in the sense that Marx was the first to say 'look, there is this object called capitalism, it has its peculiar ways of working; we must look at it as an object of study.' You don't simply throw that aside overnight. It's part of our very deep way of thinking in the West".

Marx, in short, was among the first cultural theorists and Eagleton approaches theory in the same spirit: as an object of study, not as a preacher, a fanatic or, even worse, an intellectual in love of abstraction. Marxism, Prof. Eagleton clarifies, is not about using Marx for literary criticism but "raising questions about the place of culture, the cultural practices in our kind of society" from a left-wing position, naturally committed to socialism. He praises Marx for using "dialectical thinking" to "embrace the riches of the great liberal, middle-class tradition" in his project to transform them into a culture open to all. For Eagleton "one of the great loses of post-modern theory, if that's what it is, has been the loss of that dialectical habit of mind" which consists of "seeing a relation between the opposites" and how Modernity is both liberating and enslaving. "One reason I'm a Marxist still is I don't hear anybody else say these things again": there is no "third position", no debate, no dialogue. I couldn't agree more.

The problem is, I think I need not stress this, that the word Marxist carries many unwanted connotations. It is tainted both by the excesses of the Communist regimes – though I wonder why Vietnam is never discussed in the media; is it because it is a successful Communist nation?– and the excesses of the pro-Communist European intelligentsia of the 1960s and 1970s, all those upper-middle-class kids playing revolutionary and understanding nothing about working-class life. I don't know whether

Eagleton still identifies as a Marxist but if he does he must be one of the last great intellectuals using that label. Marx is being forgotten partly because the issues I have mentioned and also because the USA's triumph in the Cold War. Add to this heady mix the rise of Communist China as the next world leader (if the current coronavirus crisis does not devastate its economy), and you can see how odd it is to call yourself a Marxist in the Western world. I know that I am indeed a Marxist, without having ever read Marx in depth, because what Eagleton implies is that if you come from a working-class family your awareness of class issues makes you necessarily a Marxist. You may become eventually right-wing but that is another form of class awareness, if you get my drift. So, yes, in a sense we are all Marxists, as we are the children of Darwin, Freud or Nietzsche –and of Mary Wollstonecraft and all the feminists.

I'll end by vindicating, as Prof. Eagleton does in the interview, the need for a renewal of dialectal thinking because this must spring from conversation, one of the greatest victims of our current self-absorbed, narcissistic academic system. I thank the stars that allowed me to share conversation with one of the greatest minds of our time one morning in April, back in 2003. Enjoy not only the record of that rich conversation but all the enriching conversations you may have in your life.

25 February 2020 / WHERE ARE MEN'S ROLE MODELS?: AN URGENT CALL

I was waiting to see Todd Phillips' controversial *Joker* before writing this post but now that I have seen it, I have very little to express about it –except indifference. And puzzlement that Mr. Cow Saviour (a.k.a. Joaquin Phoenix) has chosen to play a creep rather than a vegan hero, a figure we really need. I also feel nostalgia for the late Heath Ledger and his marvellous ability to lend Joker an air of mystery: we never know who the villain really is nor can we predict any of his reactions. Phillips and Phoenix's Joker is, in contrast, a victim of mental health issues that have nothing to do with the colossal sense of entitlement behind villainy. To tell the truth, I found movie and characters more pathetic than thrilling in any way. I wasn't even offended with this umpteenth portrait of the white heterosexual male as victim. I was, in contrast, incensed by a much smaller film, which is the inspiration for today's ranting.

David Yarovesky's film *Brightburn* (2019), written by Brian Gunn and Mark Gunn is a horror film full of gory violence which uses as its starting point a scene that will immediately sound familiar. Tori and Kyle are a couple of farmers in Kansas unable to have children. One evening, as they get ready to try again, a strange artefact lands on their backyard. Next thing we know, they have an adopted twelve-year-old son, Brandon. As he hits puberty, the boy starts noticing that there is something odd about him, manifested in his uncanny powers to move heavy objects, materialize elsewhere, and so on. Yes, this is Superman's story but with the darkest possible twist; spiteful, entitled Brandon totally outcreeps Phoenix's Joker, believe me. I stopped watching the movie after a particularly gruesome murder. I next checked the spoilers on IMDB [skip the lines until the end of the paragraph!!!] and was scandalized to learn that horrid

Brandon gets away with his violent rampage against parents, family, and fellow citizens. Just the story we need in our times!

[Spoiler alert over] I'm not fond of superhero comics or cinema but I think that characterising Superman as an evil pre-teen boy is much more than a bad plot decision: it is a sign of the decadence of the United States as a civilization incapable of furnishing its men with adequate role models. I'm sure that the scriptwriters would disagree and defend their work as a dark take on so many absurd superhero movies. Yet, though I would certainly welcome healthy parody, their screenplay is just a very unhealthy revision of the only genuine hero left from the Marvel and DC combined collection. How about Tony Stark, Thor, and all the others? What makes Superman special, you might be asking? Call me naïve but he is the only one without dark corners: meek as a man, humble as a hero, always gallant, helpful, altruistic, devoted to doing good. No wonder he is an alien from outer space! If we lose Superman, then we are all lost.

Brightburn, although just a minor horror film, is a clear symptom of a terminal malady, I insist: the American/Western/world-wide (choose!) inability to imagine positive representations of masculinity as role models for boys. This is a conversation I'm having with my doctoral student Josie Swarbrick and my good friend Isabel Santaulària. Josie is finishing her dissertation on the monstrous images of men in recent science-fiction cinema and, now that we are at the end of the road, we have realized that negative representation is dominant. It seems that as women make progress towards better representation in fiction and the media, and personal advance in real life, men retreat, showing themselves under the worst possible light and behaving in bad ways which show an evident increase in misogyny, homophobia, racism, etc. Isabel and I have the project of editing a volume on the good guys that might be an alternative to those nasty boys but we are having serious trouble finding examples. If you know of any, email me.

It is very difficult to say with certainty when the hero –as the highest male role model– started losing his charisma but he is now in the same position as the fairy Tinkerbell in performances of *Peter Pan*: unless the audience screams for him to reappear, he will vanish for ever. He cannot be the same man he used to be: boys do not need military genocides as role models, or patriarchal abusers of power. Boys need civic heroes: men who work for the good of the community without seeking personal empowerment, and who do so because they think it is their duty. Yes, I'm describing Harry Potter, possibly the last big hero, though if you notice few really admire him except for his ability to do magic. Certainly actor Daniel Radcliffe, who has done the impossible to play really whacky roles in whacky films, is no Potter admirer. Possibly the best boy character of recent years is Miguel, the protagonist of Pixar's perfect animated film *Coco* (2017) but I have not read anything in his praise. Just let me say that Miguel and the Brandon of *Brightburn* are as different as two twelve-year-olds can be, and it's easy to say who you want your boys to imitate.

Am I exaggerating? Not at all. Girls are increasingly benefitting from the feminist demand of better representation for women. It has been understood that fictional representation is extremely important for little girls to imagine themselves as self-

confident persons capable of overcoming patriarchal pressures. There is much to be done along that road because female representation is still very limited in variety but the case is that, whether out of political correctness or sincere feminist belief, the number of positive women characters is growing. The mirror held up to girls is returning a much better image. In contrast, the mirror help up to boys is reflecting a much diminished image of masculinity. Who do boys see on the news or in representation today? Corrupt politicians –beginning with the President of the USA–, rapists (Weinstein and company), mass and serial killers (on Facebook transmitting live or on the many true crime series of the streaming platforms), young men of talent killed by drugs and rampant gang violence (I have lost count of the rap stars killed that way), cheating sportsmen (Lance Armstrong, anyone?)… Where, I wonder, are the charismatic men, the truly good men? Please, don't name insipid Leo Messi.

If you do a quick Google search, as I have done, the panorama is devastating. Click in "good men" and this leads to the controversial website The Good Men Project (https://goodmenproject.com/about/), which went through a serious crisis in 2013 when a female contributor claimed that a 'nice guy' who had sexually assaulted a woman should not be really treated as a rapist (https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/dec/18/nice-guys-commit-rape-conversation-unhelpful). The Wikipedia entry for the label 'nice guy' warns that the term can be used negatively in relation to "a male who is unassertive, does not express his true feelings and, in the context of dating (in which the term is often used), dishonestly uses acts of ostensible friendship and basic social etiquette with the unstated aim of progressing to a romantic or sexual relationship". The 'nice guy' as major creep is the object of a vicious attack on the website Heartless Bitches International (http://www.heartless-bitches.com/rants/niceguys/ng.shtml). "All too often", the contributors write, "we hear self-professed 'Nice Guys' complaining about why they can't get a date, and whining that women just want to date jerks, etc. etc. The truth of the matter is that there are genuinely caring, compassionate, decent, fun guys out there who have NO TROUBLE meeting people, getting dates, and having relationships". Notice two things: a) the problematic 'nice guys' are the ones describing themselves as such (whether you are a nice guy, or a good man, this is judgement other people should pass); b) the "genuinely caring, compassionate, decent, fun guys out there" are like unicorns: often mentioned, much loved, but never seen in the flesh. Show me who they are, please…

One of the creepiest things I found out during this hurried search is that Hasbro had marketed for a few years in the mid to late 1980s Mr. Buddy, a male doll intended to be a pal for little boys (see https://nothingbutnostalgia.com/my-buddy-doll/). Screen writer Don Mancini transformed Mr. Buddy into Chuckie, the Good Guy doll protagonist of the slasher film franchise *Child's Play*, started in 1988 and still ongoing (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Child%27s_Play_(franchise)). This is a doll and I'm reluctant to take 1988 as the departure point for this negative view of men I am describing. I am, though, unable to fix a specific date for the beginning of the current process. When, in short, do men start focusing on nasty male characters as protagonists, pushing the do-gooders to the margins? If you follow my drift, what I mean is that even though there have always been negative representations of masculinity (I have just

published a book on patriarchal villainy…), there is a tipping point after which the bad guy takes centre stage. I have the strong suspicion that the trend begins in 1950s USA, with novels such Jim Thompson's *The Killer Inside Me* (1952) and Bernard Wolfe's *Limbo* (also 1952), and that it might be connected with the extremely traumatic but silenced experience of men in WWII. I cannot tell for sure. Others might argue that the Vietnam War is the trauma that makes it impossible for American men to still believe in positive representation. Rambo replaces John Wayne, whose ridiculous movie *The Green Berets*, of 1968, is certainly anachronistic. But when exactly the hero begins his downhill journey into decadence remains elusive to me.

I'll finish by stressing that I'm writing this post for feminist selfish reasons. In recent fiction and even ads (the Audi ad with Romeo and Juliet, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4yu4hLYEwak&list=PLE48D5CD449F1818D) young women abandon toxic relationships to proclaim their independence, or simply free themselves from burdens they dislike (haven't you seen *Frozen 2* yet?!). Heterosexual relationships, though, are assumed to be short-lived affairs with a long string of men who always turn out to be inadequate. One thing, I must say, is enjoying your sex life as a free woman, tasting as much happy variety as you want, and quite another moving onto the next guy because all of them are below par as companions. Check what women say of their Tinder dates, wonder why so many Satisfyers have been sold, and come to the conclusion I have reached: heterosexual women do not really like heterosexual men. I'll go further: heterosexual men are beginning not to like themselves because they have no positive role models to measure themselves against. It's not just a matter of what women want from men but of what men have lost in the process of facing the worst aspects of patriarchy. Very selfishly I'll claim that positive role models are necessary, particularly for heterosexual men (I think other men are doing much better), because without them I see little personal happiness in heterosexual women's love lives. Women, of course, could do better if they stopped overvaluing the bad boys and praising the real nice guys as the good men we all need.

3 March 2020 / HOW ENTITLEMENT AND VILLAINY CONNECT (AS I EXPLAIN IN *MASCULINITY AND PATRIARCHAL VILLAINY: FROM HITLER TO VOLDEMORT*)

I have been delaying this post in the hopes that some of our local Spanish universities would have bought by now the monograph I published back in November 2019, *Masculinity and Patriarchal Villainy: From Hitler to Voldemort* (Routledge, https://www.routledge.com/Masculinity-and-Patriarchal-Villainy-in-the-British-Novel-From-Hitler/Martin/p/book/9780367441463). This has not happened yet, though you can check here where the volume is available near you (https://www.worldcat.org/title/masculinity-and-patriarchal-villainy-in-the-british-novel-from-hitler-to-voldemort/oclc/1140353245&referer=brief_results). I'm told there the paperback edition will be published next year, when I'll continue my own personal marketing campaign, of which this is post is, unashamedly, an item.

It is hard to say how long it has taken me to write this book because the idea first occurred to me back in 2008 (I spent a sabbatical then gathering bibliography), but technically the book expands on a chapter in my doctoral dissertation (submitted in 1996). Since 2006-7 I had been teaching the seminar (in Spanish) "Representations of Heroism" within the Cultural Studies module of the MA in Literatura Comparada: Estudios Literarios y Culturales of my university. I taught the last edition in 2016-17, so you can say that the book, which connects with my discourse on villainy for this seminar, was started back in 2006 and has taken thirteen years to be written. That might be the case, though the actual writing, from contract to publication, took about twenty months. If I have managed the feat of producing a monograph this is only because my teaching workload is now lower (thanks to the Government decree of 2012 by Minister Wert which few universities are applying), and because my Department allowed me to organize my teaching so that I could spend a complete year on the book (apart from tutorials for BA, MA, and PhD dissertations). I am already at work on another book, but I'm not sure at all that this window of opportunity will ever present itself again, considering that it has taken more than twenty-five years of my career for the past one to materialize.

Another reason why it has taken me long to write this book is that, once I hit on the idea that my topic should be villainy and not heroism (on which far more has been written), I had basically the whole field to myself. Believe it or not, there is very little direct bibliography on villainy, and what is available deals mainly with specific villains and not with the concept itself. Typically, I started with lists of villainous characters and soon got mired into what promised to be the beginnings of an encyclopedia. That was not, however, the kind of book I wanted to write. Nor a history of fictional villainy, though now that I'm done writing my own book this is a project that I wish someone else would write (not me!). The problem of how to select a corpus and structure a coherent volume plagued me for years –as I kept myself busy doing a thousand other things– until I ask my previous PhD supervisor, Andrew Monnickendam, for help. His advice was very simple but very helpful: narrow down the field to a genre, a period, and a nationality. Since most bibliography on villainy deals with recent American audio-visual products, here was the solution to my needs: I would focus on the British novel since WWII.

Why? Reason number one: the fictional construction of villainy is rooted in British culture, beginning with the Devil and Vice in the morality plays, following with Shakespeare, Milton, the Gothic novel, Dickens… Should I go on? The villain is, most definitely, not a product of American culture. Reason number two: the villain's audiovisual presence often depends on novels that have been ignored or that, even when they are very popular, are seen as vehicles for the hero. I wanted to put together a variety of cases that would help me stress a crucial point: there is a remarkable coherence in the presentation of villainy across different fiction genres; this has been overlooked simply because no one was paying attention. Third reason: Adolf Hitler had to be in my book as the real-life villain that changed the rules of representing villainy. I knew from the very beginning that my book should be called *From Hitler to Voldemort*, though Routledge preferred the title to act as subtitle, and have the volume be called *Masculinity and Patriarchal Villainy in British Fiction*, which was originally my subtitle.

Here is the table of contents:

This is quite similar to the list I started with, although Chapter 4 was originally split between Mervyn Peake, Grahame Green (*Brighton Rock*), and Anthony Burgess (*A Clockwork Orange*). I soon realized that Peake's Steerpike demanded more room and I gave it to him. As you can see, some chapters deal with very well-known texts, others not so much (Chapter 7 is the first academic essay on the Urquhart novels by Michael Dobbs). One thing that bothered me is that the list of primary sources for each chapter ran from just one book (Orwell's *1984* in Chapter 2) to twelve (Ian Fleming's Bond novels in Chapter 5) and even more (Ian Rankin's many novels in Chapter 8). I discovered, though, that the strict word-count which I had to respect (110000 words), helped me to stay focused. Of all the villains here considered, I was most surprised by Tolkien's Morgoth, a relatively little known character because he appears in the pages of *The Silmarillion*, not an easy book to read. If you're wondering who Morgoth is you need to know that he is Sauron's much admired master.

How did I tackle Hitler's immense figure, you may be wondering? A turning point in my research was Ian Kershaw's two-volume biography, *Hitler, 1889-1936: Hubris* (1997) and *Hitler: 1936-1945 Nemesis* (2000). Kershaw, an English political historian, discusses Hitler's rise and fall in relation to how the mechanism of power operates and why German society failed to control his crazed tyranny. Kershaw rejects evil and psychopathology as explanations for Hitler's personality, and that was what I needed. I added to Kershaw's interest in power my own interest in gender, and I developed thus my main thesis, namely, that villainy is the expression of the patriarchal sense of entitlement to power in its highest degree. For me, Hitler is not exceptional as a man who believes himself entitled to power in the patriarchal context of his own society, but rather a representative of a type of masculinity we now call toxic but should simply be called patriarchal. What was exceptional in his case, as Kershaw explains, is that all the mechanisms to stop Hitler's excessive entitlement failed. The hero, I argue, personifies those mechanisms but in Hitler's case there could be no German hero since he had presented himself as such. The Allies had to play that role but they did so among so many tensions that WWII was soon followed by the Cold War.

My theory of power is, unlike Kershaw's, gendered but despite my focus on the patriarchal masculinity of the villains I have studied, I believe that entitlement is a negative quality present in both men and women with patriarchal inclinations. That is to say, although patriarchy has so far accumulated most power and deployed a series of strategies to keep non-white, non-heterosexual, non-upper-class men and all women subordinated, patriarchy is so attached to notions of power that as those excluded from power rebel (=empower themselves) it may welcome them in its patriarchal hegemonic circles. This is why, as I have written here before, I find the notion of empowerment very suspect. I decided not to deal in my book with female villains because to really understand villainy in women you need to find them in a post-gender context –while I wrote the book, then, I produced a chapter on Alma Coin, the female villain of *The Hunger Games*, for a book on the Final Girl. Women, my claim is, may feel a strong sense of entitlement to power, too, but so far this has been denied by patriarchy. If, however, patriarchy becomes less gender-obsessed while still retaining its obsession with power, we might see a female Hitler one day.

At this point, though, I have made it my mission to offer an anti-fascist diagnosis of what makes patriarchal men tick, claiming in the process that we urgently need positive representations of men as alternatives to patriarchy (see my previous post). It has been inevitable, logically, to speak of the heroes in connection to the villains but what I have found out is mostly depressing. The heroes offered by the British authors I have selected are mostly weak and disempowered –often crushed by the loss of male honourability– or plain nasty. I was surprised by how deeply Ian Fleming disliked his James Bond and dismayed by how fond Mervyn Peake was of Titus Groan, to me a young man on the verge of either worshipping or becoming someone like Hitler. My authors are all white and male because I wanted to see, precisely, how they deal with the tale of the hero and the villain, which is so central to hegemonic patriarchal culture. The only woman I chose, though, J.K. Rowling, provides, as I have been arguing again and again, the best possible model of anti-patriarchal heroic masculinity (borrowing from Tolkien's Frodo). Harry Potter, however, seems to be too good for our macho-oriented times.

Throughout the writing of the book and afterwards I have been daily testing my thesis that what we call evil is actually entitlement based on a patriarchal understanding of power. Evil, in my view, is an interested patriarchal construction designed to mystify us about the operations of entitlement. Let me explain myself. Hitler acted as he did because he felt himself entitled to taking other European lands for the expansion of the German people, and to eliminating other European bodies that (for prejudices widespread at the time) he abhorred. He went further than any other villain (except for Joseph Stalin, of course) but you could say that all of human life is organized on the principle of how we express our own sense of entitlement depending on the power we wield and our disregard of punishment. From colonial occupation down to leaving your motorbike parked in the middle of the pavement everything is a matter of entitlement. Our own sense of personal privilege, our belief that we can do as we wish because we can (= we have the power) overcomes all sense of solidarity with the rest of the species. You might think that there is an enormous difference between bothering pedestrians and killing six million Jews (and many other persons) but this is a matter of degree (I'm NOT being flippant). Let your child's sense of entitlement go uncurbed and you have a

potential fascist in your hands. The rest is a matter of opportunities (the many Hitler had), befuddling your enemies (as he did with his impressive PR Nazi apparatus), and acting fast (while the victims considered appeasement policies that would never appease).

So, if the premise of my book works well readers will stop seeing patriarchy as a mechanism for women's repression (it's a hierarchical social structure based on power), and will deny the existence of evil (what matters is entitlement). Readers will also see female villainnesses, specially *femme fatales*, as the pathetic creatures they are, with their ultra-sexualised bodies, and will perceive how the villain's masculinity is shaped by patriarchal doctrines. The way I see it, the hero has been invented by patriarchy to solve one of its main weaknesses: if you structure society on the basis of power, sooner or later an individual will claim too large a share, and this will endanger the other powerful individuals. The hero acts out, therefore, on behalf of patriarchy, to limit its excesses but not at all to challenge its hierarchy-oriented, pyramidal construction.

I ended the book with a plea that one day we find other stories to tell, in which there are no heroes because the power-hungry patriarchal villains are gone. I have no idea what these stories might be, or whether they will be exciting at all, but we really need to see beyond power, abuse, and suffering and think of new plots – for the sake of our survival as a species.

15 March 2020 / AS WE DEAL WITH THE ALIEN INVASION: GREAT DOCUMENTARIES TO ENJOY DURING QUARANTINE (I)

I found nothing relevant to say last week, overwhelmed as I felt by the realization that all would have to stop in Spain in a few days, as it has happened. I'm home, teaching online, for at least three weeks, which in practice means until after Easter –but that's possibly your situation too, so nothing new on that front. My impression, hence my title, is that we're dealing with an alien invasion, even though this comes from inner rather than outer space. I am very much scared, above all because of the general stupidity of many people who are out in the streets, the beaches, the countryside, instead of being home, but that's (Spanish) Homo Sapiens for you… Perhaps Covid-19 is an envoy from poor planet Earth trying to shake us off, and with all reason.

As happens, I'm teaching our 'Cultural Studies' elective (third-fourth year) and my case study is the American documentary, or, to be more specific how the United States are represented in documentary films. I am planning to publish an e-book with my forty-five students, so I have chosen two films for each of them (yes, ninety films!). They need to do a class presentation (now moved online) and write a factsheet for the e-book. So far the presentations have been very good and I hope that we can still manage online, and eventually issue the e-book (see my other e-books with students here http://gent.uab.cat/saramartinalegre/content/books). The whole point of the course is persuading my students not only that documentary films are a type of cultural study but mainly that they are an undervalued but extremely exciting type of film to

watch. So far, they have responded very well and what I'm going to do here is to extend these main theses to my (possible) readers. In this post, then, and in others that I will write I intend, therefore, to recommend the films that my students are in charge of, hoping that you also enjoy them. I will not include info on where to see them but most are available either legally on the streaming platforms or illegally on YouTube.

The course and the e-book are organized thematically, though I might eventually alter the order if the e-book requires it. In this first post, I deal with the sections on crime (personal and organized), economics (for capitalism is another form of organized crime), and environmental activism. There are other sections on gender, interesting personalities (what I have called 'Icons of America'), politics, race, religion, other social issues, space exploration, and sports. I'll post, then, other recommendations as the semester progresses. Next week I'll post a list of recommended documentaries from the Lumière brother's *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory* (1895) to Agnès Varda's *The Gleaners and I*. The lesson I'm learning is that documentary films have provided audiences with amazing masterpieces in the past, and are providing us now with much better films than standard fiction cinema. They tell far more interesting stories in cinematic styles that are also more creative. Believe me!

These are the documentaries we have so far discussed in class:

Section CRIME. Personal crime

Bowling for Columbine (2002, Michael Moore). Oscar-award winner. https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0310793/ . This is the documentary film that changed the way we perceive documentaries for good. Moore had made other indispensable films (such as *Roger and Me*, 1989) but with this one he proved that documentary films could be huge box-office successes and, above all, impact society in significant ways. In *Bowling* he very cleverly argues that the frequent school shootings in America are not isolated incidents perpetrated by confused young men but the product of the American love of weapons, at an individual and a national level. The pity is that they still continue for the weapons lobby is stronger than common sense.

Capturing the Friedmans (2003, Andrew Jarecki). Oscar nominee. https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0342172/. Jarecki was making a documentary on clown Silly Billy, a favourite at children's parties, when he noticed something was amiss in the Friedman family. Their home movies and an investigation into their lifestyle eventually led to Mr. Friedman's being unmasked as a child abuser, even though, for odds reasons, evidence was hard to come by. In a move that was certainly controversial and that makes watching the film very difficult today, Jarecki tried to stay neutral. His film, in any case, offers a startling, scary insight into ordinary American life.

Dear Zachary: A Letter to a Son About His Father (2008). https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1152758/. Be ready to cry your heart out… Kurt Kuenne's childhood friend, Dr. Andrew Bagby, was cruelly murdered by his possessive, mentally ill Canadian girlfriend Shirley Turner. As it turned out, she was pregnant with their child and Kuenne decided to interview everyone who knew the genial Andy for the benefit of baby Zachary. This story, however, took

a sudden, unexpected turn because of the many errors committed by the Canadian prosecutors who should have put Shirley in prison for life. As I say, watch and cry, and sympathize with Zachary's heroic grandparents.

Tower (2016, Keith Maitland). https://www.imdb.com/title/tt5116410. Maitland's truly amazing documentary connects with *Bowling for Columbine* as it narrates the first school shooting ever in America. This was perpetrated by a lone gunman (a Marine Sergeant) who on 1 August 1966 opened fire from the University of Texas clock tower, killing 16 people. The documentary focuses on the victims and the heroes, making a point of not glamourizing in any way the mass killer. Maitland uses interviews with the survivors, and original film and photography, but also animation using rotoscoping (mainly in the recreated interviews with the young participants in the horrific event).

Section CRIME. Organized crime

Cocaine Cowboys (2006, Billy Corben). https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0380268 This hyperactive documentary film tells the story of how boring 1970s Miami was transformed by drug trafficking in the 1980s. The Medellín Colombia cartel, aided by the Cuban migrants, turned the city into the main gate through which cocaine flooded the USA. The corrupt authorities looked the other way until 'Godmother' Griselda Blanco went too far in her use of violent enforcers to get control of the whole turf. If you enjoyed *Miami Vice* (1984-1989) you will love seeing the actual traffickers that caused all the trouble the series portrayed. Brilliant, really.

