# THE JOYS OF TEACHING LITERATURE

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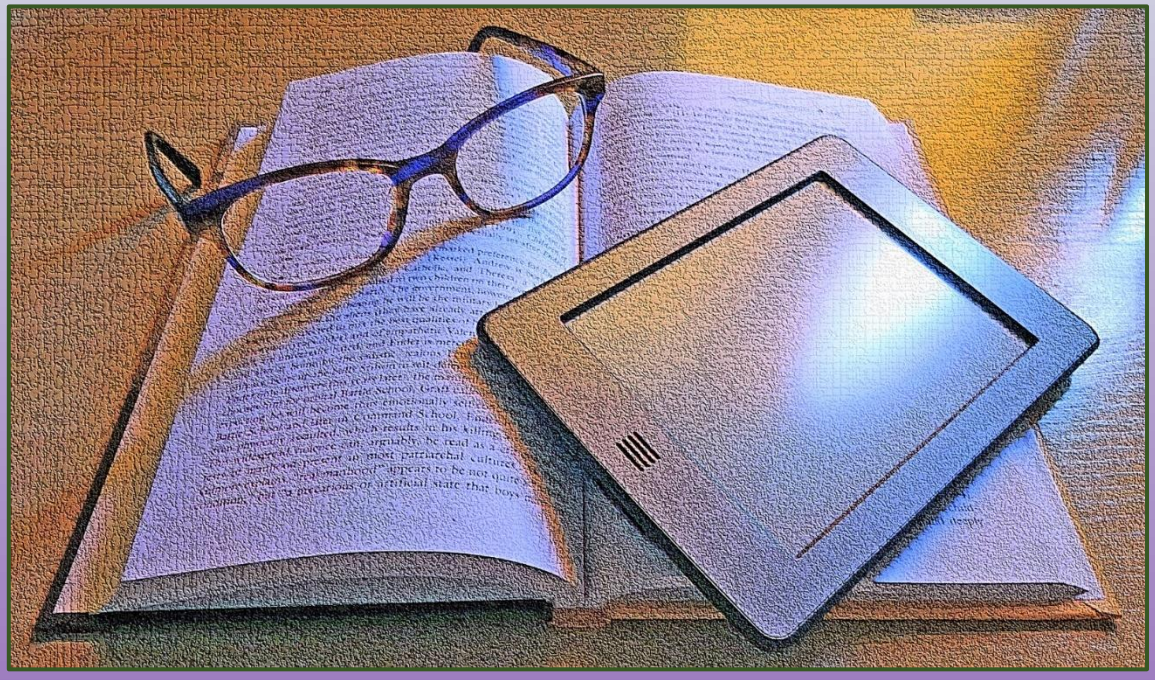

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**PLEASE, NOTE:**

**These are the posts published in my professional academic blog *The Joys of Teaching Literature* (https://webs.uab.cat/saramartinalegre/blog/, since September 2010) between September 2022 and August 2023. The twelve previous volumes are also available from http://ddd.uab.cat/record/116328, together with the first volume (no. 12) in Spanish self-translation.**

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## 6 September 2022 / FROM COVID-19 TO QUIET QUITTING: BEGINNING A NEW ACADEMIC YEAR

I re-read the posts I wrote in early September 2020 and 2021, at the beginning of the academic year, and bad as the situation was then because of the widespread presence of Covid-19, they even sound optimistic in comparison to what lies ahead. Talking yesterday with my seventeen-year-old niece, who starts next week her studies at my own university (how exciting!), I was aghast to hear from her lips that her generation is certain that civilization as we know it today will last for no more than fifty years. This is heart-breaking, not so much because *Homo sapiens* deserves better, but because I don't know how young students are going to be motivated in the years to come. Unless, that is, we focus all our degrees on the possibility of that apocalypse and start teaching survival strategies right now. Easy for Literature teachers, with all that post-apocalyptic fiction around.

My niece knows and I know that what is killing us is patriarchy—not masculinity, but patriarchy, that is to say, the villainous ideology by which humanity is organized on the basis of the power which a handful of hegemonic individuals wield. These hegemonic individuals are, as we know, mostly men, but the patriarchal aspirations of the women leading nations or aspiring to leading them from the right and the extreme right wing are also manifest. I'm writing on the day when Liz Truss, an adamant Thatcherite, has been appointed new Prime Minister replacing the obnoxious Boris Johnson. This is a disaster not only for post-Brexit Britain but also for feminism, as we see once more the wrong kind of woman empowered. I'm also writing, and that is even more important, two days after Russian despot Vladimir Putin has extended the war in Ukraine to all of Western Europe by cutting off the gas supply. 'Winter is coming' indeed, as the slogan in *Game of Thrones* used to warn, and this time it is going to be very harsh. Unless, that is, it turns out to be the warmest winter on record, as this summer has been, because of climate change. One way or another, people will suffer and die unnecessarily just because an idiotic patriarchal man cannot cope with his own ageing and bodily decadence.

My impression is that human beings can only cope with one crisis at a time, which might explain why once the Ukraine war started back in February, the preoccupation with Covid-19 has receded. The seventh wave has been certainly much milder, but still more than 60 persons have died every day in Spain (though the figure is bigger for the victims of this summer's appalling heat wave). This year we need not wear facemasks in class, though they are still mandatory in public transport, but we might have to worry about the low temperatures in the classroom or the lack of power in the homes. Or of water, given the summer drought.

Physical discomfort is an important enemy of teaching and learning, and we might see quite a bit of that. The optimists will say that Putin's threats are a good excuse to finally embrace renewable sources of energy, the pessimists will argue this is the first step towards the final collapse. Although I am myself a pessimist, I see plenty of personal suffering in the coming years for many persons, rather than a radical collapse. I am assimilating the idea that my parents' generation are lucky, as they are enjoying a rather good quality of life and need not worry, like my niece, about the world in fifty years' time, when it'll be time for her to retire. As for my own old age, I just don't know what to think any more.

I'm not teaching this semester, which I will spend again focused on research, but I do share this schizophrenic feeling by which my colleagues and I are looking forward to returning to class in a post-pandemic situation (or the illusion of it) while wondering how to deal with the students' anxieties and general disinterest. Many of my peers and myself are investing energies in subjects that, we know, are not going to work well

because the breach between the generations is growing faster, propelled by this sense that things are terminal. Students are going to be wondering, perhaps more than ever, what good any subject can do in a world with no future, and sustaining the fiction that everything matters because there is indeed a future is going to be harder than ever.

At the point we are at, after two and a half years of worldwide Covid-19 pandemic, we should feel relieved that the virus seems to be losing strength (though we'll see what happens when the protection afforded by the vaccines wanes). Yet, we're feeling exhausted about the general inability to stop Putin's crazy patriarchal bid to conquer Europe, and scared by this summer's evidence