Cartel Land (2015, Matthew Heineman). Oscar nominee. https://www.imdb.com/title/tt4126304 A truly fascinating look at both sides of the border, dealing with the doomed fight against the Mexican cartels. Tim 'Nailer' Foley, leader of the Arizona Border Recon militia, and Dr José Mireles, a Michoacán physician who leads the Autodefensas, are mirror images, men who know that there is really nothing to be done against the disinterest of Governments in fighting drug trafficking. As a narco tells Heineman, it's really up to American consumers to stop taking drugs. Impressive!

ECONOMICS

American Factory (2019, Steve Bognar, Julia Reichert). Oscar award winner. https://www.imdb.com/title/tt9351980 What happens when a Chinese billionaire, Chairman Cao, buys a closed GM plant to re-open it with a mix of American and imported Chinse workers? Cultural clash, and no wonder. This is a great comparative portrait of the United States and Chine, with an unusual focus on the working classes, and their rights.

Capitalism: A Love Story (2009, Michael Moore). http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1232207/ . Our second Moore documentary on the list, this time on the impact of corporate greed on ordinary Americans. It is in a way, a descendant of the next one on the list, and both complement each other beautifully.

Corporation, The (2003, Mark Achbar, Jennifer Abbot). https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0379225 . This is the documentary that explains everything about the USA, and about our current world – perhaps you need to begin with this one. Corporations took the world over the moment USA

legislation allowed them to exist as individual entities with rights above people, and develop their truly psychopathic behaviour. Be scared, be aware.

Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room (2005, Alex Gibney). Oscar nominee. Adapted from the best-selling non-fiction book by *Fortune* reporters Bethany McLean and Peter Elkind (2003), Gibney's film narrates a major business scandal, showing how far corporations can go in their greed and, yes, stupidity. https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1016268/

Shock Doctrine, The (2009, Mat Whitecross, Michael Winterbottom). http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1355640. Author Naomi Klein, of *No Logo* fame, hated the film, based on her own book, which, paradoxically, is a sort of rather accomplished book trailer for her work. The central concept is disaster capitalism, the idea that corporate business thrives on terror, taking advantage of moments of deep public distress, often caused by corporations in cahoots with corrupt governments.

Inside Job (2010, Charles Ferguson). Oscar award winner. https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1645089/ If you still can't understand how and why the devastating 2008 crisis happened, this will solve all your doubts…

ENVIROMENTAL ACTIVISM: Animal rights, environmental destruction, food consumption

Please, note: *The Cove* (2009) and *Earthlings* (2005) are not here because I needed to focus mainly on America, and not on how American criticize the rest of the world…

Blackfish (2013, Gabriela Cowperthwaite). http://www.imdb.com/title/tt2545118/ Ever been to SeaWorld or watched a dolphin show? See *Blackfish* and feel guilty… Tilikum, a young male orca, was captured to be a star but you cannot ill-treat an animal and expect him to respect humans, can you? See what happened

Project Nim (2011, James Marsh). https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1814836. Intriguingly, this film mirrors to a great extent a fiction film released the same year, *Rise of the Planet of the Apes.* Nim Chimpsky is stolen from his mother to be raised as a child in a human family, and test whether he can learn the basics of grammar. From this point onward, everything goes downhill for the poor ape.

An Inconvenient Truth (2006, David Guggenheim). Oscar-award winner 2006. https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0497116/ Former United States Vice President Al Gore was robbed of the Presidency by the Bush family, and he embarked next on a pioneering career as climate change activist. This is the documentary that started educating audiences about the planetary destruction emergency we now face.

Before the Flood (2016, Fisher Stevens). https://www.imdb.com/title/tt5929776/ A sort of follow-up to *An Inconvenient Truth*, Stevens's film follows UN good-will ambassador Leonardo di Caprio as he talks to the activists and authorities that might help to save the world, as he himself struggles to understand his own position as a privileged American consumer.

GasLand (2010, Josh Fox). Oscar award nominee. https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1558250/ Fox was offered $100000 by a company interested in exploiting the gas resources in his beautiful home in the woods, and suspecting foul play he started exploring the consequences of

fracking. This was the film that first warned the world about the destructiveness of the process.

Trouble the Water (2008, Carl Dea and Tia Lessin). Oscar award nominee. https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1149405/ The US authorities made no effort to get the poorest, African-American inhabitants of New Orleans out of the city before hurricane Katrina hit and the levees broke. Watch first-hand what it was like to survive the flood and the subsequent abandonment of the survivors to their fate.

Cowspiracy: The Sustainability Secret (2014 Kip Andersen Keegan Kuhn). https://www.imdb.com/title/tt3302820 Andersen tries to understand how he can be a better environmental activist by approaching the organizations supposedly in charge of offering advice. What he finds is silence, rejection, and a few horror stories enough to turn anyone into a vegan.

Food, Inc. (2009, Robert Kenner). Oscar award nominee. https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1286537/ Co-produced by Eric Schlosser, the journalist who first described the antics of McDonalds in *Fast Food Nation*, Kenner's film examines how corporate farming in the hands of just five companies poisons Americans with unhealthy ultra-processed food, abusing animals and farmers.

Super Size Me (2004, Morgan Spurlock). Oscar award nominee . https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0390521/ Spurlock wanted to know what happens if you only eat McDonald'd foot, as he did during a month in 2003. The results were so awful that it forced the restaurant chain to introduce important changes in the food it offers (but did they, really…?)

More next week! Stay safe, don't leave home.

21 March 2020 / AS WE DEAL WITH THE ALIEN INVASION: GREAT PRE-21ST CENTURY DOCUMENTARIES TO ENJOY DURING QUARANTINE (1895-1965)

Colleagues and friends tell me that they have kept themselves extremely busy this first week in quarantine but this is because for most people in my circle working at home is hardly a novelty. I myself have really no spare time to fill in which means that I will most likely miss the exciting online offer that cultural institutions, professional artists and plain citizens are pouring onto their websites and their social networks. For those of you who still have a little corner to fill in, here is the announced list of great documentaries from 1895 to 1995 (first part!)–the, so to speak, canonical list that I have asked my students to learn about, and enjoy. Most of these 50 films can be found online one way or another (but check first their duration on IMDB, there are plenty of mutilated versions…). I'm discovering these days that the situation changes from day to day, and films impossible to find one week suddenly appear the next one, either legally or illegally. Others remain, sadly, in a limbo, which is a shame.

1895 *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory*, Louis and Auguste Lumière, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Workers_Leaving_the_Lumière_Factory . The Lumières

didn't know they were making a documentary because the word didn't appear until 1926, when the British father of this film genre, John Grierson, reviewed Robert Flaherty's *Moana* calling it a 'documentary film'. The Lumières were just testing their camera and simply made a record of their workers leaving their premises, lasting under one minute. The film survives in three versions.

1922 *Nanook of the North*, Robert Flaherty, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0013427/ . This is, properly speaking, the first documentary film and also a very controversial starting point. In this film and in *Moana* (set in the Pacific islands, like the 2016 animated *Moana* here known as *Vaiana*), Flaherty had the natives whose lives he was documenting perform scenes staging customs and uses long abandoned. Since then, documentary films are plagued by the question of how close they must stay to the truth.

1927 *Berlin, Die Simphonie der Grosstadt / Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* Walter Ruttman, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0017668/ The idea has been copied countless times: take the camera and see what happens on one day in a big city. Has it ever been done with better insight and taste? I doubt it! The film is also a beautiful homage to Berlin before the rise of the Nazi regime, during the much happier times of the Weimar Republic.

1929 *Cheloveks kino-apparatom / Man with a Movie Camera*, Dziga Vertov, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0019760/ You might think that this is like the Berlin film but set in Moscow. Yes and no. Vertov's film is a riot of images full of life with shows the Soviet capital as pure humanity, with a sensuality and a freedom that is certainly unexpected, and exhilarating. Don't miss the birth scene…

1929 *Regen / Rain*, Joris Ivens, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0020321/ A short documentary based on a very simple concept: recording one rainy day in Amsterdam. The film, as it turns out, took longer to make than that. It has a lovely, strangely melancholy air, very much like the rain… which is the whole point.

1929 *Drifters*, John Grierson, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0019838/ North Sea herring fishing may not sound like a very exciting subject, particularly considering that this is a silent black and white film. Grierson, however, shows here in the only film he directed (he was mainly a producer) how little is needed to make a memorable record of life at sea. And show respect for the fishermen.

1930 *À Propos de Nice*, Jean Vigo, Boris Kaufman, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0021576/ Another silent, black and white film, which offers a slice of life like no other. Vigo and Kaufman show street life in Nice, on the French Cote d'Azur, mocking its richer inhabitants but transmitting the enjoyment of popular celebrations with glee.

1935 *Triumph of the Will*, Leni Riefenstahl, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0025913/ Yes: I'm recommending that you watch Riefenstahl portrait of the 1934 massive Nuremberg Nazi rally. This was a winner for Best Foreign Documentary at the Venice Film Festival and a film that Frank Capra and other American directors studied very

closely for its lessons in political propaganda, copied by the Allies during WWII. We must all understand Nazism for it not to reappear.

1936 *Night Mail*, Herbert Smith, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0250616/ This is one of Grierson's pro-Government, propaganda pieces –but who cares? The film manages to make the subject of how mail is gathered in one end of Britain and moved at night in trains to the other end a moving portrait of British efficiency, public service, and care. Like *Drifters*, it pays homage to the average working man, not a very common subject in our days.

1937 *The Spanish Earth*, Joris Ivens, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0029594/ This is a pro-Republican propaganda film, made in the middle of the Spanish Civil War, narrated by Ernest Hemingway (reading his own texts and others by John Dos Passos). It's, I'm sorry to say, a truly misguided portrait of Spain in those times, good only for laughs, though it still enjoys great prestige. I was flabbergasted by hearing Catalan sardanas as the background music for village life in Madrid… But do watch it!

1938 *Inside Nazi Germany*, Jack Glenn, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0131471/ An amazingly brave, bold description of Nazi Germany released twenty months before the beginning of WWII, which shows in all detail and clarity what Hitler and company were doing. Glenn, an American director, did his best but the world was not listening… Or it was, but trying not to have a new world war.

1943 *Fires Were Started*, Humphrey Jennings, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0035881/ See how firefighters coped with the bombings and the fires in London during the Blitz. Technically this is a docudrama, since most scenes are staged, but the gimmick does not mean it is less valuable for that. An homage indeed to the heroes who endured all kinds of sacrifices for their neighbours.

1943 *The Battle of Midway*, John Ford, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0034498/ Lt. Cmdr. John Ford U.S.N.R made this 18 minute colour documentary in the middle of the real Battle of Midway, with great danger to his life. The purpose was showing audiences back home what WWII aerial combat was like. The problem is that having seen re-enactments (like the 1976 *Midway* film) this looks less exciting –but remember that men are dying on screen for real.

1946 *Let there be Light*, John Huston, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0038687/ Huston was commissioned to document the progress of a group of traumatized veterans receiving psychiatric treatment back home once WWII was over but the US military could not stomach this heartfelt portrait of the suffering men. The film, which is a marvel to watch, was suppressed until 1980, when Vietnam had made PTSD a well-known concept. Please, please, please: do see it!

1948 *Le Sang des bêtes/ The Blood of Beasts* Georges Franju, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0041842/ It's only 22 minutes long but I had to stop watching after just a few minutes –Franju's camera shows lovely Paris and then what is

done to the animals in a local slaughterhouse with no frills. You can call this one the first pro-vegan film.

1955 *Nuit et bruillard / Night and Fog*, Alain Resnais, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0048434/ This may be hard to believe but few people after WWII wanted to hear what survivors had to say about the Nazi extermination camps. Resnais's short film, made ten years!! after the end of the war, was the first one to bring to light for the benefit of a general audiences what the Nazis did. It completely changed the way the suffering of the Jews and other victims was (mis)understood.

1959 *Moi, un noir/ I, a Negro*, Jean Rouch, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0051942/ This one requires a very patient viewer, but if you can accept the amateurish footage and the poor sound (badly inserted afterwards), you might enjoy this singular pioneering portrait of a migrant's life. The young Nigerian who interests Rouch survives as well he can in Abidjan, capital of the Ivory Coast, in an interesting case of intra-African migration.

1959 *We are the Lambeth Boys*, Karel Reisz, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0052380/ This is one of the 1950s documentaries recording ordinary British life in the 1950s associated with the Free Cinema movement (Reisz would have a long career as fiction film director). The Lambeth Boys are not a gang, but a youth club –do marvel at how much the young have and have not changed since 1959. And at the local accent!

1960 *Primary*, Robert Drew, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0054205/ Employing a *cinéma vérité* style Drew films presidential pre-candidates John F. Kennedy and Hubert H. Humphrey during the Democratic Wisconsin primary (1960). The film inaugurates a political sub-genre later imitated by many others, in, for instance, *The War Room* (about Clinton).

1961 *Chronique d'un été / Chronicle of a Summer*, Jean Rouch & Edgar Morin, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0054745/. Authentic French *cinéma vérité* by the director of *Moi, un noir* (and Morin). They send their female assistants to ask Parisians randomly met on the street whether they are happy. Their replies lead to a reflection on what we mean by happiness in a quite existential vein.

1964- *The Up Series*, Paul Almond (as *Seven Up!*) then Michael Apted, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Up_(film_series) The *Up* series is an ITV (later BBC) series, which has been documenting the lives of fourteen British citizens since 1964, when they were aged 7. It has now passed its ninth instalment (in 2019) and will presumably continue.

1964 *Point of Order!*, Emile de Antonio, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0058481/ De Antonio does here something marvelously clever: he edits down to 97 thrilling minutes the TV footage of the 1954 Army-McCarthy hearings (Senator McCarthy was accused of seeking to obtain from the Army special privileges for a Private he was using as a spy). Along the film, which has no voiceover, we see the infamous McCarthy dig his own grave with increasing arrogance and cruelty. No need to add any comment…

1965 *The War Game*, Peter Watkins, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0059894/ The BBC asked Watkins to make a docudrama showing the effects of a nuclear bomb dropped on an average British city (Rochester in Kent). The result was so scary that the film was not shown until 1985 (though it did win an Oscar). Can a low-budget, black and white film be so frightening? I was absolutely terrified –please watch it!

Enough for today… the rest next week! Stay safe, keep well.

I publish a post once a week (follow @SaraMartinUAB). Comments are very welcome! Download the yearly volumes from: http://ddd.uab.cat/record/116328. My web: http://gent.uab.cat/saramartinalegre/

29 March 2020 / AS WE DEAL WITH THE ALIEN INVASION: GREAT PRE-21ST CENTURY DOCUMENTARIES TO ENJOY DURING QUARANTINE (1966-1996)

Second week of confinement, already. The situation as a friend tells me, feels surreal. Here we are working a long day at home as we often do, which feels completely normal. Then we sign off our virtual world and the real world punches us in the face with enormous figures for casualties, reports on overcrowded emergency services in hospitals, elderly people dying in scores in underfunded homes, and an extended quarantine (if this means 'forty days', that's what we should be ready for, if not longer). The novelty in relation to last week is that it seems now unlikely that schools, from kindergarten to universities, will reopen. And for the record, yes, I think it was absolutely wrong to allow the feminist demonstrations of last 8 March, and any other mass event. But, then, the world looked very different. Only the day before, I had lunch with my friends and though I avoided the demonstrations, I spent a cheerful Sunday morning enjoying an exhibition of William Klein's photography. Those were happy times.

As announced, here is a second list of great documentaries, from 1966 to 1996. Again, most of these films can be found online one way or another. As you may imagine, the difficulty is that documentary films have proliferated in recent decades for the very simple reason that equipment has become cheaper and, thus, more generally available. Anyone can now make a documentary film with a smartphone and basic editing tools, though the real boom started in the 1980s when video was introduced. We tend to forget that in earlier periods image and sound were recorded separately, which required at least two persons carrying rather heavy equipment to shoot film. Of course, modern documentaries can be as sophisticated as the budget allows it (just think of David Attenborough's astonishing nature series for the BBC, any of them!) but they are always on the whole much cheaper to make than fiction movies. Beyond this, documentary films seem to have taken a major leap in abundance and cinematic prestige in the 1990s, which is why my selection for that decade may seem quite poor. I also grant that international representation is here limited.

1967 *Don't Look Back*, D.A. Pennebaker, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0061589/ This is the documentary where you see a young Dylan holding a series of cardboard notices which he drops one by one as the lyrics in song "Subterranean Homesick Blues" progress. Pennebaker followed the singer-composer during his first major tour in the UK to offer a candid portrait. If you're a fan, this will make you happy; if you're not, you will also feel happy: the film confirms that Dylan was, at least at that point, a pretentious egomaniac.

1967 *Titicut Follies*, Frederick Wiseman, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0062374/ Wiseman has 47 credits as director to his name and is a major institution in the field of American documentary. Funnily, he has won no Oscars except an honorary award (2017). *Titicut Follies*, his first film, is quite uncomfortable to watch: it asks you to consider what life is like inside a rather improvable mental health institution. Curiously, Wiseman made next *High School* (1968) perhaps because he found that institution another type of madhouse.

1969 *Salesman*, Albert Maysles, David Maysles, and Charlotte Zwerin, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0064921/ The Maysles brothers, kings of the uncomfortable documentary above Wiseman, team up with Zwerin to follow four rather obnoxious luxury Bibles salesmen as they play all their tricks to convince poor Catholic families to buy their products. The filmmakers pass no judgement, but audiences squirm.

1969 *Le chagrin et la pitié / The Sorrow and the Pity*, Marcel Ophüls, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0066904/ French 'chagrin' does mean sorrow or grief, but 'chagrin' also exists in English as a synonym for 'mortification'. This is what French audiences were asked to endure for more than four hours, as Ophüls narrates the collaboration of the Vichy Regime with the Nazi occupiers in the extermination of the French Jews.

1970 *Woodstock*, Michael Wadleigh, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0066580/ A three-hour long documentary summarizing the three-day epic concert that defined the hippy era. This is a must-see for anyone interested in both aspects: the music and the youth culture of the time, at its happiest.

1970 *Gimme Shelter*, Albert Maysles, David Maysles, and Charlotte Zwerin, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0065780/ The Rolling Stones missed Woodstock and they decided to offer instead a free concert on a California highway. What followed was major chaos, including the murder of a man right before the stage where the Stones were trying to restrain the anarchic crowd. The Maysles brothers and Zwerin were there to document the sorry mess.

1973-74 *The World at War* (mini-series), Jeremy Isaacs (producer), https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0071075/ I'm breaking my own rules here by including a series, but the 26 episodes of Isaacs' production are simply astounding. I did see the whole series as a little girl on Spanish TV's second channel, then called UHF, which says much for what public television used to be like.

1974 *Hearts and Minds*, Peter Davies, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0071604/ This American documentaries tries hard to offer a balanced view of the Vietnam conflict, asking all sides for their view. Made in the later stages of the war, the film offers now in hindsight a very complete reflection on the reasons why the United States lost that war. General Westmoreland, head of the US forces, has the gall to say that Vietnamese people do not value life 'as we do'.

1975 *Grey Gardens*, Albert Maysles, David Maysles, Ellen Hovde, and Muffie Meyer, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0073076/ Talk about discomfort… The Maysles brothers and their co-directors document the life of elderly Edith Bouvier Beale and her middle-aged daughter Little Edie in their derelict mansion. Mother and daughter seem a duo out of a Tennessee Williams play but they happened to be Jackie Kennedy's aunt and cousin. It's hard to say which aspect of this documentary is more exploitative. Perhaps watch instead the perfect parody in the series *Documentary Now!*, *Sandy Passage* (https://www.imdb.com/title/tt4943628/)

1976 *Harlan County U.S.A.*, Barbara Kopple, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0074605/ *American Factory*, 2020's Oscar award winner, is heavily indebted to Kopple's pro-union activism in this film. She documents the miners' strike against the Eastover Mining Company in Harlan County, Kentucky, in June 1973, a conflict of remarkable virulence in which the bosses did not hesitate to use hired guns against the workers.

1978 *The Last Waltz*, Martin Scorsese, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0077838/ The Band were a Canadian-American rock ensemble of great fame during their first period (1968-1977), though I confess that I only learned they existed because of Scorsese's film. He documents, with taste and beautiful unaffectedness, what was supposed to be their last concert. They returned for a second period of lesser fame in 1983.

1982 *Sans soleil*, Chris Marker, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0084628/ Marker is known for his avant-garde short film *La Jetée* (1962), which inspired Terry Gilliam's *Twelve Monkeys* (1995). In *Sans soleil* he follows a woman's journey beginning in Japan, offering a sort of personal travelogue filmed in Marker's unique poetical style.

1982 *Koyaanisqatsi*, Godfrey Reggio, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0085809/ Reggio's film (followed in 1988 by *Powaqqatsi*) is a plotless documentary that asks the viewer to enjoy a collections of beautifully photographed scenes showing how everything in the world is interrelated. Others have followed a similar path but this was the pioneer. A real beauty.

1984 *Stop Making Sense*, Jonathan Demme, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0088178/ Demme won an Oscar in 1991 for *The Silence of the Lambs* but he appears to have had a far more joyful time filming a concert of The Talking Heads, led by the volatile David Byrne, at a time when the band were at their best. The minimalist style works surprisingly well and it's just great fun to watch.

1985 *Shoah*, Claude Lanzmann, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0090015/ Even though it is nine and a half hours long, Lanzmann's very personal account of the traces left by the Holocaust in Europe is not a series. It is an indispensable work but at the same time a problematic one. Lanzmann has too much visibility and his confrontational style is at points awkward. Enjoy, if you have the patience.

1988 *Hôtel Terminus: The Life and Times of Klaus Barbie*, Barbet Schroeder, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0095341/ In contrast to *Shoah*, the four and a half hours Schroeder takes to tell the story of Nazi executioner Barbie are fully justified. This is a tale of horror that shows not only, as Ophüls denounced, the connivance of the French authorities with the Nazis but also, as Schroeder adds, how easy it was for these criminals to escape the law for decades.

1989 *Roger & Me*, Michael Moore, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0098213/ The Roger of the title is Roger B. Smith, the CEO of General Motors who closed down the plant employing thousands of workers in Flint, Michigan –Moore's hometown. Throughout the film Moore chases Smith, hoping to understand the massive downsizing but, as you may imagine, the executive (or is it executioner?) does his best to avoid him.

1989 *The Thin Blue Line*, Errol Morris, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0096257/ The thin red line were the soldiers that, according to Rudyard Kipling, saved the nation from disaster. Unformed in blue, not red, policemen fail to bring order and safety in Morris's classic documentary about the miscarriages of justice. The gradual unveiling of the truth has been copied by countless true crime documentaries.

1990 *Paris Is Burning*, Jennie Livingston, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0100332/ This film is not at all about the fall of Paris to the Nazi invaders during WWII as one might assume, but about the non-white drag scene in 1980s New York. Livingston films the low-income men doing their best to enjoy themselves in this competitive culture, also closely associated with voguing (which Madonna vampirized for one of her hits).

1991 *Hearts of Darkness: A Filmmaker's Apocalypse*, Fax Bahr and George Hickenlooper, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0102015/ Eleanor Coppola, Francis Ford Coppola's wife, provided the footage on which *Hearts of Darkness* is based. The film documents the disastrous shooting of *Apocalypse Now!* in the Philippines (standing in for Vietnam). Coppola's film was an uncredited adaptation of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, hence the documentary's title.

1993 *The War Room*, D. A. Pennebaker and Chris Hegedus https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0108515/ This documentary connects with *Primary* (1960) and *Street Fight* (2005) as great examples of the behind-the-scenes non-fiction film about political campaigns. Here the focus falls on spin doctors James Carville and George Stephanopoulos, organizers of Clinton's first Presidential campaign (who is not at all the star here).

1994 *Crumb*, Terry Zwigoff, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0109508/ American cartoonist Robert Crumb is presented here in all his glory (or lack of it) in the context of

his disastrous family life. This the kind of film that justifies why an American male genius can also be an utterly unlikeable personality and that never gets made about a woman (who are not really geniuses, are we?)

1994 *Hoop Dreams*, Steve James, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0110057/ James follows the lives of African-American teenagers William Gates and Arthur Agee for five years, while they struggle to transform their passion for basketball into a ticket out of the Chicago ghettos where they live. The film documents with surprising intimacy the lives of the boys and of their families, offering a sad, stirring description of the difficulties they face. James's portrait of American high school and university basketball as the key to the NBA's American dream is not overtly critical but any spectator can see that the road ahead for William and Arthur is a very steep climb.

1995 *The Celluloid Closet*, by Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0112651/ Based on Vitto Russo's book, *The Celluloid Closet* proves what you suspected: even under the restrictive Hays Code, Hollywood managed to insert in their film plenty of allusions to male and female homosexuality. These become apparent if you only know where to look, which is what Russo did. Epstein and Friedman added interviews with actors who had played key parts in this hidden history.

1996, *When We Were Kings*, Leion Gast, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0118147/ I don't enjoy boxing at all but this is an excellent insight into the top level of this so-called sport. Gast's film narrates 'The Rumble in the Jungle' as the fight between young champion George Foreman and the quite old challenger Muhammad Ali (the former Cassius Clay) was known. This took place in 1974, not in the USA but in Zaire, under the auspices of dictator Mobutu Sese Seko.

Enjoy!!! Stay home, keep safe.

7 April 2020 / *TIGER KING*, WHAT ELSE?: THE VIEW INSIDE AND OUTSIDE AMERICA

As I have mentioned in my previous posts, I'm currently teaching an elective third/fourth year course on Cultural Studies, taking as case study the representation of the United States in 21st century documentary films (see one of the volumes that has inspired me, Jeffrey Geiger's *American Documentary Film: Projecting the Nation*, Edinburgh UP (2013), here: https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/american-documentary-film/AA1BF73143D4FD1F33160FCA0CEDF3C9). I feel, therefore, bound to comment on Netflix's current world-wide hit, the US documentary mini-series *Tiger King: Murder, Mayhem and Madness* (released March 2020), though I certainly do not feel bound to recommend it. I saw it on two consecutive evenings and I must say that while the first four episodes (out of seven) were thrilling ad hilarious, the last three were less enticing, mainly because the directors, Rebecca Chaiklin and Eric Goode, somehow lose sight of the chronology of events in them. Incidentally, this is the first credit as director for

Goode, whereas Chaiklin had already directed *Last Party 2000* (2001), *Lockdown, USA* (2006, with Michael Skolnik) and *Another World* (2014, with Fisher Stevens).

Since the phenomenon around *Tiger King* is so gigantic right now –no doubt because the covid-19 quarantine has made the lurid series a favourite with audiences desperate for entertainment– it is arguably necessary to watch it and join the conversation. I don't intend here to comment on the plot in detail but to take the chance to consider a) what makes a good documentary and b) how judgement necessarily varies if passed inside or outside the society portrayed in the film. I have noticed in work written by my students a worrying tendency to assume an insider position, using 'we' when in fact they should use 'Americans'. I would agree that many aspects of American society are now universal, mostly thanks to 1990s globalisation, but this does not mean that US narrative, including documentaries, is not rooted in specific local concerns. 'We' are not 'they' and anyone who approaches American texts, and for that matter any foreign text, must bear this fact in mind. Of course, human beings have the ability to understand texts across cultural divides bigger than the one separating my students from the American films we're analysing but I just don't see US college students writing about a Spanish documentary using 'we'.

A while ago I started preparing for my students' benefit a list of criteria about what makes a documentary valuable, collated from several sources. Here it is:

- clear storyline (the documentary film tells a story, and if it tells several, these are presented in ways the audience can follow)
- powerful story/character arc (a good documentary makes us care about its topic, which does not necessarily mean that you empathize with the persons portrayed: it means that you google for more information the moment you're done watching)
- originality of topic (the topic must be interesting and if it is not at first glance, then it should be made attractive by the film)
- quality of research /depth (audiences can see that an effort has been made to sustain the 'truth' presented with adequate fact-finding that can be double-checked)
- clarity of presentation / good narrative flow (or quality direction)
- creativity of presentation (also quality direction, though many documentaries while not necessarily creative narrate relevant stories extremely well)
- strong interviews (or actors' performances, in case some scenes are staged, or most if the film is a docudrama)
- exclusive access (the filmmakers go where no members of the audience could not go, and have their subjects trust them as no one else did before)
- trustworthiness (the documentary stays as close as possible to the 'truth' which the filmmakers endorse, though this might not be the truth for other persons)
- complicity with audiences (the filmmakers assume that their audience is intelligent and do not patronize them)
- quality audio, cinematography, editing and music, with editing possibly as the most salient aspect
- adequate runtime (the film does not overstay its welcome, nor is its narrative too limited)

Just then I came across a similar list by a man who knows a thing or two about documentaries: Michael Moore. Here are his thirteen rules, summarized from *IndieWire*, 10 September 2014; https://www.indiewire.com/feature/michael-moores-13-rules-for-making-documentary-films-22384/), check the complete article for his comments. Please, note that he is thinking exclusively of the United States and addressing American filmmakers:

1. Don't make a documentary—make a MOVIE (call yourself a filmmaker, not a documentarian, and don't be ashamed of being entertaining or non-artistically inclined)
2. Don't tell me shit I already know [taken verbatim] (and focus on the majority of intelligent US audiences)
3. Avoid the college lecture mode of telling a story.
4. Don't make your documentaries feel like medicine your audience must swallow.
5. Make your left-wing position fun, as it used to be.
6. Name the villains and be serious about the political things currently going on in the United States of America, even if people sue you.
7. Make your films personal, let them show your concern to the audience.
8. Point your cameras at the media cameras and expose the lies and manipulation.
9. Make audiences care for documentary films as much as they care for non-fiction books and TV.
10. As much as possible, try to film only the people who disagree with you [taken verbatim]; or, the people you disagree with.
11. Try to imagine what audiences will feel seeing each scene you have filmed, be emotional.
12. Less is more. Edit. Cut. Make it shorter. Say it with fewer words. Fewer scenes. [also verbatim]
13. Finally… Sound is more important than picture for Sound carries the story. It's true in a fiction film, too. The image may suck, but never the sound.

Now, back to *Tiger King*. For me, the problem with this documentary is that it uses as bait its main issue –the exploitation of big cats for entertainment in American private zoos– but turns out to be far more interested in the exploiters. Not only the titular Tiger King, the bizarre Joe Exotic, but also other men in his circle (Bhagavan Antle of Myrtle Beach Safari, Tim Stark of Wildlife in Need, crooked businessman Jeff Lowe, and even a mafia boss whose name I cannot find). Whether straight or gay, like our friend Exotic, these men embody a sense of entitlement, over the poor big cats and over the persons they attract as lovers or as audiences with their zoos, that the documentary fails to question. They are all criminals but the only actions that are questioned by Goode and Chaiklin are those of the main female character, Carol Baskin of Big Cat Rescue. Willa Paskin complains in a *Slate* article that *Tiger King* chose the wrong villain to focus on, not just because Baskin is the only important woman among this circle of misogynistic men (that too), but most importantly because in this "sordid menagerie of human beings" she is the only one who cares for the big cats as a pro-animal activist (https://slate.com/culture/2020/03/tiger-king-netflix-carole-baskin-villain.html).

As I watched the documentary, I missed with growing concern this angle of the story. It is hard to believe in the filmmakers' trustworthiness given that although their series avowedly intends to show disgust at animal exploitation, the abundant images of cute cubs will most likely result in more Americans visiting one of these awful zoos or trying to buy a big cat as pet. The documentary begins by noting that there are more big cats in captivity in America than in the wild in the rest of the world but, ultimately, only cares for the business and personal imbroglios of the men it portrays and to bash Carole Baskin, throwing as much dirt as possible on her. This is why, if I look at the two sets of rules I have offered above, I cannot say that *Tiger King* is a good documentary. If you ask me, I believe it is actually a very bad documentary, mere docutainment to fill in five and a half hours of harrowing covid-19 quarantine. There are much better documentary films and series on offer, even on Netflix, but in our times, I guess, audiences crave for this kind of trash.

Now for the insider/outsider view. Writing for *The Guardian*, American writer Jessa Crispin (editor-in-chief of litblog-webzine *Bookslut*, and author among others of *Why I Am Not A Feminist: A Feminist Manifesto* (2017)), discusses *Tiger King* as "our world back to us –one run by megalomaniacs and amateurs". 'Us', of course, means Americans, and she traces in her article a not-so-obvious comparison between the documentary and the current covid-19 reality, reading the mini-series as "the hidden realities of a society that can't take care of its sick and poor" (see https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/apr/04/tiger-king-reflects-our-world-back-to-us-one-run-by-megalomaniacs-and-amateurs). The point she makes is that Joe Exotic and Donald Trump are part of the same American socio-cultural landscape, despite the apparent class and occupation differences, which I grant. "We are the Tiger King. The Tiger King is us", Crispin acknowledges in dismay, for "This bringing of the wild into our domestic spaces is, after all, what got us sick"; though the origin of covid-19 is not a big cat zoo in America, it turns out that the so-called Spanish flu of 1918 originated in a Kansas slaughterhouse. The disease documented in *Tiger King*, "the drive for power, the constant need for more, the willingness to remove any obstacle to what you desire, even by using violence", or in short entitlement, is the reason why America "can't pass regulations that would reduce real suffering" right now, in the middle of the coronavirus-related horrors.

As an American, Crispin has the right to criticize her own country, but do I? Do my students? One of them asked me how come that most of the documentaries in our list maintain a similarly critical position, and I replied that this is because I have cheated, selecting only those with left-wing credentials. Noticing that quite a few of these documentaries have right-wing counterparts I joked that next time I should teach a course on the Republican documentary –maybe I should, if only for balance. The question is that watching *Tiger King* as a Catalan/Spaniard/European I feel compelled to say that the United States, as represented in this mini-series, appear to be a very sick society. Whether I should or should not voice that opinion, it is hard to find anything positive in *Tiger King*, not only in the characters' actions but in the filmmakers' intentions. I assume that Goode and Chaikin were not thinking of international audiences, only of shocking US national audiences. Yet, they must have realized that

their mini-series confirms a lingering suspicion: that the United States are past their prime as a world-leading society.

Even a far less sensationalist documentary, 2020 Oscar Award winner, *American Factory* (another Netflix-backed product) gives the same impression, despite dealing with a story of working-class heroic resilience against all odds. Why, in short, I'm wondering, do American texts oscillate between the simplistic patriotism of so many run-of-the-mill action films and the crudity of the true-crime flood coming out of Netflix? Can't American filmmakers see how deeply eroded the image of the United States already is, nationally and internationally? Arguably, they do, and products like *Tiger King* should be read as a waking-up call, though the mini-series seems to be just another very American freak show.

19 April 2020 / AS WE DEAL WITH THE ALIEN INVASION: MORE GREAT DOCUMENTARIES TO ENJOY DURING QUARANTINE (2000-2020)

I woke up this morning thinking 'ok, time to write a bit'. But, what about? I wanted originally to rant and rave about the absurd ideas that I have come across these days reading new bibliography on *Wuthering Heights* but it is hard to put one's heart into academic stuff as if this mattered in the current circumstances. Then I told myself 'maybe you need to write about the black mood you're in, in case anyone shares the feeling' but, though I might do that next week, I don't feel rational enough today (add to this that it is raining quite hard). Besides, everyone is writing opinion pieces about the impact of Covid-19 and I don't see what else can be added, except a huge scream (no good to fill a post). It's a no-win situation: Covid-19 seems to be the only relevant matter and it is next to impossible to think of anything else, but at the same time thinking of the coronavirus is exhausting and one needs to focus on something else… or go mental.

So, for the time being, I'm going back to the elective course I'm teaching and offering another round of recommended documentaries. They are filling in my time beautifully and if you have problems, as I'm beginning to have, reading fiction for pleasure because it is hard to stay focused, then watching documentaries is a good alternative. The list that follows has a first section on gender/sexuality and a second miscellaneous list which I have called 'Icons of America'.

2011 *Miss Representation*, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1784538/ by Jennifer Siebel Newsom and Kimberlee Acquaro. Siebel is also the director of *The Mask You Live In* (see below), which is a sort of companion piece to this film. As the clever title indicates *Miss Representation* describes how the media misrepresent women's image to keep us enslaved to a view of who we are which only favours the interests of corporations, which are the interests of patriarchy. It created quite a stir but then, typically, it has taken almost a decade for a variety of younger women's movements to do something more or less effective about the same issues.

2012 *How to Survive a Plague*, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2124803/ by David France. The plague here is AIDS, for which, we must remember, there is not yet a vaccine even though the disease has been around for thirty years. France documents the efforts of ACT UP and TAG to transform the deathly plague into a chronic condition many persons live with through long years. Exactly what we need right now: a plan to stop the new plague based on people's own activism and regardless of what the incompetent politicians in government do.

2012 *The Invisible War*, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2120152/ by Kirby Dick. You may recall how in *G.I. Jane* (1997, Ridley Scott) Demi Moore's character, a Navy SEAL trainee, is raped to teach her the lesson of how to endure that kind of attack in combat. Dick's film shows how rape is used in real-life to teach women in the military the lesson that they are not wanted. What the brave survivors who learned to fight together teach is another lesson: being raped by your own brothers in arms, men you trust, is much worse than anything that can happen in combat –and should never be covered up the military hierarchy.

2014 *She's Beautiful When She's Angry*, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt3319508/ by Mary Dore. This documentary should be mandatory viewing in all (secondary) schools and universities because it is a thrilling overview of how Second Wave feminism started and unfolded. With plenty of original footage and interviews with the women protagonists, it is indeed not just a documentary but a document of immense interest. Of course if you see next *Miss Representation* you also become aware of how much is done daily to repress women's defence of our own personal freedom.

2015 *The Mask You Live In*, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt3983674/ by Jennifer Siebel Newsom. Another documentary that should be mandatory viewing, in this case for offering an exceptionally accurate and straightforward exposure of how patriarchy is damaging masculinity. The 'mask' refers here to the patriarchal demand to be tough, express no emotion and be in control, which is turning many men into unhappy persons and in the worst case scenario suicidal mental wrecks.

2019 *At the Heart of Gold: Inside the US Gymnastic Scandal* https://www.imdb.com/title/tt8299654/ by Erin Lee Car. Prepare to cry your heart out. Dr. Larry Nassar, posing as a lovely, trustworthy friend, managed to abuse sexually hundreds of American girl gymnasts, including those in the USA Olympic team. He told girls that his gross manipulation of their bodies was just medical treatment, which left his victims confused and feeling guilty for suspecting their 'friend' of a misdemeanour. Until a girl unconnected with the world of gymnastics sounded the alarm about Nassar's methods… and the rest finally awoke to the reality of what had been done to them.

2001 *War Photographer*, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0309061/ by Christian Frei. The Swiss director documents here the amazing career of American war photographer James Nachtwey (who is not really retired yet). The film shows a selection of Nachtwey's iconic works, interviews the man himself (who comes across as incredibly serene) and follows him into combat using ingenious photography technology. Wondering whether it is right

to invade the intimacy of the victims of man-made disaster Nachtwey concludes that he is a necessary witness. He is also a most humane one.

2006 *Finding Vivien Maier*, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2714900/ by John Maloof and Charlie Siskel. Maloof bought at an auction a box full of old negatives which, when developed, turned out be photos by an unknown master photographer. His search led eventually to the discovery of Vivien Maier, an anonymous woman who had worked as a nanny in New York and who, as her secret hobby, documented life as she saw it. This raises many questions: would all trace of Maier have disappeared without Maloof? How many geniuses we have never heard of have been lost?

2010 *Bill Cunningham's New York*, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1621444/ by Richard Press. A delicious portrayal of a unique man. Cunningham was a *New York Times* photographer for many years, in charge of documenting street fashions and social events connected with this field. Humble, not at all in love with luxury but with a sharp eye for personality and innovation in fashion, Cunningham left an amazing legacy while keeping his personal life and identity protected from inquisitive eyes.

2003 *My Architect*, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0373175/ by Nathaniel Kahn. The architect in question is first-rank American architect Louis Kahn, here portrayed by his son, Nathaniel. Note that the title is not *My Father*, or *My Father the Architect*, because what Nathaniel explores here is the question of why workaholic geniuses like his father cannot really be good parents. Or husbands, for Nathaniel was Louis's extramarital son. Nathaniel does admire his father, and gives a loving account of his main buildings, but he still wonders why those took precedence over family life.

2005 *The Devil and Daniel Johnston*, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0436231/ by Jeff Fuerzeig. This is a strange documentary a strange artist mainly because, as happens with the documentary on Cobain (see next), much of the material used here comes from the artist himself. Johnston suffered from mental disorders that went undiagnosed for a long time, and whose imagery closely connected with the religious beliefs of the family ha had tried to leave behind. The documentary focuses on the issue of whether Johnston's musical and artistic genius came from his mental imbalance, implicitly suggesting it did.

2015 *Cobain: Montage of Heck*, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt4229236/ by Brett Morgen. A terrific 'montage' of artwork, videos and handwritten texts by Cobain himself and his family, complemented with key interviews, Morgen's film approaches Cobain from childhood to his suicide on a quite intimate basis. The image that emerges is that of a happy child for whom suddenly life turned badly after his parents' divorce, and who was heading all the time towards disaster. Everyone loved Cobain for his music but he only loved drugs, because, quite clearly, he didn't love himself.

2015 *Janis: Little Girl Blue*, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt3707114/ by Amy Berg. A candid portrait of Janis Joplin, America's most extraordinary (white) blues singer and a woman who taught herself how to be free. Unlike Cobain, Joplin comes across as a woman who loved her life but who, like him, could not control her addictions. In her

case the tragedy was not caused by mental instability or lifelong depression but by a tragic accident in her chaotic life as an addict. John Lennon once said that people take drugs because society makes life unbearable but Berg's film suggests that artists like Joplin just could not keep their distance from the deadliest fad of their times and circle.

2015 *What Happened, Miss Simone?*, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt4284010/ by Liz Garbus. Nina Simone was rescued from oblivion by a 1987 commercial for a perfume featuring one of her songs. She had been a musical star, a powerful Civil Rights activist, and a singular example of female liberation in the 1960s but threw everything overboard to start a downwards spiral of her own making. Simone moved, of all places, to Liberia, stopped performing, resurfaced in France, drowned in loneliness and diverse substances… What happened, indeed?

2013 *20 Feet from Stardom*, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2396566/ by Morgan Neville. This is a bittersweet look at the mostly African American women who work as backup singers for top international stars. Talented and gifted with beautiful voices that illuminate many favourite songs, these women remain anonymous and, judging from what the film narrates, hardly ever succeed in walking those twenty feet. As happens with secondary actors, perhaps audiences simply should pay more attention to their contribution.

2017 *Bright Lights: Starring Carrie Fisher and Debbie Reynolds*, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt5651050/ by Alexis Bloom and Fisher Stevens. An intimate portrait of classic Hollywood star Debbie Reynolds and her daughter Carrie Fisher, Princess Leia in the *Star Wars* saga, produced by their son and brother Todd Fisher. News of Carrie's sudden death were too much for her mother, and the film pays here posthumous homage to both. Bloom and Stevens explore not only their careers but also what it is like to be the child of Hollywood royalty.

2018 *RBG*, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt7689964/, by Julie Cohen and Betsy West. Every time US Supreme Court Ruth Bader Ginsburg (b. 1933) gets sick, the heart of progressive America flutters. When she goes the country will lose not only a beloved personality but also the person preventing the institution she works for from falling into the dark side of total conservatism. Cohen's and West's film is an undisguised hagiography, an in-your-face homage to a very special woman who does really deserve it. Mimi Leder's recent *On the Basis of Sex* (2018), with Felicity Jones as RBG, also deals with her career.

2010 *Marwencol*, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1391092/ by Jeff Malmberg. I don't see much point in making fiction films based on previous documentaries. In this case, I almost missed *Marwencol* because I didn't like much Robert Zemeckis's *Welcome to Marwen* (2018). What is embarrassing in Zemeckis's film is, however, fascinating in Malmberg's. Mark Hogancamp was the victim of a brutal attack and, left to deal as well he could with the aftermath, he found comfort in building in his backyard a toy town, Marwencol, where he staged a WWII saga but also found healing. His photos are pure art of a personal, strange kind.

2016 *Gleason*, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt4632316/ by Clay Tweel. Steve Gleason, a successful NFL football player, saw his life take a tragic turn when he was diagnosed with ALS. This film documents his making of a series of videos for the baby his wife expects, as both battle with the effects of this degenerative disease and become fund-raising activists. An admirable example of love for life against all odds.

Enjoy!

27 April 2020 / COMBATING SPIRITUAL NUMBNESS: COVID-19 AND THE NEED FOR UTOPIA

This is my forty-third day at home, which means that technically I have passed quarantine, a period which used to mean forty days, and not as it does now a variable period of time extended by Government decrees. Today, Sunday, children have been allowed to take a one-hour walk for the first time in weeks, and this feels as a turning point of sorts, even though there is no way we can predict what lies ahead of us. Minister for Universities Manuel Castells announced this week that the new university year should be started in September with caution, taking into account the high probability of a second bout of infection. He spoke of classrooms that should be occupied only partially to guarantee social distancing (why is this not called *personal* distancing?) and that would be disinfected between sessions. This is so impractical and preposterous that I think Castells meant that in practice we'll stay online for at least one more semester. I personally prefer that to taking overcrowded trains to travel to UAB, or speaking to colleagues and students from a distance of six feet, and wearing a facemask.

For those of us fortunate enough to continue working at home, this is a ghostly crisis. Life maintains a certain level of normality until the 'other' world appears. This consists of the persons working to guarantee our everyday routine: supermarket cashiers, bakers, food market sellers, sanitation workers, workers at factories and fields, employees of tech companies that guarantee we can work online, those who make sure we can still get water, power, gas, petrol… etc. For them, the changes caused by Covid-19 must be very different from what they are for persons like myself, but, then, where are they supposed to discuss them? Twitter, I guess. And, then, there's the really scary 'other' world, the one we see grossly misrepresented in the media and, if we are less fortunate, in person in the hospitals. It's hard to imagine the level of terror that doctors and nurses, patients and relatives, have been putting up with while the rest of us discuss the boredom caused by lockdown or the limitations of the Netflix algorithm. That, I think, is a key problem: the experience we have of Covid-19 is communal as no other experience can be except a war but, as it also happens in wars, personal experience is very different. Some self-isolate in total comfort and will suffer no significant trouble, for others the virus is the end of life as they knew it before, or the end of life full stop.

Raül Magí, who writes the blog *Les Rades Grises: Una Mirada a la Literatura Fantástica*, asked me recently to write a few words about the future of dystopia after Covid-19. You can find my contribution and many others by persons I admire very much in the Catalan SF/fantasy circuit here: https://lesradesgrises.com/2020/04/19/com-seran-les-noves-distopies/. I believe that making predictions of any kind makes very little sense. Nobody making predictions about 2020 back in December 2019 would have imagined the catastrophe we are now going through (even though Wuhan was already in deep trouble). On the other hand, it takes time for traumatic experience to be fully understood and even though we now rush to discuss new events as soon as they begin to happen (Netflix already has a documentary series about Covid-19), what this crisis really means will only be grasped perhaps in the 2030s, supposing it is over by then. The best fiction and autobiography about WWI started appearing in 1929; the Holocaust only became the topic of countless publications from the 1960s onwards. I told Raül this and then I added that I hope to see many utopian fantasies of reconstruction (Slavoj Žižek has already written a book proposing a new form of communism, though I'm not sure I would support that) and also an end to dystopia because, I wrote, "this is a genre we can only enjoy as long as we enjoy a safe, comfortable lifestyle, which is what we have lost now".

I am very much aware that this lifestyle has been so far enjoyed by a privileged minority in the world, to which I belong as an academic but also as a citizen of the Western world (though I'm not forgetting the millions of fellow-citizens who have lost all safety nets). The crisis caused by Covid-19 has so many angles that covering all of them is practically impossible but try to imagine what it is like to be a refugee, a person in a war zone, homeless or poor and then have the virus threaten your life on top of that. What is at stake right now for us, the privileged, is, leaving aside the brutal economic impact for all, a sort of spiritual numbness. Spain has been very hard hit not only because the early signs of the pandemic were disregarded (that has happened in many other countries anyway) but also because our lifestyle involves plenty of personal contact. We touch each other a lot in comparison to other cultures, tend to be gregarious, and think of our lives as extended networks beyond home. Now we are asked to obey personal distance and that is a main ingredient of what I am calling spiritual numbness. Online contact has many advantages but it is not the same as face-to-face contact. What the virus has brought is a total suspicion of proximity which must be already having a devastating impact on intimacy at all levels. If the Government decreed tomorrow that we can go back to normal in about one month, I fear that my own personal sense of abnormality will persist and it will take me time to get close to people again. On the other hand, I think of the Germans demanding that the Government of the Balearic Islands opens up the territory to tourism again this summer and I realize that their selfishness is also part of this spiritual numbness I am describing. Who are they to say that our lockdown measures are unnecessary, I wonder? How can they be so unfeeling?

The other reason why I dislike dystopia, apart from its inherent hypocrisy about privilege, is its destructiveness. What we're going through is a mild form of dystopia in comparison to what a far more aggressive virus could have caused; a scientist recently claimed that Covid-19 is but a poor apprentice in comparison to HIV, though, of course

what makes the new coronavirus so effective is its very simple strategy of contagion. Anyway, in dystopian fiction when a society is devastated and needs to focus on pure survival, it soon becomes apparent that all the skills developed since prehistory are useless. Only hunters, farmers and, if the post-apocalyptic society is lucky, low-level technicians are necessary (I mean smiths, weavers, and so on). In dystopia doctors become gradually useless because they require high-tech machinery; you only need to think of how the lack of basic protective gear has resulted in the death of many doctors and nurses, and how many patients have been lost for lack of respirators. Dystopia is a most potent generator, in short, of spiritual numbness for it makes you feel that if worse comes to worse, we're done for. It also makes you feel your own intrinsic worthlessness. Why should I survive? Who needs academics in dystopia? What can culture contribute? One thing I regret about this crisis, though, is that it is not having the impact I expected in questioning celebrity. Musicians, for instance, are proving very convincingly that they do have a place even in current dystopia, but not even Covid-19 is helping us to get rid of all the superfluous celebrities that still persist in sharing their parasitical lives. Of course, they might think the same about me and my academic peers.

Utopian narrative of the kind I hope authors feel motivated to write, has the opposite effect: instead of making you feel useless, it asks how you might contribute to building a new society and it provides ideas about how to do it. This is why we hardly have any utopian narrative. Writing dystopia is very easy because it consists of imagining how a privileged world can be dismantled layer by layer: the aliens invade, the climate changes, a plague goes rampant, the economy collapses and one by one the comforts that we know vanish, from voting in democratic elections to eating every day. Dystopia consists of thinking how things could be worse, but for that things have to be good enough, otherwise the loss is not felt, the suspension of disbelief does not work. Many are reading or watching dystopia now for the sake of comparison (was the Spanish flu of 1918 worse than Covid-19?) but this is, I insist, numbing. All energies should go now to taking advantage of this horror and imagine a new way of doing things. Many others are asking for utopia now but I think that the impulse could be best consolidated by potent new utopian fiction. Otherwise, we'll go back to that false sense of security that made us doubt climate change or the use of vaccines. That recent but already lost time when we felt that we could afford the luxury of enjoying dystopia because it would not happen in our lifetime. Well: here it is, now see how you like it.

Covid-19, I insist, is killing many persons and will kill many more but, above all, it might kill our ability to act in humane ways, which is a result of all-pervasive dystopia. My pharmacist told me that considering the world's population (7.5 billion) and the average mortality rate, we should expect at least 3,000,000 deaths. The 1918 flu, caused by a virus of avian origins, is estimated to have caused 50 million victims; WWI caused about 40. Those 90 million are the breeding ground for what came next: spiritual numbness so deep that fascism grew out of it and then WWII. 3 million, even 10 million, might seem a relatively low figure but it is gigantic if we think of how unnecessary this crisis is. By this I mean that this is the 21st century and we should be moving towards a utopia with no biological warfare (supposing the virus came from that), minimal animal farming and no wet markets (if eating a wild animal was the cause), and little interfering with nature (third hypothesis). We humans are naturally vulnerable to infection and

viruses appear to be far cleverer than we had assumed, but we have increased our vulnerability a hundred fold by following spiritually numb, selfish ideas in our relationship with our so-called civilization. Now we're paying the price of having abandoned utopia because, guess what?, it is supposed to be boring… It is supposed to be participative, and that is the real reason why it has been abandoned both in narrative and as a political project (with the main exception, I think of feminism).

I hope that by next year, I can reread this and laugh at my fears and anxieties because Covid-19 will have disappeared, or be at least under control. I also hope that by then we will already see a change in the perception of dystopia and utopia, with the latter beginning to dominate over the former. That however may be in itself just a utopian hope, in the sense of pure wishful thinking.

3 May 2020 / SUPPOSING REASEARCH MATTERS: A BAD AND A GOOD EXAMPLE OF LITERARY INVESTIGATION

The mood has changed so much this weekend that I must think somebody is crazy: either the scientists asking for as much prudence as possible until the Covid-19 vaccine arrives (most likely 2022), or my fellow citizens who have taken to the streets disregarding all precautions as if this nightmare were already over. The latter, I should think. My crystal balls tells me that in two or three weeks we'll be back in square one, with panicky calls to the emergency services and overcrowded hospitals again. If I were a doctor or a nurse I would be seething with frustration, anger, and disappointment and would scream during the daily 20:00 celebration of their heroism. What a mockery!

I'm writing this preliminary note because I no longer know which direction to take: are we still fighting for the survival of the species and nothing else matters?, or are we already on the road towards business as usual to save the economy? I'll let my reader take their pick. For those of pessimistic inclinations, I strongly recommend the devastating article by Antonio Turiel "La tormenta negra", which describes all you fear to know about the next oil crisis (https://ctxt.es/es/20200401/Politica/32045/Antonio-Turiel-petroleo-tormenta-negra-crisis-energetica.htm). For the rest, go on reading…

Supposing research still matters in this world, I'd like to discuss an example of bad literary criticism and an instance of great literary investigation. In a world now gone if somebody published a controversial article a polemic would follow with replies and counter-replies *ad nauseam*. Today, this is not worth the effort because so much is published and because, let's be honest, you never know who you might offend. I have, therefore, decided not to name the author or the title of the bad article to which I'll refer (though, of course, nothing is hard to find anymore). In contrast, I'm very pleased to reference the good article on which I'll comment next: "'I've learned I need to treat my characters like people': Varieties of Agency and Interaction in Writers' Experiences of their Characters", by John Foxwell, Ben Alderson-Day, Charles Fernyhough, and Angela Woods, *Consciousness and Cognition* 79 (March 2020): 1-14, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.concog.2020.102901.

The bad article analyses Hareton in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, defending the thesis that he is an idiot in the clinical sense of the term. To begin with, I was mightily surprised to see the word used formally but Wikipedia teaches me that even though 'idiot' is not used in British psychology, in the United States it is still used in legislation, with amendments in diverse state legislations as recent as 2007 or 2008. The author of the article on Hareton uses 'idiot' in the sense of someone with an intellectual disability even though Merriam-Webster, an American source, claims that "The clinical applications" of idiot, imbecile, and moron "is now a thing of the past, and we hope no one reading this would be so callous as to try to resurrect their use" (https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/moron-idiot-imbecile-offensive-history).

The article I am discussing, published by an outstanding A-list American journal of literary criticism, uses a nice trick to avoid political incorrectness: it reads Hareton by measuring his characterization against 19th century conceptions of idiocy. The author is not simply calling Hareton an idiot, then, but suggesting that this is how the original readers would have understood his ungainly appearance and brutish behaviour. In fact, the author uses a Disability Studies perspective so that they can also criticize how persons with an intellectual impairment were callously classified as idiots in the not too distant past. I have nothing against this line of argumentation, for prejudice needs to be exposed and the appalling wrongness of earlier psychology also denounced. The problem is that Hareton is not at all an idiot, nor would original readers have mistaken him for one. The Literature of the past surely has other examples of persons with an intellectual disability worth exploring.

That Hareton is not mentally impaired in any way is very easy to establish: he responds quickly to the young Catherine's literacy programme, which the lad himself suggests (once he returns the books he has stolen from her). When Catherine understands that he wants to be educated she proceeds, and this is the first step in their joint undermining of Heathcliff's patriarchal rule. In the process, Hareton's good looks and warm feelings resurface, having been buried under the thick layer of illiteracy that Heathcliff imposes on his foster son. If you recall, basically he wants to avenge himself by humiliating the son of his main enemy, his foster brother Hindley. When this man dies, Hareton becomes Heathcliff's adoptive son. The author of the article, thus, misses what any Victorian reader would understand: Hareton looks and acts like any other person of the time who had received no education whatsoever and was subjected to much abuse from harsh parents. In fact, if one pays attention, there are frequent comments about how handsome the lad is despite Heathcliff's efforts to destroy him physically and psychologically. No reader who reaches the end of the novel should doubt that Catherine has fallen in love with an attractive, warm-hearted, loyal man who is, besides, willing to learn from her (and teach her in return about nature).

What, then, is the cause of the misreading in the article I have mentioned? Two causes: one is the misguided desire to expand the field of Disability Studies to works which have no disabled character; the other is that we are scraping the bottom of the barrel when it comes to producing new readings of the classics, as my friend Esther

Pujolràs tells me. The author of the article knows that the happy ending disproves the thesis, and even acknowledges that there might be no evidence of idiocy in the text, but the article has been accepted by peer reviewers who have seen no problem in publishing a piece which is plainly wrong. I am 100% sure that this has to do with the use of Disability Studies as the theoretical frame, though I must add that I have seen other articles cheekily warning that there is no evidence for the thesis presented. I was taught that this is mere speculation but it seems that the rules have changed. The other question, the depletion of new things to say about the classics, is visible in the thick stream of research that deals with minor aspects. It is, logically, hard to approach a classic like *Wuthering Heights* from a truly new perspective and so attention is paid to smaller elements missed by previous research. A result of this is that 21st century bibliography looks like an analysis of single leaves on trees rather than of the forest. Another problem is that there is so much bibliography that any new author has hardly room to develop a thesis among so many obligatory references to predecessors. I am not saying that no new work about the classics should be published; what I am saying is that many other authors, works, and aspects of literary criticism are waiting for someone to pay attention to them.

The article by Foxwell et al. is a very good example of this. Finally someone has thought of asking authors how they imagine their characters and here are the first results. The authors present evidence collected with a questionnaire sent to the authors who presented work at the Edinburgh Literature Festival (in 2014 and 2018). 181 replied (mostly women, mostly British) and from their replies the first tentative sketch of the imaginative process behind writing characters has emerged. Foxwell and his colleagues wanted to investigate a phenomenon which I have often mentioned here: writers claim that characters take decisions in the process of building a piece of fiction, often taking it in directions unanticipated by the author. The questionnaire was designed to have writers be more specific about their relationship with their own characters: are they like the imaginary friends of childhood?, is hearing their voices a sort of hallucinatory experience?, are characters' voices different from the author's own inner speech?

Although the results are not homogeneous, a general conclusion is that writers imagine characters and then they give them a voice in ways that recall how we suppose a person we know would react in certain circumstances. Of course, this is a very superficial summary of the many aspects concerning the topic which the article analyses. Read it and you will see how amazing the statements from the writers are. Here is an example: initially, the characters "feel under my control and then at that certain point when they feel completely real, it's becomes a matter of me following them, hoping to steer" (10). The bibliography, full of articles on diverse forms of hallucinatory madness, indirectly hints that somehow the researchers were worried to discover that the authors of fiction actually suffer from some kind of mental disorder. They very carefully point out throughout the discussion of results that all authors know that their characters are mental constructions and that the voices they hear and the conversations they have are perfectly normal manifestations. Normal for a fiction author, I should add. I remain mystified by how it feels to have your imagination colonized by the presence of other people. The article describes quite well what happens in the mind of a fiction writer at work but it cannot say *why* it happens.

I am not a big fan of the strict, formalist language in which Foxwell and his colleagues write, and which is habitual in cognitive and linguistic analysis. Here is an example: "Those writers whose characters were fully distinct from their inner speech were significantly likely to report dialoguing as themselves with the character ($\chi 2 = 22.19$, $df = 6$, $p < 0.001$), to feel like they were observing their characters ($\chi 2 = 32.15$, $df = 2$, $p < 0.001$), and to experience their characters as possessing full agency ($\chi 2 = 28.29$, $df = 6$, $p < 0.001$)" (9). In fact, I'm quite sorry that there is no room for discussing how the imagination works in literary criticism, from which living writers are mostly absent. There should be, I think, a middle point between the interview and the statistical analysis, but it seems nobody is really interested, perhaps even few authors (see my post of 13 January, "The Elusive Matter of the Imagination: Too Frail to Touch?"). Tellingly, many writers declined the invitation to participate in the survey, refusing to explore in detail mental processes that are personal and delicate. As the researches stress, imagining characters is "a specific aspect of inner experience for which no established vocabulary exists" (13).

I'll end by suggesting that perhaps that vocabulary does not exist because writing fiction is play and connecting adults with play is always complicated. I do not mean by this that the task carried out by fiction writers is easy child's play but that dreaming up characters has a playful aspect. We take fiction too seriously to accept that it is a complex game and in the end we have no idea about how it works. If we could resurrect Emily Brontë, everyone would want to know how she imagined and spoke to her characters, so why not ask the living authors surrounding us? Obviously, they have plenty to say.

10 May 2020 / LEST WE FORGET: THE 1980s AIDS CRISIS AND RANDY SHILTS'S *AND THE BAND PLAYED ON*

'Lest We Forget' is a phrase from Rudyard Kipling's poem "Recessional" (1897) habitually quoted in war remembrance events. May 8 2020 was the 75th anniversary of the Nazi rendition but World War II is not the war I have in mind today. Contradicting my own injunctions to only read positive, ideally utopian books, I have spent many hours this past two weeks reading one of the most impressive American non-fiction works: Randy Shilts's *And the Band Played On* (1987). This is a terrific account of the early phase of the AIDS plague, covering from the first cases until the public announcement in 1985 that star actor Rock Hudson was a victim of the disease. Shilts, an investigative journalist employed by the *San Francisco Chronicle* and a variety of Californian TV networks, wrote the book with passion and anger. A gay man himself, he waited to take the HIV test until the massive volume was published, and died of AIDS-related complications in 1994.

Shilts was the author of *The Mayor of Castro Street* (1982), the biography of Harvey Milk which was one of the sources for Oscar-award winner documentary *The Times of Harvey Milk* (1984), directed by Rob Epstein. Gus Van Sant's film *Milk* (2008) was based on Epstein's documentary. A while ago I wrote a book chapter comparing

documentary and film, and explaining the connections between homophobia and patriarchal masculinity (the Spanish version is available online here https://ddd.uab.cat/record/147464). The point I made was that Dan White, Milk's fellow supervisor in the San Francisco Board of Supervisors (or town council), did not murder him and Mayor George Moscone simply because he was a homophobe but because he felt disempowered by Milk's election. Harvey Milk was the first openly gay officer ever elected in the USA and when White, a classic patriarchal man, lost his position as supervisor because of his own ineptitude, he blamed both Milk and Moscone for his disempowerment. Moscone's death was basically read as collateral damage, though, by an angry gay community that has since then honoured Milk as a martyr. His death in 1978 was the catalyst for the beginning of a time of enormously increased visibility for the San Francisco gay community, which knew how to channel their anger into positive activism.

Shilts's *And the Band Played On* reads as a second act in the tragedy of Milk's death. As he narrates, the new happier period in the life of gay men lasted for just very few years until AIDS emerged. Shilts's volume, based on hundreds of interviews that he himself carried out, has an immense cast of (real-life) characters, among which several are members of the Harvey Milk Club, a referent for gay activism in the Castro neighbourhood. What Shilts narrates is the story of how the gay community resisted in a suicidal way any measure that might curb down their newly found sexual freedom. Homophobia was much more intense in the 1980s than it is now and many gays feared being ostracized as lepers by the health safety measures dictated by mostly homophobic public officers. The disease, in short, spread far more than it should have if only many gay men had listened to doctors' advice and refrained from engaging in dangerous sexual practices. Of course, as Shilts notes with bitterness, the advice came too late, when the virus had been probably circulating for years undetected (he dates the first case back to 1976).

I knew, more or less, of the efforts made by the gay communities of San Francisco and New York, mainly, to organize themselves and work on promoting not only safe sex but also the use of innovative treatment. The book is very critical of how irresponsible personal behaviour contributed to spreading HIV (though Shilts is very unfair to Gaetan Dugas, the Québécois Canadian flight attendant that was never really Patient One). This is an important lesson to apply to our Covid-19 crisis: disobeying health measures is lethal, and personal freedom should always be second to safety. Of course, the main difference between AIDS and Covid-19 is that the former was initially associated to gay men, which caused homophobia to increase even further, whereas Covid-19 is not associated to any specific human group. The lesson, anyway, is still valid. It must be noted that Shilts mentions several times how AIDS was never seen as a gay disease in France, where researchers at the Pasteur Institute first isolated HIV. They saw the disease as a sexually transmitted infection which affected both gays and heterosexuals, and which could also be transmitted through other contacts involving blood (transfusions, sharing needles for IV drug use, drawing nourishment through a placenta from an infected mother in the case of foetuses).

As a researcher, though in the Humanities, I worry very much about how scientists do research in critical situations like the onset of AIDS or of Covid-19. Shilts has two main arguments to develop about this. On the one hand, he demonstrates how President Reagan's administration (1980-1988) did all it could to hinder research for its own homophobic reasons and because Reagan did not want to lose his most conservative voters in the 1984 re-election. Funding only started to materialise when it became evident that AIDS was never a gay-exclusive disease. On the other hand, Shilts exposes how academic squabbling wasted precious years. Academic authorities withdrew funding and shunned researchers working on AIDS for purely homophobic reasons. Yet what seems to me most intolerable is how the peer reviewing system slowed down progress and how certain scientific stars placed their personal careers before the care of AIDS sufferers. Shilts always defends the idea that Dr. Luc Montagnier of the Pasteur Institute and Françoise Barré-Sinoussi were the discoverers of HIV, siding with those who accused Dr. Robert Gallo of the National Institutes of Health of somehow having used the LAV French samples sent to him as the basis for his discovery of the HLVT-III virus (both LAV and HLVT-III were actually the same virus, later called HIV). Gallo was left out of the 2008 Nobel Prize award, which went to the French virologists.

There is a passage in *And the Band Played On* which, as a researcher, I found very scary. The French team isolated the virus in 1983, one year before Gallo. They did try to publish their research in the USA but, Shilts writes, "they were inexperienced at writing papers for American scientific journals. They did not present their data as well as American scientists. The Pasteur's primary spokesman, Dr. Luc Montagnier, lacked the charisma and forcefulness of Gallo". Peer reviewing, Shilts notes, was also used to prevent the French team from publishing, with prestige journals using reviewers connected with Gallo's employer institution or others with a known animosity against Montagnier. That this kind of corruption could happen made me even more indignant than the shenanigans of the Reagan Government, for these were no surprise. Call me naïve but I should have thought that national or personal arrogance should play no role in science at times of crisis. Reading Shilt is not at all reassuring in that sense. I would expect personal irresponsibility and political interests to be the cause of many deaths, as we are seeing in the case of Covid-19, but the details of how some scientists misbehaved in the early 1980s in relation to AIDS are simply revolting.

Just this morning I received the Catalan bulletin for research, this time a monographic issue on Covid-19. As you may imagine, and I assume this is the same all over the world, the bulletin is pretty bombastic about the magnificent work of local researchers. I am sure that they are doing their best but what irks me is the nationalist angle at a time when this is the last thing we need. There are, at least, two news items about international matters publicizing the existence of the Covid-19 Clinical Research Coalition and the Coronavirus Research and Innovation Portal of the EU. More importantly, the bulletin includes a short piece defending the need for international open research, which highlights the Global Research on Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) portal run by WHO, and other initiatives mainly referring to open access repositories, among them Elsevier's Novel Coronavirus Information Center. I cannot say, though, whether publications available there, like *The Lancet* or *Cell Press*, have made their peer reviewing processes more agile. Shilts describes the overwhelming frustration of early

AIDS researchers forced by indispensable journals such as the *New England Journal of Medicine* to wait a minimum of three months before publication (remember these were pre-internet times) and not to leak any information to the media under penalty of article withdrawal. The media, I must complain, should be giving us information about all this: how science is being run right now, and not just the endless lists of figures which in the end mean very little.

And the Band Plays On narrates in the last segment the process by which the first antibody tests were put on the market. This will ring familiar: the tests were not made available to all who needed them, they were not 100% reliable, and did not necessarily result in the isolation of infected patients. Like Covid-19, HIV can be carried asymptomatically (the virus, it was determined, may take years to attack the immune system) which is why testing is so important. In case anyone thinks that HIV is under control, think twice: 700000 persons died last year of this disease all over the world. The number of new infections has gone down in most countries (South Africa remains a hot spot) and the rate of survival is much higher, with HIV carriers keeping the disease in check for decades. It must be noted, though, that only two persons have been cured thanks to stem cell transplants "from donors with a genetic mutation present in less than one percent of Europeans that prevents HIV from taking hold" (https://www.sciencealert.com/hiv-cured-london-man-still-has-no-trace-of-infection-nearly-3-years-after-treatment). The second patient was pronounced healthy just last March. Note that here is no vaccine yet, after 35 years of quite dynamic research. 35 million people have died of AIDS since 1981. This week a series of clinical trials have started in different labs of different nations, which sounds promising; there is talk of a functional anti-Covid-19 vaccine for 2021. Apart from questions of funding (remember covidiot President Trump withdrew US funding from WHO?), researchers are now facing ethical dilemmas such as whether it is legitimate to infect healthy persons for the experiments (logically, you could not do that with HIV), because there is always a risk of death. One hundred vaccines are currently being developed (see https://www.bioworld.com/COVID19products#vac). Now, try not to think of the still missing vaccines for AIDS.

Shilts explains that US citizens were shocked into the realization that AIDS was there to stay when they saw images of Rock Hudson's ravaged physique in his last public appearance (on a TV show with former co-star in many films, Doris Day). Hudson still denied he was suffering from AIDS but his death in October 1985 was used to instil into the nation a widespread fear of the new plague, for good and for bad reasons. We have not gone yet through a Rock Hudson moment, that is to say, we still lack an image so potent that we finally understand what Covid-19 is about. We are being fed images of happy survivors and of hard-working doctors and nurses, but I don't think we really understand that this coronavirus is potentially lethal for all, hence the daily acts of disobedience.

The US media, Shilts complains, were guilty of misinforming his fellow citizens about the urgency and gravity of the AIDS crisis but he is himself an outstanding example of the best investigative journalism. Read his book, pay him homage, and hope that current journalists are also doing their best.

19 May 2020 / HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY AND PATRIARCHY: POINTS OF CONTACT

This is not really a review of *Hegemonic Masculinity: Formulation, Reformulation, and Amplification* by James W. Messerschmidt (2018, Rowman & Littlefield) but a post inspired by a number of passages I have come across in this volume. For those of you unfamiliar with the concept, hegemonic masculinity is the brainchild of Australian sociologist Raewyn Connell (formerly known as R.W. Connell), one of the founding parents of Masculinities Studies. Messerschmidt, Connell's disciple and academic collaborator, offers here as the transparent title of his volume announces a sort of ultimate guide about how this concept should be understood and used. The problem is that since the concept itself was quite unstable in its origins—poorly formulated, if you want less elegant language—it has generated much controversy about its actual meaning and intended use. Messerschmidt and Connell already published an article back in 2005 intending to fix its use but since they obviously could not succeed, because of the porosity of the concept, Messerschmidt has tried again, sounding a little bit like a disgruntled acolyte offering the definite Bible to errant believers.

A matter which makes *me* feel disgruntled is Messerschmidt's cavalier approach to feminism and the fact that he does not even mention Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990), an omission that I simply fail to understand in a volume about how gender changes historically. Butler is a philosopher and I'm thinking that perhaps citing her in a treatise on sociology is not kosher, but this is the equivalent of writing about power and ignoring Foucault. Reading Messerschmidt's account of how 1970s and 1980s radical and socialist feminism 'failed' to explain patriarchy, I am reminded of why Masculinities Studies always sounds suspiciously misogynistic. At least he does. Look at this: "Radical feminism made distinctive and original contributions to feminist theory, yet got entangled with biological arguments as the foundation of 'patriarchy'" (2). Poor things, the silly women!

What seemed to cause the entanglement was that patriarchy, Messerschmidt says, was formulated as an ahistorical system of female oppression which was ultimately too broad-ranging to make any sense. This is why theorists in the social sciences gave up any attempt to further refine the definition of patriarchy in the 1980s. If you ask me, I think that the radical feminists got it right in many ways: patriarchy is not ahistorical but can certainly perdure despite profound historical changes because its main bases as regards gender (misogyny and homophobia) endure. Patriarchy is infinitely flexible and, as I have been arguing, currently it is beginning to invest more energy on organizing society hierarchically on the basis of individual power than of gender. But let me go on.

Now, according to Messerschmidt, Connell took the new feminist theorization of gender in the mid-1980s and started talking about gender relations instead of patriarchy; an important reason why this turn happened is that gay men started explaining their own masculinity in relation to heterosexual masculinity, revealing how they were empowered as men in relation to women but disempowered as homosexual

men. In *Gender and Power* (1987) Connell formulated the concepts of hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity in the way in which they were known throughout the last decades of the 20th century (please note that Butler's *Gender Trouble* was published just three years later and has had really a much bigger impact). The main point, Messerschmidt clarifies, is that Connell "concentrated on how hegemonic masculinity in a given historical and society-wide setting *legitimates* unequal gender *relations* between men and women, masculinity and femininity, and among masculinities" (46, original italics). That is to say, hegemonic masculinity is not a set of actual men or a set of actual features that define masculinity but a set of values that are practiced by certain groups of men (that I would not hesitate to call patriarchal). The aim is to keep femininity and non-hegemonic masculinities in a position of inferiority. Connell also came up with the division of the non-hegemonic masculinities as complicit, subordinate, marginalized, and protest masculinities.

If you want another angle on the same matter, hegemonic masculinity combines a variety of techniques of domination into one. It is, plainly, masculinist sexism, as defined by feminism, and homophobia, but also racism, ethnic supremacism, nationalism, ableism, ageism, and all other prejudices combined into one. Messerschmidt describes a situation in which there is not one but a sort of local, regional, and global network of hegemonic masculinities in charge of policing the gender borders. All of them "must be culturally ascendant to advance a rationale for social action through consent and compliance" (76) for, and in this you see the Gramscian roots of the concept, hegemonic masculinities operate on the basis of consent, not coercion. In contrast, Messerschmidt explains, "Dominant masculinities are not always associated with and linked to gender hegemony but refer to (locally, regionally, and globally) the most celebrated, common, widespread, or current form of masculinity in a particular social setting" (76). If I understand this correctly, Donald Trump is an example of how hegemonic masculinity is practiced (after all he was democratically elected), whereas Barack Obama would be an example of dominant masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity need not be admired but it is obeyed, contributing to gender inequality, whereas dominant masculinity is respected and admired but might have little impact on gender divisions.

That all this is less than perfectly defined appears more than evident when Messerschmidt explains, in what reads like a gender tongue twister, that "Although hegemonic masculinities and emphasized femininities at times may also be dominant or dominating, dominant and dominating masculinities and femininities are never hegemonic or emphasized if they fail culturally to legitimate unequal gender relations; in this latter scenario, dominant and dominating masculinities/femininities are thereby constructed outside relations of gender hegemony" (125). I fail to understand this. There is clearly a great difference between Trump and Obama and how they connect with gender inequality, or how they connect in their different masculinities. But as Presidents of the United States they both belong to the same patriarchal system that has made it practically impossible for a woman to be elected President. Obama did not graciously withdraw when Hillary Clinton announced her intention to be the Democratic Party's candidate in 2008 and Trump cheated her of a Presidency she had actually won in 2016. Hillary possibly lost much support because many women saw her as either too

patriarchal herself or too radical as a feminist, but the point is that the 2020 female Democratic candidates have been also swept aside. As things are now, there is, then very little difference between hegemonic and dominant masculinity because the only way towards gender equality is that these categories are abandoned. Or, alternatively, that the dominant masculine model becomes what Connell and Messerschmidt have called 'positive' masculinities and femininities, a label so vague that it could mean anything. I myself prefer using anti-patriarchal, so that the enemy is clearly defined both for men and for women outside patriarchal circles.

When Messerschmidt says that "The hegemonic masculine social structure consists of different types of power relations" (133) it seems evident to me that he means patriarchy. Hegemonic masculinity is "continually and pervasively renewed, recreated, defended, and modified through social action" (133) because it is, plainly, the ideology of patriarchy by another name. Whereas the patriarchy defined by radical feminists was (allegedly) a monolithic, ahistorical institution designed to oppress women, Connell's hegemonic masculinity is the same dog but with a historical collar, devoted not only to oppress all women but also all the types of men that resist its rule or lack sufficient power to join the ranks. Hegemonic masculinity can be found at the local, regional and global levels where patriarchy exists because it's the same thing. Or, the other way round: I have altered the definition of patriarchy to make it a more useful concept than hegemonic masculinity. Sorry to sound so smug, but Messerschmidt also sounds smug… In plain words: all types of discrimination consist of "different types of power relations". He and Connell call that hegemonic masculinity, I call it patriarchy, following my feminist predecessors.

Both they and I, however, are trapped by the same problem: the persistence of gender binarism. Messerschmidt continually alludes to attitudes that are 'masculine' or 'feminine', having besides accepted Jack Halberstam's notion that there is something called 'female masculinity'. For me, matters look different: if, to give an example, being a nurturing person has been traditionally associated with women, this does not mean that nurturing men are expressing a 'masculine femininity'. It just means that as society progresses and prejudice diminishes certain attitudes will be seen to be gender neutral. Being, for instance, self-assertive will cease being connected with masculinity to be gender-neutral, just as being blond is gender-neutral. I read recently, besides, that the generation born in the 2000s and later increasingly resists being defined by binary gender labels, which will affect how both masculinity and femininity are understood. Yet, here we are, speaking of men and women as if nothing is moving. The day will come when the moment a baby is born the parents will be told 'congratulations, it's a person' and not 'it's a boy' or 'it's a girl'.

What am I ranting and raving about, then? It seems to me that when the use of an academic label fails to please those who created it, as Messerschmidt's censorious volume evidences, then the problem lies with the label, not with its users (or abusers). I would say that further discussions are a waste of time (here I am wasting my time) while what really matters, how patriarchy follows its rampant path of destruction, goes on. Judith Butler's notion of gender as performance may also have its flaws but it is useful to explain why patriarchy persists and how it can be changed: patriarchal masculinity is

very good at adapting to the changing times without losing much power, whereas anti-patriarchal masculinities are very good but less successful at opening up masculinity to other styles of performance, including its very dissolution into gender-neutral variants. I grant that before the emergence of hegemonic masculinity there was not a single concept to explain the simultaneous oppression of women and of marginalized men, and that Connell and company have made a reasonably good job of explaining how men who feel entitled to power find the perfect niche in their circle to express their sense of entitlement, from Trump down to the unemployed man who lashes out against wife and children.

I also grant that patriarchy is not an ideal label to explain how gender and power intersect but perhaps this is because we're struck with binary labels that cannot help. To be blunt, the behaviour of the lesbian woman who batters her wife cannot be explained by invoking hegemonic masculinity, or masculine femininity, because it has to do with power in ways for which we still lack a name. I have been struggling to find an alternative to patriarchy, but this is what I have for now.

25 May 2020 / HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY AND PATRIARCHY: CONSENT AND COERCION, OR STELLA AND BLANCHE IN *A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE*

[SPOILERS AHEAD]

I am going back to the discussion of hegemonic masculinity on which I focused my last post, this time in connection to Tennessee Williams's popular play *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), a Pulitzer-Award winner. The 2014 production by the Young Vic and Joshua Andrew, directed by Benedict Andrews, has been available online since last Thursday, as part of the National Theatre's generous streaming of successful productions while the quarantine of British theatres lasts. With its attractive cast—Gillian Anderson (Blanche), Vanessa Kirby (Stella), Ben Foster (Stanley Kowalski)—and its gimmicky revolving stage (by Magda Willi), this version of the play was enormously successful. It has attracted these days a considerable number of new reviews, all also enthusiastic—but with a caveat.

Michael Billington's 2014 review for *The Guardian* noted that "The updating to the present sits oddly with a play that talks of period bandleaders like Xavier Cugat and where the feel is of an America on the verge of postwar economic expansion". Paul T. Davies concurs, six years later. The updating (which remains quite fuzzy, as Billington's comment indicates), "underlines the problematic sexual politics of the piece. Once we move out of the 1950s, Stanley's behaviour is even more brutish, and it's a tricky balancing act as, although Stanley hits his wife and rapes Blanche, members of the audience, of any gender specification, must want to sit on their front porches fanning themselves and wishing for the rains to cool their desire for Stanley down" (*BritishTheatre.com*, 24 May 2020). I should think that what is problematic is that

Stanley, the abuser and rapist, is still connected with desire in any way and that the partial updating of the play does not alter its original sex and gender discourse.

As Williams conceived it, *A Streetcar Named Desire* tells the story of two sisters, Blanche (the elder) and Stella (the younger), during the months of Blanche's conflictive stay at her sister's home in New Orleans. The sisters are the last scions of their ancestral home at Belle Rive (in Mississippi) which, as we learn, has been lost to the financial improvidence of the patriarchs in the DuBois family. Blanche has been making a living by teaching English in secondary schools, whereas Stella (no occupation mentioned) is married to WWII veteran and factory parts salesman, Stanley Kowalski.

Blanche has been unable to overcome the serious mental health issues caused by the suicide of her young closeted gay husband, which has led to a scandalous promiscuity and a liaison with one of her seventeen-year-old students, for which she has been dismissed from her teaching post. She is on the run from herself when she takes refuge in the Kowalskis' home, though she never discloses her actual circumstances. These are dug out by the persistent Stanley, who very much resents Blanche's presence and her interference in his marriage to Stella, based, as it is apparent, on sexual attraction and a toxic co-dependence. Stella is, nonetheless, happy enough and willing to tolerate occasional abuse from Stanley, despite Blanche's attempts to open her sister's eyes. When Stanley realises that Blanche is lying to his buddy Mitch—pretending to be the lady she is not in order to have him propose marriage as a way out of her troubles—he unmasks his sister-in-law. Stanley also rapes her, which breaks the lasts remnants of her sanity. The play ends with Blanche being taken away by a psychiatrist, as a devastated Stella remains with Stanley.

There are a few gender hot spots in the play, which require a negotiation with the audience: the homosexuality of Blanche's husband and his ensuing suicide; her scene with an underage newspaper boy whom she talks into kissing her; Stanley's brutal assault on a visibly pregnant Stella; and the rape scene. I do not know the details of the reaction that the play elicited in the original productions, beyond the fact that the rape scene caused outrage (I cannot say how it was performed). Williams himself wrote the screenplay for the 1951 film adaptation directed by Elia Kazan, with Marlon Brando (Stanley), Vivien Leigh (Blanche), and Kim Hunter (Stella). Brandon had been discovered in the Broadway production (in which Jessica Tandy played Blanche, and Hunter was Stella). Leigh, who was English, had been the quintessential Southern belle Scarlett O'Hara in *Gone with the Wind* (1939) and had played Blanche on the London stage, directed by her husband, Laurence Olivier.

The film adaptation went through a two-phase process of censorship: first, the Code Hays was applied to it and next the Legion of Decency demanded further cuts. This resulted in much confusion about the reasons for Blanche's overwhelming sense of guilt and in a toning down of misogynistic violence. Whereas in the original play Blanche is in shock because her husband shoots himself after she calls him "disgusting" (having caught him in bed with his 'friend'), in the film version there is a vague allusion to his enjoying writing poetry too much. The rape scene, which on the stage is directly seen, is hidden in the film by the metaphorical shot of a broken mirror. An interesting twist,

though, is that whereas in the play Stella remains loyally by Stanley despite how he has acted towards Blanche, the producers of the film accepted punishing him for the rape by having Stella abandon him. The 1993 restored version brought back into the film the four minutes elided under pressure from the Legion of Decency, but not even then was the content of the plot questioned. Only now are some reviewers beginning to see its appalling gender discourse.

Of all the elements of the play, the most jarring one is no doubt the rape scene. The standard sexist reading has always been that Blanche is 'asking for it', both because of her promiscuity and because she is attempting to undermine Stanley's patriarchal rule in his own home. She attributes his very short fuse to his being a natural brute, uneducated and rough, though Stanley can also be read as one of the many unhinged WWII veterans whose inexplicable mood swings made marital life so difficult after their homecoming. Of course, any interpretation of Stanley is very much complicated by the bodily magnetism of Marlon Brando in Kazan's film, but when he is played by less attractive actors (such as muscled, tattooed Ben Foster in the 2014 production) the ugliness of his personality becomes apparent. At the root of the play there is, however, something even uglier than Stanley's patriarchal masculinity. I believe that the author Tennessee Williams, a gay man, rapes Blanche by proxy, using Stanley, to punish her for her homophobia. When the rape scene happens, Stanley has established his dominion over Blanche and he simply needs to call the psychiatrist to get rid of her. The rape is an act that the character needn't perform but that the author requires to further humiliate Blanche for her own humiliation of her gay husband.

This brings me back to the discussion of hegemonic masculinity in my previous post. A point that kept nagging me after writing it is the matter of consent. According to Connell, Messerschmidt explains, hegemonic masculinity operates on the basis of consent obtained "largely through cultural ascendancy" or "discursive persuasion" (2018: 28). Furthermore, the concept of hegemony would be "irrelevant" if it "only referred to, for example, violence, aggression, and self-centeredness" (2018: 40). The "discursive legitimation (or justification), encouraging all to consent to, unite around, and embody such unequal gender relations" (2018: 46), and not "direct control and commands"(sic) (2018: 120), is the basis of discrimination. The play by Williams survives and is still very much successful because as audiences we have granted our collective consent, agreeing to its "discursive persuasion" about the fact that both Blanche and Stella need to be disciplined into submission. Yet, here's the contradiction: *A Streetcar Named Desire* shows that, actually, hegemonic masculinity does not only work by consent, but also by coercion, perhaps in a 50-50 ratio.

Stella appears to consent to her husband's sexist dominion over her but his savage punch to her face reveals that this consent is granted by a mixture of willingness and fear (both physical and psychological). Blanche is disputing all the time both Stella's consent and Stanley's coercion, and this is the reason why she is ill-treated and ultimately declared insane, which is the ultimate coercion (together with her rape). Those who think that she deserves this fate are granting their consent to the hegemonic masculinity practices by which Stanley undoes her resistance to patriarchy, and are in

fact complicit with him (and with Williams, who is as patriarchal as his characters, despite being gay).

There is a scene in which Blanche tells her sister what is wrong with her dependence on Stanley, and for a second we can imagine an alternative play in which Stella is rescued and the two sisters start a new life helping each other to overcome their toxic relations with the men in their lives. It is, in fact, perfectly possibly to turn *A Streetcar Named Desire* on its head and, without altering the plot, stress its underlying sexism and misogyny—but for that Marlon Brando needs to be forgotten. If Stanley is, in any way, justified or glamorised, then the play serves the cause of hegemonic masculinity. This is why the 2014 production still falls short: Foster's Stanley has no charm, but Blanche could and should be played as a strong, independent woman slowly going insane under patriarchal pressure, and not as a clueless girly woman constantly blabbing about gentlemanliness.

The way out of granting our consent is by education. The first time I saw *Streetcar*, the film, I was too young to understand the rape scene but I had been told by family, friends, and reviewers that this was an amazing film which I had to enjoy and respect. So I did enjoy and respect it. The second time, I was educated enough in gender issues to notice that there seemed to be a discrepancy between the cult around the film and Williams, and the severity of Blanche's victimization—I was shocked to recognize the rape scene for what it was (Brando a rapist?) and by the truth about Blanche's husband. This third time I should have known better but I was attracted by the presence of my admired Gillian Anderson (Scully in *The X-Files*) in the main role. That is another form of granting consent: lowering your defences and accepting to be made complicit with an atrocious story of patriarchal control out of admiration for an actor, whether this is Brando or Anderson.

So here I am, apologizing for my lapse, and trying to educate others into withdrawing their consent and to learn the subtle and less subtle ways into which this is elicited from us. Does this mean that you should not see/read *A Streetcar Named Desire*? Not at all: by all means educate yourself, just do not enjoy what cannot be enjoyed unless you align yourself with patriarchy.

1 June 2020 / THINKING OF THE NEXT ACADEMIC YEAR UNDER THE SHADOW OF COVID-19: A TIME TO RECONSIDER WHAT WE DO AS TEACHERS

Like most of my colleagues in Spain, I will not finish teaching until mid-July, when the marks for the MA dissertations will be introduced. Yet, now that I'm done 'teaching', that is to say, interacting with my undergrad students before assessment, might be a good moment to stop and consider how Covid-19 has changed some pedagogical matters but will most likely fail to change others. I have spelled 'teaching' between quotation marks because since 12 March, when I taught my last two presential sessions, I have been teaching online—again, like the rest of my colleagues in Spain. This does not

mean that we have all being approaching online teaching from the same angle, though I lack sufficient information to know what my colleagues have been doing so far. From what I hear, my impression is that, given the lack of general guidelines, they have improvised and have mostly tried to transfer their habitual activities onto our Moodle classrooms. A common complaint by students is that they have been overloaded with extra work to compensate for the missing lectures; this has been gradually corrected but it is for me a sign that the approach taken might not be the best one.

I was an associate teacher at the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya, a pioneering online university, between 1998 and 2014. I used to teach there an elective subject called 'Introduction to English Literature' for the BA in the Humanities. I was part of the team that had written the handbook and I myself set the course in motion under the supervision of Pauline Ernest. I combined, then, online and presential teaching for sixteen years and I only gave up because in the last semester at UOC I had 70 students in my hands. Multiply this by six exercises each and you will see that I just couldn't cope with UOC and UAB at the same time. The current teacher tells me that the subject is going to be discontinued after twenty-two years, which is a pity.

I joined UOC when I was an untenured teacher, seeking to enhance my possibilities of getting tenure. The money was also an enticement, of course. When I became tenured, in 2002, I found out to my surprise that my new contract was compatible with UOC, so I continued teaching online. My motivation was at this point pedagogical: the UOC students were mostly very well read, highly autonomous mature students and interacting with them was a pleasure. In all my sixteen years, I only failed one student; the rest who did not pass the subject just quit, though most passed the second time around.

I learned plenty at UOC in terms of planning tasks for continuous assessment, giving constructive feedback, encouraging students who were less autonomous. I never used exams—only a variety of written exercises, including forums—and I never missed them. I don't know how other UOC teachers managed, though. And, although this might sound surprising, I never used video. My students were not taking a degree in English Studies but in the Humanities and although their command of written English was good (in some cases much above that of my UAB students), none of my three UOC supervisors (or coordinators) thought that video was a necessary part of the subject. I agreed.

I had been reading worrying news about Wuhan in the British press for weeks before quarantine started in Spain, so I was ready to go online at any moment with my two BA courses: 'English Romantic Literature' (second year, 58 students) and 'Cultural Studies' (third-fourth year, 42 students). For this, I have mostly followed the UOC model. In fact I have been following that model for years, in the sense that I avoid exams and I think of my courses as a chance to teach a set of skills though a set of tasks, and not just to teach content. So, what we were doing in class in February is not in the end very different from what we ended up doing after 14 March: I transferred what was supposed to be presential to our Moodle classroom mainly through the use of forums—I use plenty of students' oral presentations in class, so that was not really a problem. In the case of 'Cultural Studies' the students have interacted online infinitely far more than

they were interacting in our physical classroom. In the case of 'English Romanticism' their interactions have been available for much longer than they would have been in the classroom.

I have not, however, used my teaching time in the same way I was using it in February. To begin with, I believe that online teaching needn't be synchronous. That is to say: I see no need to keep the rigid schedule of classroom teaching, much less to reproduce online the same twice-weekly ninety-minute sessions we were teaching. With 58 students in one class and 42 in the other, I have seen, besides, little use in online Teams meetings; to the matter of numbers I need to add that for me teaching works by looking at people in the eyes, which cannot be done online. The few Teams meetings I've had with colleagues have been quite awkward in terms of visual quality and the personal awareness needed to interact well. For that, the classroom is much, much better.

I know that some of my colleagues have used Teams regularly or have recorded themselves and uploaded podcasts and video, which is fine. I am just saying that I have used other strategies. For instance, in 'English Romanticism' I have been teaching students to write papers, and so, for one of our books (*Frankenstein*) I wrote a paper for them instead of lecturing. The same applies to 'Cultural Studies': in this subject I have provided sample written exercises and guidance about how to do presentations. Students have in fact taught each other much, and I have used my teaching time to give detailed, personal feedback. I have certainly missed classroom interaction and I do look forward to meeting face-to-face again. But, let me be completely honest, I have not missed at all the students who were projecting onto me a relentless sense of boredom in my English Romanticism lectures, possibly because that is a compulsory course. That is one of the great advantages of teaching online: students' eating and drinking in class, using cellphones, chatting need not bother me.

Our schedule for next year is ready but, even though the end of quarantine approaches (21 June), it seems likely that the preventive measures against Covid-19 will be enforced for a much longer time, at least until December. I am personally scandalised by the imprudence that Spaniards are displaying now, after a death toll of possibly near 40,000 persons (not the official 28,000 count) and in the absence of a vaccine. This summer we'll see the actual danger that the virus poses once foreign visitors return and general national mobility goes back to normal (or pseudo-normal). It might well be that Covid-19, in the best case scenario, is under control by early September and that we can resume teaching as we have done so far. Even so, it would still be a great moment to consider how we teach.

I am logically speaking as a Literature teacher, and I understand that matters can be very different in other disciplines, beginning with the Language section of my Department. A six ECTS course, allow me to remind you, amounts to 150 hours of work, of which 30%-40% (45 to 60) should be of classroom interaction, leaving only 100 for reading, and assessment activities. In my school we used to teach 45 hours in 15 weeks (so, 3 hours a week), but this has gone up to 50 hours in 17 weeks. Here is for me, a first problem: Literature students have too little time to read, and too much is taken by

listening to us, teachers, discuss books they haven't had the time to read. Add to this that to reach UAB, or many other campus universities, students and teachers often have to employ at least 2 hours every day (and think of the carbon footprint this means—you just need to see the parking lot any day). Our buildings are woefully overcrowded with students who spend on average fifteen to twenty hours a week in classrooms, mostly passively listening (if they listen at all!). The furniture in our classrooms consists mostly of benches facing towards the teacher's platform, which are not only very uncomfortable but also impossible to move and guarantee a better use of the classroom space for group work (and now that Covid-19 is making personal distance necessary). To sum up: the way we teach takes too much reading/studying time, the classrooms are obsolete as teaching spaces, and we contaminate too much.

Next, what do we do in our biweekly ninety-minute lectures? We are supposed not to use 'lecciones magistrales' (lectures) but I should think that this is still a very typical model. The question we are not asking is whether this is the best possible model. Ninety minutes is an amount of time that goes totally against all studies in the attention span of average human beings. In conferences we offer twenty-minute papers and each ninety-minute session has three papers followed by discussion. Why do we assume, then, that our students benefit from ninety-minute sessions? And do they? Shouldn't we start thinking of alternatives? Perhaps forty-five minute sessions? Perhaps one presential and one online session a week? Of course, the problem with this is that our task as teachers is measured by how long we spend lecturing. Try to explain to the authorities that monitor us that teaching is not only face-to-face interaction but mainly guidance. It used to be about passing on information but this is the 21st century, not the Middle Ages, and information is accessible in many other ways than it used to be. The rule should be simple: the classroom should only be used for what cannot be done elsewhere.

Sixty per cent of students' work already happens elsewhere, in the library or at home. It is 'virtual', in the sense that it does not happen in the classroom. The thirty per cent that does happen in the classroom is now a problem because of how Covid-19 has attacked our capacity to be together in the same indoors space in big groups and for a long time. I believe, though, that with or without Covid-19, we still need to think why we need to crowd so many people in classrooms and what for. In primary schools they have 25 children in each classroom, though in really advanced countries like Finland this is down to 15. In universities, however, we think that it makes sense to have 100 students sitting huddled together—it doesn't make sense now, but it has never made sense at all. Past 25 students classroom interaction simply does not happen, you just see a mass of faces looking at you, as you desperately try to remember their names. In big groups, it really makes no difference whether you're there in the flesh or on YouTube.

Our target, then, should be making new sense of university teaching in a world that, as Covid-19 is forcing us to see, already needed a profound reform.

15 June 2020 / SCARLETT AND THE STATUE: WHY SUPPRESSION IS NOT EDUCATION

The brutal murder of African-American George Floyd by an overzealous, racist white cop, who thought that kneeling on the detainee's neck for nine minutes was adequate police practice, has resulted in massive social unrest in the USA and other countries. The #BlackLivesMatter movement has taken to the streets in the middle of the Covid-19 pandemic to demand an end to racism, while white individuals and white-dominated corporations apologize for having disregarded blacks in a variety of ways, from personal interaction to fictional representation.

As part of this trend, earlier this week streaming giant HBO announced the removal from its Max platform of *Gone with the Wind*, on the grounds that the film's racism is no longer acceptable, though recent news updates indicate that the movie will be returned to the platform with an accompanying statement on race. Scarlett O'Hara might then go not with the wind but with the statue of former slave trader Edward Colston, which was tipped into Bristol harbour a few days ago by a crowd of angry protesters. The local City Council has now retrieved it, with the intention of exhibiting it in a museum, complete with the graffiti and ropes the protestors used to deface and topple it down, as a History lesson.

There have been countless articles, blog posts, and tweets about Scarlett and the statue this last week all over the world, but the best I have read is by the geniuses that write satirical newspaper *El Mundo Today*. Their piece announces that after erasing all racist movies the only one that remains on HBO is *Spiderman 2* but since that one has not passed the anti-sexist Bechdel test, the platform will only stream its own menu (https://www.elmundotoday.com/2020/06/spiderman-2-sera-la-unica-pelicula-de-hollywood-disponible-en-las-plataformas-de-streaming-despues-de-que-borren-todas-las-peliculas-racistas/). What else can one add?

The past (and the present) is full of texts of all types that are racist, sexist, homophobic, transphobic, classist, ableist, ageist, speciesist, chauvinistic as regards nationality, and a long etcetera in the long list of human prejudice. We have no excuse now to produce offensive texts (I'm using 'text' here in the Cultural Studies sense of the words, which encompasses anything that can be subjected to interpretation), though political correctness is now a minefield almost impossible to navigate (see the J.K. Rowling tweetstorm this week on transphobic issues). What we cannot do is start erasing the texts of the past for we will be left with practically nothing.

Some will say that this is fine, and that the only way that a prejudice-free new textuality can emerge is by applying a sharp cultural rebooting, and starting all over again, from a completely different stance. Seeing this week how many comedians have apologised for having used blackface in their shows, there might be a point in asking for a radical revamping of culture. Still, it seems to me that retrospective apology and textual erasure misses the point without a deeper conversation.

Look at country band Lady Antebellum, now renamed Lady A: why did they think that was a good name? Why hadn't anybody pointed out that the use of the word Antebellum has certain racist connotations in the fourteen years since the band's foundation? And when comedians, singers, or even Vogue's editor Anna Wintour apologize (in her case for not hiring black staff), to whom are they apologizing? It seems to me that there is a strange kind of ghostly tribunal out there deciding who is absolved and what penance must be done, and I wonder why a white policeman had to act like a beast for so many people to suddenly realize that they were being racist but should not be. How come they didn't know before? It is not as if race is not discussed all the time.

I'll leave for the time being the discussion of what kind of new textuality can emerge in a fully politically correct atmosphere to focus on why suppression is not education. To begin with, I believe that HBO Max's decision may have had the opposite effect: attracting many new admirers to *Gone with the Wind*, a 1939 film which is hardly the type of fare that attracts young compulsive series watchers. I have fond personal memories of watching this film with my mother in its Spanish re-release, at some point in the 1980s, on the huge screen that Cinema Bosque used to flaunt before it was transformed into a multiplex. Any spectators could and can see, I think, that the original novel by Margaret Mitchell and its film adaptation are focused on white people of the American South in ways that are racist because that was a racist society. And least that was my impression: one thing is the racism of what is portrayed, the other is the film's racism. The film does not defend that the South was right and slavery should have been maintained; in fact, it portrays what was wrong with the white society that Scarlett embodies, if you want to see it that way, and why they lost the Civil War.

Let's not forget, besides, that actor Hattie McDaniel won the first Oscar ever awarded to an African-American for her role as Mammy (the second win went to Sidney Poitier in 1963!) and that Scarlett O'Hara's spunkiness (courtesy of English actor Vivien Leigh) was a refreshing innovation especially in comparison to the likes of bland, passive Melania (Olivia de Havilland) in the same film. With this I mean that context matters as much as text. We now see the scene when Rhett Butler (Clark Gable) drags Scarlett into their bedroom as marital rape and are outraged that next we see her blissful face the morning after. At the time what outraged the censors in Spain was Scarlett's expression of sexual satisfaction. Times change and we cannot live in a constant presentism, measuring everything by our rod.

If, in any case, the values of a text are so deeply at odds with our values, what happens is that it is eventually abandoned. We show little or no interest in medieval texts that caused major rifts and much personal damage depending on which quirky religious tenet they supported. The ones we attempt to suppress still bother us, but it is much more productive to try to understand why they bother us than simply avoid them. The same applies to statues, a type of art that completely baffles me. I don't understand what is the point of putting a reproduction of a person on a pedestal to be admired. Public spaces should be filled with art, but not of this kind. The same applies to calling institutions by person's names. A dear friends who works at Universidad Juan Carlos I has started a campaign to have the name changed, which is the equivalent, I think of toppling down a statue. And with good reason.

I teach Victorian Literature, as I have often noted here, and there is no way that I can do that using texts which offend nobody. Even the texts by women carry a good measure of prejudice, often class-related, and on occasion notably androphobic. I believe that I did explain here that we chose to replace Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* with H. Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* because even though some comments by Conrad's narrator Marlowe are clearly anti-racist the novella is not on the whole overtly so. It has generated too much admiration by snobbish literary people for its racial politics to be obvious (at least until Chinua Achebe protested in 1970 that for all its elegant prose this is a barbaric text). Haggard is so blatantly racist that, paradoxically, racism is easier to explain and to expose using his text: we do not teach *King Solomon's Mines* as a text that needs to be admired but as a text that was extremely popular for a very long time for reasons that need to be looked into. Following the same engaged pedagogy we teach Bram Stoker's *Dracula* as a deeply sexist text which is nonetheless extremely useful to understand the patriarchal concerns about women's liberation.

I think that the crux of all this problematic situation is our personal and collective admiration for certain texts and persons. This is a tricky concept. In Carme Torras's science fiction novel *La mutació sentimental* (2008), the future society she depicts has forgotten what admiration is about because individuals live in a totally egalitarian world. This is something she implicitly criticises. Admiration, of course, depends on acknowledging that something or someone is extraordinary and, so, worth our affection and respect. Thus, if a text or a person we admire is negatively valued, we feel an intimate hurt: don't touch my *Gone with the Wind*, don't touch my Edward Colston. I don't care, for instance, for D.W. Griffith's appallingly racist *Birth of a Nation* (1915) or for Alfred Hitchcock's appallingly sexist *Psycho* (1960) and feel offended whenever they are discussed as great examples of artistic innovation in cinema. I wish they could disappear from collective memory because they offend me deeply, and if they do I'll be happy (here contradicting my own argument that nothing should be suppressed). Now, try to suppress *Blade Runner* for being sexist, as I very well know it is since I am a feminist woman, and you will hear me scream, for I admire it. The same goes for *Dracula*, which is a superb novel.

The process of education, then, should consist of curbing down the admiration for questionable texts and persons and redirecting that feeling towards what truly deserves it (but according to whom?). The problem, as I am trying to argue, is that the process is more complex than it sounds because admiration has irrational, sentimental roots that have to do with personal experience. At the stage we are, most of us are fast re-educating ourselves but hardly willing to let go of certain texts: as a woman I am offended that men fully aware of sexism still admire sexist texts, but then I do the same if the sexist texts elicit my admiration in any way as I have noted. And nothing is ever one-sided. I admire Charles Dickens very much for certain qualities of his writing and deplore him for others of his personality. It would be very hard for me not to teach him in Victorian Literature but I have no problem not teaching Walter Scott in Romantic Literature because I do not admire him (of course, by not teaching him I am preventing my own students from admiring Scott, which might be very pig-headed of me).

The best I can do, in any case, is ask you do watch *Gone with the Wind*, even read Margaret Mitchell's novel, and learn who Edward Colston was, and then decide what you find there to admire or deplore. Just don't tip both into History's trashcan (why have I instantly thought of Donald Trump…?) for they are what History is about.

3 July 2020 / CAREER BLOCKERS AND BLOCKED MEN: *ALWAYS BE MY MAYBE*, AND THE MEN HOLDING BAGS

Today's post is inspired by two very different items. One is the delicious romantic comedy *Always Be me Maybe* (2019, Netflix) and the other my coming across the term 'career blocker' in a CV sent to my university by a candidate to a teaching post. Yes, very different matters but not really.

The comedy, scripted by its stars Ali Wong and Randall Park, together with Michael Golamco, and directed by Nahnatchka Khan, deals with the difficulties of thirty-something top chef Sasha to convince her childhood friend Marcus that they are meant for each other. Her frantic lifestyle, however, suggests that there is hardly room for anyone but herself in it. In the CV I read a woman academic with a similar hectic lifestyle described her five-year-old daughter and two-year-old boy as career blockers. I didn't know what that meant, and what my quick search revealed is that, yes, this mother was warning prospective employers that her career had been halted at points by her having children. I understand and profoundly respect the need to send this warning but I was, nonetheless, saddened. Put yourself in the children's shoes and try to guess how it would feel to be described in this way by a parent.

A very quick Google search revealed three basic meanings of 'career blocker', a term which, I assume, must be American (how come Americans are so inventive linguistically speaking?). In the article "Avoding Mid-Career Stalling" by Athena Vongalis-Macrow of the volume *Career Moves: Mentoring for Women Advancing Their Career and Leadership in Academia* (Sense Publishers, 2014, 71-82) which she herself has edited, you may find this sentence: "The lack of participation in networks has been identified as a career blocker for working women largely because most networking has been traditionally organised around male activities and interests" (77). Here the career blocker is, rather, a career lack. In the article "Beware of These Career Blockers" signed by Performance Management Consultants in their web PMC Training, the focus falls on the relational skills. They offer a table in which these binary pairs appear (strength first, career blocker second): Responsive/Too easily influenced, Careful/Too Cautious, Free thinker/Eccentric, Confident/Arrogant and so on (check https://pmctraining.com/site/resources-2/beware-of-these-career-blockers/). The article by Victoria Butt, manager director of Linked In, "Why Career Blockers are Impacting your Salary" (https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/how-identify-influence-your-career-blockers-victoria-butt) defines very differently 'career blockers' as "those people who will inhibit your career in some way –large or small. On a large scale, they will openly block your promotion in a leadership forum and explain to others why you should

NOT be eligible for a promotion/role change; on a small scale, they do not recommend your skills when asked". Definitely, one's own children are not it… One day, when I get the courage to do that, I'll talk about the person who was my career blocker for so many years, and in what sense I am an abuse survivor. Not now, perhaps soon.

Extremely successful individuals, then, have no inner or outer career blockers, whereas the rest of us are subjected to them. The gender discourse implicit in the CV is that for a woman becoming a mother is a major career blocker, whereas for a man it need not be, though I think that what is at stake is the construction of personal careers based on masculinist patriarchal models that value competitiveness above all. Whereas men still enjoy the complicity and help of many career wives, few women have the luxury of enjoying the support of a career husband. And this where chef Sasha comes in. She longs to have a baby but when the film begins she is in a relationship with an ambitious man who just sees her as a prop in his own business emporium but not really as a person to found a family with. Who does Sasha turn to? To childhood friend Marcus, as noted. What is the main argument she uses to seduce him to her view of things? That he has blocked his career as a musician at all points and accepted a job, a lifestyle, and even a girlfriend that are not good enough for him.

The problem with this argument is that it still doesn't work well with men, hence the film's title: *Always Be my Maybe*. Apparently, this is a witty distortion of a song by Mariah Carey, "Always Be my Baby". In the film's title the certainty of 'always' is destroyed by 'maybe' for the problem is that love stories involving career women are still fraught with all sort of problems. I was watching yesterday Gus Van Sant's *My Own Private Idaho* (1991), a post-modern take on Shakespeare's *Henry IV*, and at one point the Prince Hal character Scottie (Keanu Reeves) falls in love with an Italian peasant girl. Next thing we know, he has transformed her into a well-dressed Portland socialite, with no comment required. Her social ascent seems as credible to me today as it was in 1991, I only need to think of Cristiano Ronaldo's girlfriend Georgina Rodríguez as an example. The opposite case, the guy who adapts his life to that of a career woman is still complicated. Very much so.

Thus, in *Always Be my Maybe* there is a running gag about Marcus's inability to match his outfits to each occasion. This is put down to his being working-class but it is really down to his being a man sartorially at odds with the glamorous world of Sasha. Of course, she is not just a cook, but a star chef, though the film makes a point towards the end of endorsing small scale homely restaurants rather than the elite places she runs. The point I am making is that although the likes of Georgina Rodríguez have made a career out of their social climbing, triggered by a man's erotic choice, in this film comedy comes from the difficulties a regular guy has with accepting a place by the side of a successful woman. This is not even a case of his being considered less manly but of how his decisions not to pursue a career are chastised in the film's discourse.

There is a more or less general consensus that a career is better than a job, as a career is vocational and if you play your cards well you eventually become your own boss, reap the corresponding economic rewards and live the upper-class dream (or at least upper-middle class). In the film Sasha pulls herself by the bootstraps and gets all

this, except that she has no man to share it with, whereas Marcus is content enough until Sasha starts pointing out that actually he is unhappy. In fact, she is projecting her own unhappiness and does so by a constant process of harassment, without quite realizing that if Marcus had been as successful as a musician as she is as a chef he would hardly be there for her. They would be in another film: in Damien Chazelle's nasty *La La Land*, that awful film in which love becomes the main career blocker for the man, and so he turns his back on the woman, a successful actor. *Always Be my Maybe* is much more fun and so it reaches a sort of happy ending but one that provokes just a half smile and not the full confidence that romance will work. In this sense, all romantic comedy is dead.

If you move on five years into Sasha and Marcus' story what you will probably get is a couple with one or two kids squabbling because she is still running her career at the same hectic pace and his as a musician has not really taken off. Marcus, who is not interested in the lifestyle of the wealthy, might resent his new life as an imposition and try to be the nonchalant dude he was as often as possible. I can easily picture him spoiling a few dinner parties when guests ask him what he does apart from being Sasha's husband and the father of her kids. This is not a question a woman who has chosen to be a wife and mother would resent but here Marcus has not chosen being a house husband but pushed into becoming something that hardly exists: the working-class husband of a middle-class, ex-working-class woman. Holding her handbag at parties might jar after just a couple of events.

If you're familiar with *Always Be my Maybe* you may be wondering when I am going you mention race and ethnicity, for Sasha is American-Vietnamese and Marcus American-Korean. The answer is that I am not because a sign of the normality of racial matters is that they needn't be discussed. It does matter very much that this romantic comedy enhances the presence of Asian-Americans on the screen and that it has something quite interesting to say about the invisibility of Keanu Reeves's ethnic background so far, but to me it is essentially a text about class, not a very popular subject these days. Specifically, it is a text about the difficulties of an upwardly mobile de-classed woman to find a mate, for the men in her new circle are too career-minded and the men in her former circle are too little career-minded. Where is the middle ground, Sasha wonders? The solution, as noted, is pushing Marcus very hard up the social scale but, again, this is a very, very complicated choice. Keanu, who plays an obnoxious version of himself, is there, by the way, to test Marcus's insecurities when faced with a top male star.

I think, in short, that when thinking of gender, careers and career blockers we tend to forget class issues connected with upward social mobility, which is what this romantic comedy has forced me to consider. I do not know if there is a study of who career women of working-class backgrounds end up partnering with and though I assume it is mainly middle-class men, I am really curious to know. I think that men of the same background have the choice of marrying either working- or middle-class girls for women from the lower social strata can adapt far more easily than men of the same class to new social circles. I do wonder how many Marcuses are there holding bags for

their career wives and my guess is that very few, if any. So cheers to Wong and Park, and Golamco for making us think of this neglected topic.

10 July 2020 / MY FAVOURITE SCREEN PLAYWRIGHT IS…: CONSIDERING OUR COLLECTIVE NEGLECT OF SCREENWRITING

I am going to avoid the temptation of checking but this must be a post that I have written several times already. This time the inspiration comes from screenwriter Marta González de Vega whose work I did not know and whom I saw presenting the most recent programme of *Días de Cine* (La 2). I recommend that you see the complete interview with her, which is really very juicy, informative and entertaining (https://www.rtve.es/alacarta/videos/dias-de-cine/dias-cine-entrevista-completa-marta-gonzalez-vega/5614593/). De le Vega specialises in stand-up comedy, is herself an actor, and this shows. What she said to inspire me is very simple but requires an immense change of mentality: films belong to screenwriters even more than they belong to directors for without a screenplay there is no film (with very few exceptions, I must add). Besides, she added, when you ask spectators what they like about films, they always refer to the story and secondarily to actors' performance, hardly ever to the technical aspects of directing.

I wrote my master's dissertation on this very same topic twenty-eight years ago, but that bee in my bonnet is still buzzing hard because I see no change whatsoever in how we understand and discuss films. In the case of the MA dissertation my thesis was that Harold Pinter's adaptations had received scholarly attention because he was a prestige playwright (he became later a Nobel Prize winner) but there was really no reason to treat other screen playwrights differently. All his screenplays, mostly adaptations like the one that interested me (of John Fowles's novel *The French Lieutenant's Woman* for a film directed by Karel Reisz) had been published, by Faber & Faber no less!, and studied, so why shouldn't we do the same for all screen writing? Since 1992 when I started worrying about this a few things have changed and many more screenplays are published than ever, but the core of the matter, which is reviewing, remains stagnant.

The arguments are well known but I'll repeat (rehash?) them again. If you look at the Oscars, the ones acknowledged as the main authors are the producers: they are the ones that collect the Oscar for Best Picture, not the director. This comes from old Hollywood. The Oscars, first awarded in May 1929, a few months before the October Crash that made moviegoing a cure for collective D/depression , were organized on the assumption that the producer is the film's originator. It is his or her job to hire the director and the screenwriter, much as a theatre producer hires a director and a playwright. Directors used to see themselves as, basically, craftsmen, at the service of the producer's vision, though, of course, individuals like Orson Welles broke the rule book by acting as jacks-of-all-trades and beginning to put the director's name before the producer's.

This however, did not happen for good until François Truffaut and the *Cahiers du Cinéma* staff decreed in the early 1960s that the real author of the film was the director, and no wonder about it since Truffaut, by then also a critic, had become one the *enfants terrible* of the *Nouvelle Vague*. His first film was *Les quatre cents coups* (1959) but the funny thing is that whereas Truffaut has 28 credits as a director he has 38 as a writer… Most serious reviewers all over the world fell under the *charmant* spell of *Cahiers* and started eulogizing the work of the director at the expense of everyone else. Film Studies became consolidated around the same period on the false assumption of the equivalence in authorship between the literary author and the film director, which would certainly have surprised Shakespeare. He, the equivalent of the modern screenwriter in a commercial theatrical business not so unlike the studio system, would have been miffed. The popular movie magazines continued their adoration of film stars (this was the reason why most had been founded: star saleability) but nobody cared to interview the poor screen writers. The last one I saw interviewed all over the place was Scott Z. Burns, and that was because he wrote the screenplay for Steven Soderberg's film *Contagion* (2011), the movie in which Gwyneth Paltrow plays patient zero in a plague similar but far more lethal than Covid-19.

When I was a little girl and finally grasped that movies were not real, I assumed that actors were the authors of films. Kirk Douglas and Charlton Heston were God to me because they seemed to have the best ideas. This is not as far-fetched as it may sound for, surprise, surprise, stage directors did not exist until the 20th century: the habitual practice was for the main star to make all decisions eventually assumed by this figure. I must have been 12 when I finally realized that directors existed still having no idea about what they did except for what I saw in films (like Truffaut's *La nuit américane*, 1973). I owe my discovery to the great film critic Alfonso Sánchez Martínez (1911-1981), who from 1959 onward educated Spaniards on the art of reviewing. I must have seen him on *Buenas Tardes* (1970-1974), *Revistero* (1975) or, most likely, *Revista de cine* (1976-1979); incidentally, *Días de Cine* started in 1991. Later, I read the magazine *Fotogramas* and the movie reviews in *El País* and *La Vanguardia*, until I tired of the impenetrable language of the classic Spanish *cinéfilo*. At least, Carlos Boyero is transparent.

A constant in this training as an amateur film critic, what everyone is and no doubt about it, is that we have got used to the figure of he director by constant exposure but still know nothing about the screen writer. Meryl Streep would be nothing with no lines to say and the best director and producer in the world, but, still, nobody cares for the poor writer. If, happily, director and writer are the same person then matters are at least more or less justified, which possibly explain the, for me, inexplicable popularity of Woody Allen. I am, however, sick and tired of seeing guys like Ridley Scott or Clint Eastwood praised for ideas they never had. Scott has 140 credits as a producer, 52 as director and only 4 as writer, all for short films. When the screenplay is good his films work beautifully; when they are not, his films are unendurable. *Gladiator* (2000) from a storyline by David Franzoni was written by Franzoni himself, with additional work by John Logan and William Nicholson. Franzoni had written previously Steven Spielberg's *Amistad* (1997). Clint Eastwood has 50 credits as producer, 41 as director and none as writer. *Million Dollar Baby* (2004) was written by Paul Haggis from stories by F.X. Toole and Gran Torino (2008) by Nick Schenk, from his own storyline with Dave Johannson.

Now let's play a game. I'll make a list of the Oscar-Award winners for Best Original Screenplay of the last 10 years and you try to guess what they wrote (sorry, there is no reward for guessing right). Here we go: 2010 David Seidler, 2011 Woody Allen, 2012 Quentin Tarantino, 2013 Spike Jonze, 2014 Armando Bo, Alexander Dinelaris Jr., Nicolás Giacobone & Alejandro G. Iñárritu, 2015 Tom McCarthy & Josh Singer, 2016 Kenneth Lonergan, 2017 Jordan Peele, 2018 Brian Currie, Peter Farrelly & Nick Vallelonga and 2019 Bong Joon-ho & Han Jin-won… Ready yet? The answer: 2010, *The King's Speech*; 2011, *Midnight in Paris*; 2012, *Django Unchained*; 2013 *Her*; 2014 *Birdman*; 2015 *Spotlight*; 2016 *Manchester by the Sea*; 2017 *Get Out*; 2018 *Green Book* and 2019 *Parasites*. No women on this list… In six cases the writer was also the director.

Now the other way round. Here are ten Oscar award winners for Best Picture– who wrote them? What! You've forgotten about *Gladiator* already? Shame on you… Here we go: 1990 *Dances with Wolves*, 1993 *Schindler's List*, 1994 *Forrest Gump*, 1995 *Braveheart*, 1998 *Shakespeare in Love*, 2000 *Gladiator*, 2001 *A Beautiful Mind*, 2005 *Crash*, 2007 *No Country for Old Men*, 2009 *The Hurt Locker*. Of course, here I am trusting that you know the names of the directors and of the actors, because we do, right? It's like when we read a book: we make sure to recall the title and the name of the author, correct? Anyway, the solution: 1990 *Dances with Wolves*: Michael Blake, from his own novel; 1993 *Schindler's List*: Steve Zaillian, from the novel by Thomas Kenneally *Schindler's Ark*; 1994 *Forrest Gump*: Eric Roth from the novel by Winston Groom; 1995 *Braveheart*: Randall Wallace; 1998 *Shakespeare in Love*: Marc Norman & Tom Stoppard; 2000 *Gladiator*: David Franzoni; 2001 *A Beautiful Mind*: Akiva Goldsman from Sylvia Nasar's book; 2005 *Crash*: Paul Haggis & Bobby Moresco; 2007 *No Country for Old Men*: Joel and Ethan Cohen, from the novel by Cormac McCarthy; 2009 *The Hurt Locker*: Mark Boal.

Of course, I have cheated for I don't know any of this by heart. I make a point of recalling that Steven Zaillian wrote *Schindler's List* as a sort of party trick for the classroom. Everyone knows Steven Spielberg directed this stark black and white portrait of the Holocaust (beautifully photographed by Janusz Kaminski) and that Liam Neeson and Ralph Fiennes played major roles, but who remembers Zaillian? He is, by the way, the author of the screenplay for Martin Scorsese's *The Irishman* (2019) based on Charles Brandt book. Perhaps he would be better remembered if the three films he has directed, among them *All the King's Men* (2006), which he scripted from Robert Penn Warren's novel, had been the box-office hit Zaillian needed to be known as a writer-director but, alas!, that did not happen.

Not all screenwriters dream of becoming movie directors just as not all playwrights dream of becoming stage directors. Indeed, why should they? The problem is that stage playwrights need not dream of being someone else because their work is respected. A play by Tom Stoppard is a play by Tom Stoppard no matter who directs it, whereas a screenplay by Steve Zaillian is… nothing for him (except a fat playcheck, since he has big credits to his name) and the world for the director in question, whether this is Spielberg or Scorsese. This is simple to explain: a play by a playwright will be hopefully staged many times in different productions along the years, even in different languages,

whereas a screenplay is a prop consumed by one single production. Nobody will come along and make ten different films of the same screenplay (only two at the most) and in different languages. The 'To Be or not to Be' monologue has been recited thousands of times; the screenplay written by Melchior Lengyel and Edwin Justus Mayer for Ernst Lubitsch's anti-Nazi comedy *To Be or not to Be* has been recited once for the film (if there is a play based on it, that's another matter). The screenplay, I insist, is devoured by the film, whereas no production can wholly eat up a stage play. Look at Shakespeare…

Now, tell me… Your favourite screen playwright is…

13 July 2020 / ON GOOD BOYS AND LADS (AND *FROZEN*'S KRISTOFF)

Next year I'll teach an MA elective subject on gender in children animated films of the 21st century and I have started the process of selecting indispensable bibliography for my students. I have, then, spent a few great days reading Amy M. Davis's excellent volumes *Good Girls and Wicked Witches: Women in Disney's Feature Animation* (John Libbey Publishing, 2006) and *Handsome Heroes and Vile Villains: Men in Disney's Feature Animation* (John Libbey Publishing, 2013), both in reasonably priced paperback editions. Both are very good, as I say, though the former is possibly better because it includes a very informative introduction to the history of animation for children in the USA, and to the rise and rise of the Disney Studios. The latter volume is quite curious because Davis uses a far more descriptive style as if she is carefully finding her way as she writes about men lacking clear directions. You might think that we know everything about gender in Disney films but Davis proves very convincingly that many critiques are based on gross misreadings of the heroines (who are more active than we assume and not so often a princess) and that the male protagonists have been mainly overlooked. Her chapter on the "Handsome Princes" is quite a surprise, painting a portrait of these guys as quite passive men and, in essence, just trophy husbands for the gals.

These days I am also thinking of finally starting the project of a collective volume on the good guys, now that I am done with the villains, and I have been paying close attention to what Davis has to say about the male Disney characters. Clearly, something important happened at the turn of the century, for the good guy generally preferred by Disney Studios started sharing space with the spoiled lad. Davis describes Milo from *Atlantis* (2001) as a young man with enough "love, integrity, and moral strength" (103) to defeat the villain, whereas Emperor Kuzko of *The Emperor's New Groove* (2001) is described as an "over-indulged boy", "*very* spoiled" and "selfish" (178, original italics). Following a pattern already present in *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), the uncaring boy is transformed into an animal (in Kuzko's case a llama) and needs to become a "true man" (178) before he regains his human form. Milo, in contrast, is a "true man", which means a good man, from the start. This is why he can play hero and be accepted by the new-style heroine Kida.

Davis dates the emergence of the unmanageable lad to a point between 1999 and 2000 when British magazines *FHM* and *Maxim* became exports to the US market, as

part of the Cool Britannia wave (182). I think that laddism, as the lad culture has been called, may have been a catalyst for trends already present in the USA by which the good lad became the nerd, and the jock became the frat guy, and a bully. Earlier in the book, David discusses Brom Bones, the practical joker that gets rid of nerdish Ichabod Crane in Washington Irving's *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* and its Disney version (NOT the Tim Burton version). She writes that Bones "is generous, good-hearted and has a lively sense of humour, but he is rough, rude, cocky, and tends to be a bully" (133) though not a cruel or vicious man. It seems to me that the current Brom Bones (in plural) have lost the first half of these traits to keep only the second, feeling authorized by laddism to be the worst version of themselves. The good guy, I insist, is now reduced to being a nerd (as we see, for instance, in the boys of *Stranger Things*). President Trump is the arch-Brom Bones today, the lad with the 'grab-them-by-the-pussy' locker-room talk and acts.

Reading Davis it occurred to me that I have no idea what the little boys in the audience for animated films are like. I know about the girls: they are clever and/or intelligent, self-assured, playful, certain than being a queen (like Elsa) is cooler than being a princess because you don't need a guy, and very much in search of their own way into the future. But who are they boys? It seems to me that the division into nerds and bullies has done away with the middle ground at which animated films used to aim: the nice boy. I haven't read yet *Pixar's Boy Stories: Masculinity in a Postmodern Age* by Shannon R. Wooden and Ken Gillam and the answer to my query might be there, but I still have a strong suspicion that something is not quite right. I do see the good lad in a film as perfect as Pixar's *Coco* (2017) but I am not sure who among the boys *Coco* appeals to. Or, rather, what I mean is that this tale imagined by Lee Unkrich, Jason Katz, Matthew Aldrich and Adrian Molina, though being firmly anti-bully can do little to stop the bullies from being so prominent in the current lad culture. Do not misunderstand me: I am NOT saying that little boys like Miguel in this film do not exist, what I am saying is that they are not popular and respected in real life, though they should, because the lad, the frat guy, the jock are attracting all the attention. And they are not good guys.

Another matter that strikes me very much reading Davis's *Handsome Heroes and Vile Villains* is how often the word responsibility crops up. Far from being ready to follow in their father's footsteps the Prince resists the patriarchal demands to find a wife and become himself a husband and father. *Ever After: A Cinderella Story* (1998), written by Susannah Grant, Andy Tennant and Rick Parks, and directed by Tennant, has many interesting things to say about how in the medieval patriarchy which inspired many fairy tales the prince was as much a pawn as any princess. In this film Prince Henry (Dougray Scott) is quite dismayed by the role he must play and resists assuming his responsibility to marry a wife he does not love. In a way, Cinderella (Drew Barrymore) frees him as much as she frees herself by marrying him. The Prince's plea, however, has attracted little comment because it is usually assumed that he is eventually empowered by becoming the King and, anyway, if he is unhappy in his arranged marriage he can always enjoy the company of a mistress, which is not the case for a Queen. You might think that my talk of Princes assuming their responsibility and refusing to be pawns is positively medieval, but you only need to think of the immense differences between Juan Carlos I and Felipe VI to understand that this is still a vital matter. We have always known that Juan Carlos I solved the problem of his indifference to his wife Queen Sofía with a string

of mistresses, the last of whom has caused him to lose his prestige as a respected King emeritus. In contrast, Felipe VI went through a string of girlfriends until he chose, unexpectedly, a divorced commoner to be his Queen, with whom, we assume, he is personally happy. I say this as a convinced Republican, by the way.

Before I get lost in the corruption of the Spanish monarchy as embodied by Juan Carlos I, I'll get back to the matter of responsibility. Little girls are taught to be responsible for themselves and because, it is assumed, they will want to be mothers someday. My nieces started expressing their opinion about having children around the age of seven, and I myself became aware that this issue was part of my life at that age, when my youngest brother was born. I don't see, however, my nephew, now nineteen, considering the matter of fatherhood if only hypothetically, as something in his future. My impression is that he is fairly representative of the average lad today: someone who is good company but hardly someone I would define as responsible and taking steps to eventually become a husband and a father. I do not mean that adulthood is defined by marriage and parenthood but what I mean is that I see the responsible adult in the little girls in ways I don't see in little boys. Animated films are great fun but still they address themselves to the responsible little girl who wants to be loved and even admired for who she is. I don't see the same attitude towards little boys, as if somehow society has given up on them and has no plans to teach them how to become responsible adults. Or perhaps I am exaggerating: parents of boys lends me a hand here!!

Davis claims that for a long time now Disney has addressed its films mainly to boys but its merchandising to girls. My impression is that things are more balanced as regards the films so that for each *Tarzan* we have a *Mulan* (no idea, though, why *Frozen* is not called *Elsa and Anna*, or *Sisters*). The matter of the merchandise has its own scary edges. A friend of mine, father of two little boys and very keen on *Star Wars*, a franchise now owned by Disney, called my attention to how the most popular Disney character among boys, judging by the merchandise, is now Kylo Ren. In case you are not a *Star Wars* fan, Ren, born plain Ben Solo, is the grandson of Anakin Skywalker, a.k.a. Darth Vader, whom he very much admires. In *Episode VII: The Force Awakens* (2015) he murders his own father, Han Solo (his mother is Princess Leia). I am wondering right now what kind of father buys his little boy merchandising connected with a patricidal monster, but there you are. In the most recent episode, *Star Wars: Episode IX – The Rise of Skywalker* (2019) Rei does her best to have Kylo Ren show his better self, to no avail. Although there is an even worse villain in the saga, apparently Ren, who has a very cool laser sword, remains a favourite with boys. I hope for our collective sake that I am very, very wrong.

Then, there's Kristoff in *Frozen*, whom I keep calling Sven, though that's his reindeer. Commoner Sámi Kristoff, quite a handsome lad, informs Princess Anna that he sells ice for a living. When she meets the troll family that raised him, his adoptive mother Bulda tries to convince Anna that he is a good choice, though at that early point in *Frozen* the Princess is not interested at all. Bulda sings then the song "Fixer Upper" wondering "Why are you holding back from such a man?". "Is it the clumpy way he walks?", she asks Anna, while other trolls add "Or the grumpy way he talks?", or his weird feet, or how "though we know he washes well, he always ends up sort of smelly". Kristoff is said

to be "Sensitive and sweet" and have just a "few flaws" that can be fixed with love… if only Anna accepts his "peculiar brain" and his "thing with the reindeer"... Shy Kristoff is also characterised as "socially impaired". There is much more but Bulda does ask "Are you holding back your fondness/Due to his unmanly blondness?/ Or the way he covers up that he's the honest goods?" The good guy is, in short, comical relief and it takes a determinate suspension of disbelief to see him become Anna's love interest in earnest. Songwriter Kristen Anderson-Lopez has claimed that her own husband and co-writer Robert Lopez was the inspiration for the song, the original fixer upper (a term originally meaning a house in need of repair). This is all great fun, and a change from the idiot Prince Hans Anna chooses as her husband on the same day she meets him, much to Kristoff's incomprehension, but what is this song telling little boys? No matter how clumsy you are, as long as you're handsome, a nice pretty girl will choose you…? It's confusing…

I'll end here, in all this confusion, and will get back when I read the book on Pixar and think how Poppy's friend Branch in *Trolls* fits the picture.

20 July 2020 / ON BULLIES AND NERDS: READING *PIXAR'S BOY STORIES*

I have now read Shannon Wooden and Ken Gillam's *Pixar's Boy Stories: Masculinity in a Postmodern Age* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2014) and feel even more disconcerted than I did last week about the boys in the audience for animated children's movies. Interestingly, Wooden and Gillam are not only academic collaborators but the parents of two boys, their inspiration for writing the volume. We are all used to the idea that Disney is conservative and its filmic products a way of teaching little girls to stay within the confines of patriarchal heteronormativity (which is a biased view, as Amy M. Davis shows) and to the complementary idea that Pixar, bought by Disney in 2006, is the more progressive studio. Much to my surprise, Wooden and Gillam do a terrific, though controversial, demolition job of Pixar's production until 2013 (*Brave*, *A Bug's Life*, *Cars*, *Cars 2*, *Finding Nemo*, *The Incredibles*, *Monsters Inc.*, *Monsters University*, *Ratatouille*, *Toy Story*, *Toy Story 2*, *Toy Story 3*, *Up!* and *WALL-E*). Possibly only *Coco* out of the rest (*Inside Out*, *The Good Dinosaur*, *Finding Dory*, *Cars 3*, *Incredibles 2*, *Toy Story 4*, *Onward*) contradicts their main arguments.

Wooden and Gillam establish, to begin with, that there is a worrying situation concerning boys as, the more girls advance, the more boys retreat. This is not because girls are actively pushing them out of any area but because American boys identify any area in which girls excel as a girlie area, which is slowly but constantly erasing their presence, out of their own accord, from many. This is a phenomenon we know well: the only degrees with a majority of young men are those in Engineering, which does not seem to interest girls so much. In the rest, the girls are the majority and still gaining ground. Borrowing their theoretical framework for masculinity mainly from sociologist Michael Kimmel, Wooden and Gillam paint a bleak picture of contemporary US masculinity, split between the bullies and the nerds (as I noted in my previous post). The patriarchal 'boy police', which consists not only of direct bullying but of general social

pressure to avoid anything connected with femininity out of a combination of misogyny and homophobia, is preventing American boys from receiving the right guidance to become well-adjusted adults. Wooden and Gillam candidly grant that whereas girls are now well liked "At the heat of the *boy* crisis, it seems, is the hard truth that we don't like them very much anymore" (17, original italics). I was surprised to read that this extends to some US couples actively trying to select the sex of their babies, preferring girls.

Using Jesse Klein's *The Bully Society: School Shootings and the Crisis of Bullying in America* (New York: New York UP, 2012), Wooden and Gillam try to make sense of what has happened to boys for US society not to like them. I am not sure that I agree with all their arguments but the changes in masculinity, they say following Klein, have to do with the emergence of the concept of "body capital", which has facilitated "the jock cult" (and on the side of the girls the cookie cutter looks of the teen influencers). Whereas in the past any classroom would afford social acceptance to a variety of boys, from the popular jock to the socially awkward nerd, passing through the geek, the super-achiever and the B-grade boys, now all classrooms are radically split between the jock and his cronies and the rest, all pushed into the nerd category by the jock's bullying. This is a sort of revenge of the jocks: told in the 1990s that body matters more than brain by the combination of shallow lad/frat guy culture and celebrity culture, the jock demands a position of prominence he never had by demeaning those who do not possess his body capital. What he sees in society, with the cult of male sports celebrities, confirms his view of school social hierarchy. The boy that excels in matters which are not sports learns to conceal his abilities so as not to attract the jock's bullying. The boy that has no special qualities tends to side with the bully, either overtly or covertly for "even young boys know how to read bodies as signifiers of social status" (35), and the one with the 'right body' is, definitely, the jock with the six-pack abs.

According to Wooden and Gillam, "The Pixar films, for all their wholesome surface messages, do nothing to rewrite the bully script by which many American kids suffer" (80). Their narratives register, in fact, "disapproval of the extraordinary" (22). They endorse the homesteader ideal of the past which "privileges self-effacement, obedience, and emotional stoicism, hardly healthy values for contemporary boys" (15) and preach that "Maturing out of boyhood requires suppression and conformity" (25). By joining in the "traditional celebration of physical brawn" they "tacitly endorse the social hierarchy that perpetuates our rampant bully culture" (52). This is done mainly by presenting the "gifted and talented" as "ludicrous, creepy, or downright dangerous" (96) and by characterizing them, not the jocks, as the villains even from childhood. The model, they hint, is that of the Columbine High School massacre: the child nerd, or geek, is ostracized and bullied, and left with no parental guidance, and he grows up to be a resentful teen school shooter seeking respect in real life, and a villain (or a loser) in the Pixar films. Wooden and Gillam also note that the worst villains are the guys that disrupt the workings of the market on which companies like Pixar and Disney depend. "Rather than asking the community which values should be taught, the corporation teaches the community those lessons that work in its favor" (130), they conclude.

I am not sure that I completely understand what Wooden and Gillam are arguing, for I do not see the alternative they propose and I do not see the boys in the audience

(are the Pixar films for the bullies? Do they go to the cinema? Is going to the cinema nerdish?). If I follow them correctly, the authors want for the boys what studios are beginning to offer the girls: stories in which being outstanding following positive values is rewarded and which offer a lesson in how to mature into being a well-adjusted woman (man in the boys' case). I am just wondering whether this is indeed what girls are being offered…

Take *Frozen*, the biggest hit with girls in recent years. Princess Elsa has a unique gift by which she dominates ice but she is forced to conceal that gift because her power is presented to her as a danger to the persons in her circle and to the community. Elsa almost becomes a villain, as she is in the original fairy tale, but learns to 'let it go', turn her fear of herself into a positive understanding of power, and enjoy the love of her sister Anna. For all that she is rewarded and becomes the respected, celebrated Queen of Arundel. Yet, in *Frozen 2*, which I initially loved but now I have serious misgivings about, Elsa feels again unhappy as, somehow, her powers are too constrained in her new role as Queen. The story leads to her gradually shedding away any duties she has towards her community, including passing the crown to Anna. Elsa moves elsewhere to a place that looks very much like Superman's fortress of solitude to do… what? I thought she was going to enjoy complete freedom but now I read that as solipsism. Or even worse: social limbo. I recently read that, originally, Elsa died at the end of the film, which is very scary for even though this is a Disney film it responds to the Pixar model which Wooden and Gillam criticise: whoever is different needs to be isolated or suppressed. There are happier films with girls, like Disney's *Moana* (2016), but *Frozen* also needs to be read from this dark angle.

I think that the Pixar film that most worries Wooden and Gillam is *Monsters University*, which most clearly corresponds to the 'bully society' pattern they describe, with Sulley as the jock and Mike as the bullied nerd (though my impression is that this is a much inferior film to *Monsters Inc*., in which Sulley learns valuable lessons about parenting and friendship). I find, however, that children's animation moves on very quickly and the gaps noted by Davis in relation to Disney and by Wooden and Gillam in relation to Pixar are no longer there. We need to consider, besides, the DreamWorks films (Shrek, Trolls…) and other studios such as Blue Sky (of *Ice Age* fame).

Anyway, Wooden and Gillam make little of some of the Pixar films that have a happy end for the nerdish male character and I mean here specifically *Ratatouille* written by Brad Bird (also the director) from a storyline by Bird himself, with Jan Pinkava (also co-director) and Jim Capobianco. I am not very sure about how to read this film, which tells the story of how, defying patriarchal authority, the provincial French rat Remy manages to fulfil his dream: cooking in an *haute cuisine* Paris restaurant. He does so by establishing a singular partnership with the hopeless garbage boy, Linguini, who little by little learns to appease the bullies in the kitchen, be his own man and, of course, interest the strong female character, aspiring chef Colette. The message here is that, um…, even if you are the lowliest of the low as rat or boy you do have a right to fulfil your dreams which does sound positive to me. The bullies are put in their place and even charmed and, in short, the nerds here triumph. And we love it.

Coco (2017) is even clearer in its anti-bully, pro-nerd message. There have been very serious concerns about whether this film by Lee Unkrich and Adrian Molina, from a story by them with Jason Katz and Matthew Aldrich plagiarises the Mexican film *The Book of Life* (2014) directed by Jorge R. Gutiérrez, from his own screenplay with Doug Langdale. Unkrich and Molina have claimed that the films just overlap in their visual treatment of Mexican popular culture but I have my suspicions that there is much direct borrowing of visual motifs. The plots, however, could not be more different. *The Book of Life* tells an embarrassingly cliched story about Manolo, a young man whose father wants him to be a bullfighter but who wants to be a musician and who is involved in amorous competition with his manly rival Joaquín for *señorita* María. In *Coco* Miguel, a younger boy than Manolo, also wants to be a musician against his family's wishes but here the similarities end.

That his family are shoemakers instead of bullfighters is a relatively unimportant matter; what matters is that Miguel's bildungsroman passes through understanding who the bully is in his personal story and through paying homage to a nerdish ancestor. Since he is universally celebrated in his native Mexico Miguel deduces for a series of wrong reasons that the late star singer Ernesto de la Cruz must be his great-grandfather, when in fact he turns out to be, once he meets him in the land of the dead, a most horrendous bully. The long-lost father that Miguel's *abuela* Mamá Coco misses so much is a very different man, and actually a direct victim of Ernesto's violence. The film is called *Coco* because what is at stake how the *abuela's* gradual loss of memory makes Miguel's identification of his real great-grandfather so complicated. The title tries not to spoil the film's surprise discovery of who her father and Miguel's great-grandfather really was but it might as well be called *The Lost One*. Talented Miguel, who has inherited his musical gifts from this man, not only vindicates him but also gets rid of his own bully, his Abuelita, who wrongly believes that her grandfather, the lost man, deserted his wife and daughter (Mamá Coco). *Coco* teaches boys in the audience, in short, to oppose the bully and stand up for themselves, which is what Wooden and Gillam find missing in the other Pixar films.

I haven't seen yet Pixar's most recent film, *Onward* (2020), about two elf siblings in search of their lost father but an enthusiastic IMDB spectator praises the studio for "providing rich a brotherly relationship" as *Frozen* did for girls. What I am wondering is whether the boys are there, getting the message, or elsewhere… perhaps playing videogames…

27 July 2020 / THE STRAIGHT WHITE MALE STRIKES AGAIN (AND IS STRUCK…)

These days an article published in the new magazine *The Critic*, sponsored by Brexiteer billionaire Jeremy Hosking, has made a bit of noise. In their launch issue of November 2019 editors Michael Mosbacher and Christopher Montgomery announced that "Our writers will subscribe to no editorial line nor serve the interests of any party, faction or cause. We ask them to write because we expect them to be honest, and lucidly so. Look

to our contributors and fault us if they are not". However, it seems to me that the critic calling himself (because this is clearly a 'he') Secret Author (a "former professor of English and creative writing at a leading British university") who signs the article "Decline of the English Novel" (https://thecritic.co.uk/issues/july-august-2020/decline-of-the-english-novel/) has a clear agenda. This is dominated by the defence of things as they were when white, straight, middle-class novelists ruled uncontested.

Secret Author bemoans in the July-August issue that the weekend arts sections run full of "a cornucopia of alleged talent", when, in fact, the "awfulness of most of the fiction" available today is "one of the great unacknowledged secrets of modern cultural life". What's wrong with the English novel?, he wonders. Three factors: lack of technical ability, the snobbery that has radically undervalued the middlebrow novel, and, brace yourselves, a lack of religious belief and moral standards. Religious belief is not "a fit subject for a novel" (obviously he means Christian belief, for I am sure he would immediately reject fiction about any other religion), "while 'moral behaviour' is mostly reduced to the pressing dilemma of who to sleep with this week". I would agree that too many new novels are usually overhyped and that technique could be improved in all fronts, but this appeal to traditional values is plain wrong.

This is where I started thinking that, unless this critic is past the ripe age of 100, he must be a troll. His idea of a good novel is one in which "the fount of all moral goodness flows from a country house in Gloucestershire and the lower orders are portrayed as shiftless and venal", the kind "no one in these enlightened times would dare to publish it". If, he sentences, you ignore "God, class, power and bourgeois moral values and all you have left for a subject is identity politics (of great importance to a sociologist but a desperate yawn when peddled by writers of both right and left) and some very minor social interactions". Ah, here is what bothers him: that the 'others' who are not white, straight, male and middle- or upper-class have something to say at all, and that their work is appreciated.

The *Guardian* article by Rhiannon Lucy Coslett, "The Novel is Dead – Again. And this Time, It's Women Who Have Murdered It" highlights how Secret Author identifies Zadie Smith and Sally Rooney with this "supposed decline" of the English novel (https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jul/10/novel-dead-again-women-murdered-it-sally-rooney). Coslett claims that Rooney in particular "drives men wild" with "jealousy" but I must say that although I am not a man and I have no reason to feel jealous of Ms. Rooney I intensely dislike her novel *Normal People*. I am not going to fall into the trap of defending anything a woman writes just because I am a woman, though I will certainly refrain myself from attributing to Rooney faults that should be shared by the whole publishing industry, above all, the frantic search for the next masterpiece that burns so many young writers out. Let Rooney and all the others have a career before calling them superb.

I do agree with Coslett, however, that the problem with men like the Secret Author is that they do not understand that the Great White Male Novelist has also been expressing the identity politics of his type but without seeing them as such. The problem is, she says, that he is "still cloaked in too high a regard for some to see he has as much

of an identity as anyone else". I am not sure that I see the connection between high regard and identity, for me this is a matter, rather, of a general failure on the part of reviewers and scholars to make the label "men's fiction" as visible as "women's fiction", or any minority label. Coslett concludes her article by re-assuring the indignant Secret Author that "No one wants to make the Great White Male Novelist extinct – they just want more diversity in publishing" for readers "who truly love books are hungry for a range of perspectives".

I am afraid this is not true. The title of the interview with new Australian novelist Jessie Tu in the same publication, *The Guardian*, is "I will probably never read another novel by a straight white male" (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/jul/01/jessie-tu-when-you-dont-see-yourself-on-the-page-you-literally-dont-exist). Tu is the author of *A Lonely Girl Is a Dangerous Thing*, a novel about former child prodigy Jena Lien "who, as a young adult, now uses men to fill the void left by fame". This includes her looking for validation from a powerful "older guy, he's white, he's a fucking douchebag" and he is, in essence, toxic but still socially valuable. This seems to define as well the "straight white male author" that Tu will not read again because "Those guys are always going to have readers … I'll spend the rest of my life reading black writers and BIPOC [Black, Indigenous, People of Color] people and LGBTQA people, because there's so many books out there written by these people who don't have the platform naturally that conservative straight white male guys have". I could not agree more, yet at the same time I believe that this is absolutely wrong.

Tu's words explain much better than Coslett's what is happening now: a fragmentation of the reading public which can hardly end privilege and promote change. Coslett's ideal readers "hungry for a range of perspectives" runs the risk of disappearing, if they are there at all, or of never emerging, if they are to materialize in the future. I have no doubt whatsoever that the white, straight, middle-class male writer is still privileged by the critics and very popular with readers but the way to undermine that privilege and that popularity is not at all ignoring him, hoping that, somehow, his work eventually loses appeal and his readers move onto other texts.

The way forward I think is twofold. On the one hand, privileged writers and readers that respond to that basic description need to be made aware of their own identity politics and educated in an appreciation of any other identity politics. On the other hand, the production of the WSMCM writer needs to be subjected to the same scrutiny anyone else passes regarding race, ethnicity, sexuality, class, gender. I'll cite, once more, black, lesbian, left-wing, working-class Scottish author Jackie Kay, currently the Scottish Makar (or poet laureate), to stress that the moment we examine in which ways Martin Amis is a white, straight, conservative, middle-class, male English novelist we will have gained much. If we only see Martin Amis as a major writer and Kay as an author marked by her identity politics we are stuck in square one. Do create critical categories that speak of 'white man's fiction', or 'heterosexual male fiction', etc., instead of just letting WSMCM authors go on undisturbed and even send now and then a Secret Author in their defence.

Tu's loyalty to BIPOC people and LGBTQA people is praiseworthy but also worries me because this battle is not just about who you remain loyal to but about how you re-educate people. Imagine you are a white, straight, male, middle-class man intent on starting a career as a novelist from a position that I am going to call anti-patriarchal and totally respectful of diversity. How would you react to Tu's words? Why should you be automatically classed with the male writers of the past and be denied any chance to offer a different perspective? What is more, how are Tu's words and invitation to appreciate BIPOC and LGBTQA authors? Do they want to be put in those categories? Why does Tu, the Australian daughter of Taiwanese immigrants, want to put herself in a category beyond the category 'writer'? How can Tu and Secret Author communicate at all? Many questions, as you can see.

As a critic working on Masculinities Studies, or Critical Studies of Men and Masculinities, I often feel very foolish trying to convince others that we need to read men's texts from the same identity politics position we use for the rest. Haven't WSMCM authors received enough attention I am constantly told? Well, yes and no. They have received attention for their art, if you want to use that word, but not for their politics except to criticise how they represent women and the minorities. We have not really looked into self-representation, into how identity politics is altering (or not) the way men write. Secret Author would then understand that the absence of God and of upper-class morality in the current English novel has nothing to do with the rising presence of the women and the minorities but with the abandonment of these issues by the WSMCM writers themselves. Why Evelyn Waugh has no current equivalent might be a pertinent question to ask but within the field of what should be called Men's Fiction.

This has to do with a strange tension between representation and authorship. As critics we are doing plenty to examine representation, increasingly including in this examination male characters (just see my previous post). But we are strangely reluctant to the see the so far dominant critical categories also as critical categories for authorship. Shannon Wooden and Ken Gillam, the authors of *Pixar's Boy Stories: Masculinity in a Postmodern Age* which I discussed last week, never think of Pixar as Men's Cinema in the same way Women's Cinema is assumed to exist in, for instance, Patricia White's *Women's Cinema, World Cinema: Projecting Contemporary Feminisms* (2015).

If someone who is not a WSMCM author creates a text, their difference from the WSMCM norm is always incorporated into the way their authorship is read. However, and I know that I am repeating myself, we have great difficulties to see WSMCM authors as specifically conditioned by their identity even when we discuss how they represent the persons of their same type. It's an either/or question: either we stop using identity politics for everyone who is not a WSMCM author, of we also use them for WSMCM. We cannot just allow the norm to remain unexamined and split the reading public into mutually ignorant segments. Whatever needs to happen will happen, of course, but one thing we do not need is literary separatism.

Secret Author, I know you are a troll planted there as clickbait for *The Critic*, which needs all the publicity it can get in this early stage of existence. You might have a

point but if there is anyone to blame for falling standards in the English novel perhaps you need to look at you own kind for falling standards in criticism.

4 August 2020 / (MIS)ADVENTURES IN (MIS)CASTING: VISUALISING CHARACTERS

I start reading *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead* (2009) by the recent Nobel Prize co-winner Polish novelist Olga Tokarczuk, and I am dismayed to realize that the first-person narrator I have visualized for about fifteen minutes as an old man is an old woman. Her name is mentioned at the very end of the first chapter when my neurons have already made the effort of seeing this person as a man, for I must 'see' who is speaking; for a few more pages 'she' is still 'he' in my mind until the wrong image is corrected, with an ugly jolt.

Tokarczuk, the author, has seemingly forgotten that she is writing a novel, not making a film, and has taken for granted that her readers will understand her first-person speaker is a woman. But, why should we? Because we have read the blurb on the back cover? Seen the trailer for the film adaptation by Agnieszka Holland? I grow quite annoyed and end up finding many other flaws that make me intensely dislike this totally overhyped novel by this totally overrated Nobel. [SPOILERS ALERT] If you want to narrate a crime story in which the first person speaker is the criminal you need to do it upfront in an *American Psycho* in-your-face confessional style, not trying to build up any kind of suspenseful mystery, for God's sake! [END OF SPOILERS]

My other adventure is casting is more satisfying. My ex-student Laura Pallarés sends me a copy of her first novel *Pájaros en la piel*, the story of the very intriguing relationship between a young Catalan woman in her early twenties, Júlia, and her Swedish father, Joseph. He and Júlia's late mother had met when both were seventeen but Joseph ignores that their brief summer romance had resulted in a daughter. When he seeks Júlia out the scant age difference makes it hard for them to bond as father and daughter, as they seem to be more comfortable being friends although of an uncomfortably close kind.

Júlia, the author says, looks like Lily Collins, though this English actress is about ten years older. I imagine Júlia, rather, as Catalan actress Laia Costa, currently thirty-five, in a more youthful version (both Costa and Collins are pretty brunettes with interesting eyebrows and lively eyes). If I see her as Collins, then I'll need to think of Júlia as an English-speaking girl, which is confusing. Joseph, a cosmopolitan artist, is given a Spanish best friend which justifies why he speaks the language so well. Knowing that he is Swedish, blond and blue-eyed, he is easy to cast: he looks like Alexander Skarsgård who, aged forty-three, could really play Joseph in a possible Netflix adaptation (I wish there is one!). Here's the funny thing: Laura tells me she was not thinking of any specific actor for Joseph but it seems other readers have told her about casting Skarsgård in the role. Well, it was either him or Eurovision Song Contest winner Måns Zelmerlöw (aged thirty-four) for I cannot think of other Swedish men…

'Why cast actors in roles in fiction at all?', you may be wondering. And my reply is, 'why do you ask? Don't you do it as well?' I do not know when this habit of mine started but I assume it is widely shared, and made necessary by what I have often commented about here: the diminishing amount of description in contemporary fiction. Novels offer today less information about characters than screenplays with authors supposing, I insist, that readers have not a mental theatre in the sense of the stage theatre but a mental theatre in the American sense of the word, that is to say, a mental cinema. I don't have one and so I find myself increasingly struggling with visualization.

If failing to see space is bad enough, imagine what it is like not to see characters, either… Hence the constant casting (or even checking the IMDB.com credits before I start reading a novel in case there is already an adaptation). Not that you need a long description to present a character, mind you. This is for instance Long John Silver's presentation in R.L. Stevenson's *Treasure Island*: "I remember him as if it were yesterday, as he came plodding to the inn door, his sea-chest following behind him in a hand-barrow—a tall, strong, heavy, nut-brown man, his tarry pigtail falling over the shoulder of his soiled blue coat, his hands ragged and scarred, with black, broken nails, and the sabre cut across one cheek, a dirty, livid white". That's him, no need to go fishing about for the perfect cast. Why, I wonder, is this gone?

This week I have put myself through another kind of trouble regarding the visualization of characters consisting of completely changing an image in a second reading. I am currently working on Iain M. Banks's non-Culture novel *The Algebraist* for an article on masculinity in SF and, so, I needed to look again at the human protagonist Fassin Taak. When I say look I really mean look. When I first read the novel a few years ago I did it with no pencil in hand, just for fun, and I let myself go. Fassin is a sort of cultural anthropologist with an alien species known as the Dwellers, who live in gas giants like Jupiter. You might think that visualizing the Dwellers, who look "like a pair of large, webbed, fringed cartwheels connected by a short, thick axle with particularly bulbous outer hubs onto each of which had been fastened a giant spider crab" might have driven me crazy but no, I think I get the idea. Fassin has driven me crazy precisely because he is human and supposedly easier to visualize.

The name Fassin Taak gives no clues whatsoever: Fassin is a French surname, as far as Google tells me, and Taak appears to be a Dutch word for 'talk'. I have found no men called 'Fassin' in real life as a first name so no help there. The only description Banks volunteers, and just in passing, is that Fassin has brown curly hair (no length or thickness noted) and light brown skin. He is two metres tall, looks a decade younger than his forty-five 'body years' and is handsome, though at the end of his rough adventure he looks older and somehow emaciated. For reasons unknown to me I saw Fassin as a colleague in another UAB Department initially, perhaps because this guy seems very keen on his scholarly pursuits and so does Fassin. This time, however, I decided to really focus and look at Fassin in the face.

A comment by the narrator suggests that the human civilization to which Fassin belongs is the result of alien abductions of Central American, Middle East and Chinese

individuals (or just of their DNA) around the fourth millennium before Christ. Together with the light brown skin this indicates that Fassin is NOT white though the curly hair suggested to me that he must be of Middle East descend. This led me to Antonio Banderas because I had been re-reading Michael Crichton's *Eaters of the Dead* and Banderas played the Arab protagonist in the adaptation, *The 13th Warrior*. However, I was a bit scandalized to see Banderas rather than a proper Arab actor play that role and I Googled the words 'handsome Arab man' to check other possibilities for Fassin.

Here's the joke: all men appearing under that heading were as light-skinned as Banderas, who looks totally white to me. Not Alexander Skarsgård white but white enough (a bit darker than me but Spanish white nonetheless). Anyway, I found a photo of a gorgeous Arab man with a nice beard and lovely green eyes and he has become my new Fassin Taak. I have no idea who this Arab man is and I totally avoided checking him up in case he is a celebrity but he has done me a great service of being the perfect Fassin Taak. When I saw a couple of illustrations by Banks's readers I positively guffawed… MY Fassin Taak, with his love of hard partying and his ability to cry his green eyes out whenever he is struck by emotion is the real thing. At some points he looked a bit too much like green-eyed bullfighter Cayetano Rivera but I got rid of that and Fassin is now for good and for ever a Middle-East guy with shoulder length curly hair of soft locks, dark lips, bright green eyes and suitably light brown skin. Now the problem is that I have no idea what he is wearing, not what his cyborgian light gascraft looks like. Deep sigh…

Banks is no better and no worse than many other writers in describing characters. In fact, he is quite good if you consider how many alien species he describes in his books. The problem with him and any other writer coming after the Modernist revolution and the eruption of film is that they have stopped caring for physical description. In a world obsessed with racial issues like ours, this neglect of description is a real mess, for readers must be told which skin tone each character is but writers feel somehow embarrassed to go into that kind of detail. The result is that the first-person speaker may be a black woman but if we are not told we see by Pavlovian default a white man simply because we are used to that kind of character dominating fiction. I'll be very happy to be contradicted in this by any of you (if anyone is reading me). Funnily, 19th century writers, who were on the whole very fond of description, did use illustrations to accompany their work but in our extremely visual time using illustration for fiction is a total taboo, except of course for children's fiction.

I know I am repeating arguments already presented here, and I hope I am not boring my reader but it's funny how in the middle of this tremendous crisis on identity politics and representation, character description occupies so little room. I don't think at all that describing character better infringes on readers' rights to imagine as they wish. I really think that writers are not fulfilling their part of the pact and helping us readers to share what they have imagined for their own sake as much as for ours. So please use more description!

10 August 2020 / DON'T WE MEAN MAMMALS WHEN WE SAY ANIMALS? READING SHERRYL VINT'S *ANIMAL ALTERITY: SCIENCE FICTION AND THE QUESTION OF THE ANIMAL*

In her introduction to her indispensable monograph *Animal Alterity: Science Fiction and the Question of the Animal* (2010, Liverpool UP) Sherryl Vint writes that "Part of the rethinking the human-animal boundary, then, is recognising the embodied nature of human existence, that *Homo Sapiens* is a creature of the same biological origin as the plethora of species we label 'animal' and that we have greater or lesser degrees of kinship and common experience with them" (8). Thus, she argues, "In reconnecting with animals, we are also reconnecting with our embodied being, what might be thought of as our animal nature" (9).

This type of argumentation, developed among others by Rosi Braidotti, Dona Haraway and a long list on key names in Human-Animal Studies has allowed us to speak of animal rights by analogy with human rights. I would say that this is plain common sense, yet I was flabbergasted to hear one of my colleagues guffaw at the notion and counter-argue that animals can have no rights because rights must be accompanied by duties. We told him that animals have rights just as children do: because they need protection and not because they are expected to fulfil any duties. Supposing we get to that point, as Vint notes, "A future of human-animal dialogue will require humans to accept their responsibility for acts of exploitation and abuse" (86), a responsibility that, although in different ways, also extends to the appalling mistreatment of children.

The issue I want to address here today is quite simple: when we speak of animals, don't we really mean mammals? Make the experiment, just say 'animal' and tell me what you see. Funnily, I see four legs that most often result in the image of a dog, sometimes a cat, a horse, a wolf… I don't think immediately of a bird, or a reptile, much less an insect and even less of crustaceans. If you say 'animal' and the first image that comes to your mind is that of a crab, fine, but then perhaps the question is that 'animal' is too big a category and, hence, human-animal relationships a concept that needs to be more nuanced. Surely, our relationship with dogs has nothing to do with our relationship with mosquitos, nor do we ever think of animal rights applying to lice.

I didn't know that the Spanish word 'animalista', still not accepted by the really absurd Real Academia de la Lengua in its dictionary, has a false friend in English: 'animalist', which means, according to the Wiktionary, "One who believes in the dominance of man's animal nature in behaviour. A sensualist". I use here 'animalist' in the sense of 'animal liberationist' to claim that though I am an animal rights defender, I have received a very poor education in animal issues and I'm not at all a real animalist. My mother was convinced that her younger brother had caught typhoid fever from a stray she-cat who bit him (the Salmonella typhi bacteria is actually transmitted by lice and flea, which may have infested the cat) and she instilled in my siblings and I a horror of any contact with animals, which I have not really overcome. I have never had a pet, except for a short-lived goldfish, and you will not catch me petting any dog or cat, no matter how lovely I find them. I do share part of my home with the bees, butterflies,

birds, lizards, spiders and insects that visit my plants and that I quite enjoy watching (not the mosquitos!) but that's about it. I'm afraid that I eat meat and consume dairy products, though not as frequently as I used to and even though I enjoy vegetarian and vegan cuisine I don't see myself consuming them exclusively. Going to the market has its moments of deep revulsion for me, like yesterday trying to ignore the carcasses of skinned rabbits in the poultry stall. And I would totally agree to have zoos suppressed and any associated research done in the wild. That's the limited extent of my commitment to animal liberation.

Vint's book has opened my eyes to how science fiction dreams of communication with aliens from outer space because, as noted, any communication with animals needs to face the ugly issue of our ceaseless exploitation of animals, from direct consumption to their anthropomorphised use in fables, fairy tales, and children's fiction, passing through lab experimentation or their use as beasts of burden. Vint refers to diverse sf short stories in which animals and humans manage to communicate but the conversation is far from friendly. We suppose that if our pets could talk they would express feelings of tenderness and appreciation for us but it is obvious that not even the most pampered dog or cat in the world would meet their owners' expectations. Perhaps if animals really could speak we would soon wish they kept silent, for they would have very few kind words for us. They would complain about their enslavement. Hence, Vint argues, our preference for the myriad alien species of science fiction, most of which (whom?) are clearly based on animals. The many reverse plots of conquest, beginning with Wells's *War of the Worlds*, amplify our fears and assuage our guilt as we fantasize about what it would be like to be on the receiving end, overpowered by a master species of aliens that would treat us as we treat animals.

I have written here about the current Covid-19 crisis as an alien invasion and I still think that the way things are unfolding, with the figures for infected individuals and casualties mounting sharply on a daily basis all over the world, this is a very bad sci-fi B-movie. Viruses, I must clarify, are not living creatures but "free forms of DNA or RNA that can't replicate on their own" and that need a host to survive (https://www.livescience.com/58018-are-viruses-alive.html). They cannot really be said to be alive because they do not obey the seven rules of life: "all living beings must be able to respond to stimuli; grow over time; produce offspring; maintain a stable body temperature; metabolize energy; consist of one or more cells; and adapt to their environment". Viruses have genetic material but are not at all like bacteria and left to their own devices they remain inert. They appear to be descended from ancient RNA molecules that "lost the capability to self-replicate" for unknown reasons, hence their parasitical grafting onto complex living organisms whose cellular reproductive capacities they hijack. Who would have thought, after so much debating on the sentience of animals and AIs, and so much imagining complex aliens, that human civilization would be on its knees because of a dumb non-living piece of genetic code just trying to survive?

Viruses and bacteria (which are neither animals nor plants because they are "single-celled, prokaryotic organisms in comparison to animals and plants which are multicellular, eukaryotic organisms", https://australian.museum/learn/species-identification/ask-an-expert/are-bacteria-plants-or-animals/) do not occupy any room

in Vint's book perhaps because our relationship with them deserves a separate volume –and now possibly thousands of them considering this supposed 'new normality' which does not materialize. This leads me to the matter of size, which I think is totally underplayed in our relationship with animals. What is driving us crazy these days is that Covid-19, like any other virus, cannot be seen by human eyes, which is why most of us are wearing masks to protect us from infection. Allow me to be stupid once more and let me ask you to imagine how different things would be right now if Covid-19 was the size of a butterfly. And the other way round: we find butterflies harmless and beautiful because they are small, but try to think of a butterfly the size of a German shepherd and now tell me whether you'd welcome any in your garden. We love whales and elephants but this is because they are harmless to us.

Vint refers often to how this animal alterity is a relatively new situation caused by urbanisation; she cites a study which discovered that some American kids draw six-legged chickens because the drumsticks they eat at home come in packs of six at the supermarket. This is certainly an aberration, like our having pushed slaughterhouses out of city centres, out of the sight of the consumers who cannot identify which part of the animal they are eating anymore. However, I do not quite see what the target situation is for animal activism, which appears to be again, too little nuanced in this respect. I think that there is a mixture of targets, actually, perhaps not wholly realistic or compatible with each other. Stopping animal consumption is one, with veganism as an ever more popular option (but wouldn't this make current cattle disappear eventually?). Stopping animal experimentation is another (or at least, stopping unnecessary experimentation that has nothing to do with health issues). Stopping extinction and protecting wildlife is another, though whether nature can be 'natural' again is a major doubt. Maybe it is already post-natural.

Then there is the matter of being eaten. One of my doctoral students is working on a dissertation on that topic and Vint certainly addresses it in her book. To my surprise, there is much more than I had ever imagined on the experience of persons who have survived situations in which they were prey, I mean books and documentaries. Recently, a woman was killed by a white shark off the coast of Maine, more or less where Peter Benchley set his best-selling novel *Jaws*, the one that inspired Spielberg's blockbuster. I am all in favour of protecting species and their habitats, and correcting the misinterpretations of animal behaviour (white sharks are not the evil monsters of the film) but every time I watch a nature documentary there comes that moment when a predator attacks a lesser animal seen being devoured still alive in all detail. I am not saying that nature red in tooth and claw is not worth fighting for, what I am saying is that I find that aspect of nature often too sanitized in accounts of animal activism.

I'm going back then to my initial question: when we say 'animal' don't we really mean mammal? Shouldn't we distinguish in a more nuanced way how we relate to fellow mammals rather than insects and birds? And within this more nuanced positioning, shouldn't we consider how our relation with the animals we eat and exploit is very different from that with the animals that prey on us, from mosquitos to white sharks? And how about viruses and bacteria? They are also natural… I don't know what the alternative for the word 'animal' might be but as it is used today I just find it too

unspecific, too abstract. No wonder some people are confused and think of animals as beings that cannot have rights because they have no duties…

24 August 2020 / DISMANTLING PATRIARCHY: RONAN FARROW'S *CATCH AND KILL*, AGAINST THE TIDE

The Harvey Weinstein scandal exploded almost three years ago thanks to two articles that earned the Pulitzer Prize for Public Service to its authors: *The New York Times*'s "Harvey Weinstein Paid Off Sexual Harassment Accusers for Decades" by Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey (5 October 2017), only available to subscribers, and *The New Yorker*'s "From Aggressive Overtures to Sexual Assault: Harvey Weinstein's Accusers Tell Their Stories" (10 October 2017, https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/from-aggressive-overtures-to-sexual-assault-harvey-weinsteins-accusers-tell-their-stories). Read it, please, it's a historic text in the evolution of gender issues world-wide, I really mean it.

According to Farrow's own 2019 book *Catch and Kill: Lies, Spies, and a Conspiracy to Protect Predators*, which (oddly) avoids any reference to sex in its title, he would have been able to publish before Kantor and Twohey if it weren't because his employers at the time, NBC's news subsidiary, were busy protecting their own predators. In this substantial history of how Farrow wrote his story the tale which emerges is one of how Weinstein managed to fend off the attack because, in essence, he was blackmailing NBC with his knowledge of his fellow sexual predators' operations. If was then not just a matter of 'catch and kill', the practice of silencing victims by using NDAs agreements usually backed with hush money, but of Farrow's gradual realisation that he need not go far to find sexual predators of Weinstein's own ilk. If you're wondering why Farrow ended up publishing the story in *The New Yorker*, that's the answer: NBC was not free from guilt and able to cast the first stone. Less afraid to lose his job than others and perhaps protected from his status as Hollywood royalty, Farrow persisted, for which we need to honour him.

Catch and Kill is a superb exercise in journalism, and a wholly recommended read, but it is at the same time a strangely naïve book in terms of what the author is actually doing, which is contributing in a major way to dismantling patriarchy. Ronan Farrow, the only biological child of Mia Farrow and Woody Allen, is a sort of intellectual wunderkind who managed to give himself a very solid academic training, perhaps a very unusual one in the field of journalism (he happens to be a lawyer and has a PhD in political science). So to speak, great things were expected of him and great things are to be expected. His onslaught on Harvey Weinstein is one, not just for the legal and judicial consequences of Farrow's report (Weinstein is now in prison) but for how it unleashed the worldwide #MeToo movement we are all aware of. Kantor and Twohey's article obviously also contributed to the explosion of that movement and it would be unfair to credit Farrow with all the merit, but it would also be unfair to ignore his task as women's champion in this matter. Plainly, if it weren't for Farrow's obsessive insistence and staunch professionalism many of the women who spoke against Weinstein and

described how the culture of sexual predation works in practice would have remained silent. He did act as a knight in shining armour. I hear my feminist readers groaning but this is the truth of the fact.

He also acted as a man plagued by a guilty conscience. It is inevitable, when discussing Farrow's motivations to refer to the sexual abuse allegations made by his (adoptive) sister Dylan against their father Woody Allen, which the director has always denied. According to Dylan, Allen abused her when she was a seven-year-old child (remember that this is the guy who eventually married another adoptive daughter). Ronan did believe Dylan but as he confesses in several passages of *Catch and Kill* did not support her ongoing feud with Allen, basically telling his sister to move on with her life and bury the hatchet. Farrow explains that listening to the women abused by Weinstein made him finally understand what Dylan had gone through and he reports a series of calls asking his sister for advice about how to proceed with his investigation of the cases. Her words, he said, were essential in the process.

It is then tempting to read Farrow's motivation to doggedly pursue the rumours that lead to the testimonials as atonement for the sin of not properly supporting Dylan. It is also tempting to interpret his hunting of the monster Weinstein as a haunting of the abuser Allen. Even the fact that he does not carry his father's surname (technically Mia Farrow was a single mother when Ronan was born as she and Allen never married) helps stress his position on the side of the women and against patriarchy. I am not sure that Farrow's being a gay man is a relevant factor but since he does refer explicitly to his partner in *Catch and Kill*, I must assume that this is also important. I am not so naïve as to believe that gay men can never be sexual predators but in a way a gay man is in a better position to dismantle patriarchy's heterosexism than a heterosexual man.

Farrow is not a gender issues activist in the sense of being specialized in the field as a journalist. Judging from his other major book, *War on Peace: The End of Diplomacy and the Decline of American Influence* (2018), he appears to be a political journalist or perhaps more widely an investigative journalist. In any case, his work reporting Weinstein in the *New Yorker* and *Catch and Kill* are enough to put him on the honours list of the men who have opposed patriarchy so far and are opening the way to out not only the monstrous abusers but a whole culture of sexual abuse. Unfortunately, Weinstein has turned out to be one among many in a constellation of harassers in the high positions of all types of business and institutions. This is what is really important: anti-patriarchal men, we learn from Farrow's reporting, are essential to undermine the regime by which the patriarchal men rule, not only in their own domain but the whole nation. From Weinstein to Trump, it turns out, there are less than six degrees of separation.

Reading these days, after *Catch and Kill*, Michael S. Kimmel and Thomas E. Mosmiller's thick anthology *Against the Tide: Pro-feminist Men in the United States 1776-1990, a Documentary History* (Beacon Press, 1992) a few thoughts occur to me. One is that this book should be much better known. I've come across it absolutely by accident even though I am much alert to any volume dealing with the good men who have helped the feminist cause. The other is that I find more optimism in the texts

written by pro-feminist men up to 1920, when US women were granted the right to vote in national elections (some states had authorized the female ballot in the 1890s), than in the texts of the 1970s to 1990. By this I mean that there is a clear line of progress which earns women the rights to be educated, to be employed in all professions, to keep their own property, and to vote as one by one the absurd arguments against first-wave feminism fall. Next, there comes what Leila J. Rupp and Verta Taylor called the doldrums in their book *Survival in the Doldrums: The American Women's Rights Movement, 1945 to the 1960s* (1987). Then some matters progressed but most remained stagnant until the publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) and the onset of second-wave feminism. The problem is that I do not see much progress in the texts of the 1970s to 1990 in relation to today, or very little. And that is very worrying.

The text before the last in the volume is Senator Joe Biden's 1990 "Statement before the Senate Judiciary Committee on the Violence Against Women Act of 1990" which sought to make all violence against women a civil rights offence apart from a criminal act. Biden wanted the "something horribly wrong" in America's treatment of women to be made visible and to be destroyed, but I should say that thirty years later matters are much worse. The Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) to the USA Constitution written in 1923 by Alice Paul and Crystal Eastman to guarantee equal legal rights for all American citizens regardless of sex has not been passed yet, almost 100 years after its was first submitted to Congress. Biden's act, proposed jointly with Senator Orrin Hatch, did pass in 1994 and was signed by President Clinton (a feat that should be recalled rather than his hanky-panky) and there is hope that the Joe Biden-Kamala Harris ticket wins the election in November against Trump. Yet, many more Ronan Farrows are needed to force the patriarchs out of power and it is hard to see where they are.

Kimmel and Mosmiller refuse to look into the personal motivations of the men that sided with women and exposed themselves to the derision and the violence from the men who considered them traitors to the patriarchal cause. They warn that many men who helped were far from being angels (their word, not mine); often, men behaved in a pro-feminist way in public and in a patriarchal way at home, even with their own feminist wives or lovers. I don't think we need angels but we certainly need allies, as their book shows. The question they ask is one that is quite scary: why did men help at all, knowing as they did that their pro-feminist ideas would undermine their own privilege? It is simple, actually. As I am constantly saying patriarchy is not as monolithic as it looks. It has plenty of dissidents for whom the answer to Kimmel and Mosmiller's question is straightforward: some men help because it is the only right thing to do, and this is what they feel. This is what Ronan Farrow felt: that he was doing a public service by pointing his finger at Weinstein, and this is what the Pulitzer Award committee acknowledged.

Maybe because I am part of a public service, that offered by public higher education, I very much like the idea that advancing equality is a matter of serving the public. What I like about this idea is that public service is done for the good of the community, not in the expectation of personal reward but simply because it is right. The other aspect I like about public service is that it is gender-neutral, meaning that it is open to anyone, of any identity, as Farrow's work shows. Men doing a public service can

hardly be accused of promoting the 'wrong' causes, which is why I think that there is potential in the concept as an alternative to individualistic heroism or chivalry (I have called Farrow a knight…). If the cause for equality is seen as a pillar of the community then defending it can be seen as public service, which might help many men to act in pro-feminist ways without being questioned either by men or by women. If equality is presented as a civil right, which is what it is, then there is no excuse to remain uninvolved, just as there is no excuse to condone racism. I am just thinking out loud about what should be the mechanism to recruit more Ronan Farrows to the cause…

Thanks, then, to all the pro-feminist men, those who have helped are those who are helping. Let's just hope that there is less and less need for their help because patriarchy has been finally defeated and equality is really respected as a fundamental civil right.

31 August 2020 / THE MEANING OF HARRISON FORD: STARDOM AND MASCULINITY

I have just written a review of Virginia Luzón-Aguado's new book *Harrison Ford: Masculinity and Stardom in Hollywood* (Bloomsbury) and there are a few more matters I'd like to consider, for which I had no room there. Luzón-Aguado's accomplished volume is absolutely recommended to those who admire this American male star but also to those interested in how to write academically about this type of icon. Its only limitation is that Ford (Chicago, 1942) is a living man and an actor far from retirement who can still revolutionise the way male ageing is presented on screen. Believe it or not, Ford, aged seventy-eight, is currently involved in the making of a fifth Indiana Jones film, scheduled for 2022. For reasons possibly of limited word count, though, Luzón-Aguado ends her analysis with *42* (2013), the film which in her view best signals Ford's transformation into a character actor. This means there are no comments in her book on the end of Han Solo's narrative arc in *Star Wars – Episode VII: The Force Awakens* (2015), on *The Age of Adaline* (2015), which has an interesting comment to offer on Ford's ageing, or on the controversial *Blade Runner 2049* (2017).

As I read Luzón-Aguado's study of Ford, I was wondering whether I like him as a star and I'm afraid that the answer is no. I like Han Solo and I like Indiana Jones, his two most iconic roles, but I don't enjoy watching Ford in all of his films. Even so, I have seen most of the forty-four films Luzón-Aguado analyses in her book, which means that Ford has enough star appeal to have put me through diversely failed movies such as *The Mosquito Coast* or *Random Hearts*. Funnily, I usually name *Blade Runner*, in which Ford plays the protagonist, as one of my favourite films; it is then possible to love a film but not its star. In any case, I would name *Witness*, for which Ford got his only Oscar Award nomination, as my favourite Harrison Ford film and would call attention to the vastly underrated *K19: The Widowmaker* as a Ford film to rediscover.

Luzón-Aguado writes in her conclusions that she has tried to analyse the 'fictional truth' behind Ford's public persona and she does so very beautifully, calling attention to

the triangular tension between the man, the star, and the roles. She also avoids carefully showing a mere fan's interest, though I assume she likes Ford as a star (otherwise why make such a big effort about him?), and treading on the less savoury aspects of his private life. Not that they are exceptional, but still they do matter.

I remember an article of many years ago by the late Maruja Torres in *El País* enthusing about Ford's persona and praising him for having married (in his second marriage) not a star like himself but Melissa Mathison, a scriptwriter known among others for having written Steven Spielberg's *E.T.* Close to sixty, in 2000, however, Ford went through a deep life crisis and separated from Mathison, whom he had married in 1983. They got divorced in 2004, after much acrimony and a substantial payment on his side, when Ford was already dating the woman that would become his third wife, Calista Flockhart, twenty-two years his junior. When the two met, in 2002, Flockhart was at the height of her popularity thanks to the title role in TV series *Ally Mc Beal* (1997-2002) and in a way her marriage to Ford seemed to be the answer to her thirty-something character's search for a mate. I assume that many who, like Torres, had praised Ford to the skies found themselves disappointed. I am well aware that mixing the private life of actors with their public persona as stars is naïve and immature but I really believe this change of spouse is a factor that negatively affected Ford's stardom. Interestingly, the year when he separated from Mathison he played a villainous husband in the horror film *What Lies Beneath*, and I would say that Ford was guilty himself in this way of blurring the lines and mixing the two spheres. The former ideal husband and father, according both to his private life and star roles (in the films about Jack Ryan or *Air Force One*) suddenly appeared to be far less wholesome, even mortally dangerous.

Ford did not continue playing villains but my personal impression is that as he became tabloid fodder the distance he had kept from the press and the zealous protection of his private life in his remote Wyoming ranch, so far from Hollywood glamour, accentuated a gruffness that must have been present all along. A truly rounded male star must project something exciting that makes you want to meet them in real life and whereas I see that something in actors such as Al Pacino, Robert de Niro, Hugh Jackman, Tom Hanks, Tom Cruise, or Chris Hemsworth, I don't see it in Harrison Ford. Hollywood's currently best-paid actor, Dwayne Johnson, is a most likeable man which, surely, says something about the kind of masculinity generally preferred today. In contrast, Ford appears to be far less likeable, perhaps because in his 21st century films he has been projecting all along a sense of detachment, even of boredom, with the business of acting. Even his reappearance as Han Solo in *The Force Awakens* lacks appeal. [SPOILERS AHEAD] The scene in which he is murdered by his son with Princess Leia, Ben Solo (a.k.a. Kylo Ren), lacks pathos as if the actor wanted the whole thing to be done with as quickly as possible. Besides, the realization that Solo did not leave happily ever after with Leia only helps to undermine his cool as most desirable man in the galaxy.

Having said that, there is also a certain sense in which Ford is unique and irreplaceable. The choice of the insipid Alden Ehrenreich to play a young Han Solo in Disney's mercenary *Solo: A Stars War Story* (2018) tells a much neglected story about the difficulties Hollywood has to find new major male icons. Chris Hemsworth (b. 1983 in Australia), Chris Evans (1981), or Ryan Reynolds (1976) are perhaps best positioned

to play that role but something is amiss. Sean Connery, who hit ninety last week (and famously played Ford's father even though he is only twelve years older), or Clint Eastwood (also ninety) still preserve a charisma that seems lacking in the younger generation, perhaps with Hugh Jackman's only exception. This difficulty to find young icons means that we have been witnessing for quite a few years now, perhaps since the beginning of the 21st century, an extraordinary prolongation of the careers of the older blockbuster male stars. The three *Expendable* films (2010, 2012, 2014)–Ford participated on the third one–offer an extensive comment on his phenomenon with their all-star cast of ageing action actors. The projected fifth Indiana Jones film also comments on the difficulties to find a male star capable of filling in Ford's niche for younger generations. Presumably, Ford, famous for doing most of the stunts in his films, will this time require a double. I wonder, though, whether it makes ultimately any sense to have a man play the same action role in his late seventies which he played in his thirties and what exactly this says about Hollywood, US masculinity, and filmmaking generally.

Ageing in public is no easy matter and although it does not affect men and women in the same way, it does affect men nonetheless. Perhaps it is more correct to assume that stars with long careers like Ford (he played his first screen role in 1966) have a compound image which not only changes from decade to decade but also as their own audiences age. I am old enough to have attended the original release of *Star Wars* (1977) and have a first childhood memory (I was then eleven) of Ford as the hot hero Solo, but who is Ford today to an eleven-year-old? His most recent film, a new adaptation of Jack London's *The Call of the Wild*, seems addressed to that demographic but he can hardly generate the same response now. Possibly, any eleven-year-old will be puzzled to realize that this wrinkled old guy with a thick white beard is the same Han Solo of the first *Star Wars* films they may have seen at home with their nostalgic parents. With this I am not saying at all that Ford ought to retire, just that his persona is not one, but many depending, as I say, on the parallel evolution of his career and that of his audience. The film I have recommended, *Witness*, was released already thirty-five years ago and this means that in practice for younger audiences Ford may be perceived as a relic from a classical past far in the depths of the 20th century.

This impression that Ford is somehow a throwback to other times is increased by the constant comparisons along his career to classic male stars ranging from Errol Flynn to Gary Cooper. Both Han Solo and Indiana Jones are throwbacks to the 1930s and 1940s adventure film series and it can be argued that, somehow, Ford's persona was constructed from the beginning as a suggestion that macho cool cannot be a matter of the present. By macho I do not mean that Ford's image is blatantly sexist, but the other way round: I very much suspect that he has embodied the kind of subtly patriarchal guy that at heart most men, women, and even children prefer. This is a guy that, as Luzón-Aguado notes, can safely display a "manly vulnerability" because this vulnerability is by no means a sign of insecurity. Or of male chauvinism. Perhaps, unlike the current US masculinity which shows so much rampant sexism and homophobia and fear of losing control, Ford's American masculinity showed in his prime that being a man is a simpler matter: knowing who you are mentally and accepting the limitations of your vulnerable body, with no need to hate others. When Aguado-Luzón says that Ford need not display

his sexuality aggressively she does not mean that his roles are asexual but that his sole presence is enough to transmit a reassuring sense of non-sexist manliness. Perhaps this is what is most missed from the male stars of the past and in modern masculinity generally.

There is, in any case, always a bit of a mystery about why certain individuals, male or female, become major film stars. Navigating the Hollywood choppy waters for more than fifty years is already a major accomplishment; being an audience's favourite for many of these years even more so. It is then necessary to acknowledge these merits in Ford's case (and, of course, in others). I remain personally very curious to see where his career is going in his old age and, though I have my misgivings, I will certainly see the fifth Indiana Jones film. I hope, however, for the sake of the current eleven-year-olds that new male icons appear and that they are what is needed in these troubled times.

CREATIVE COMMONS LICENCE/LICENCIA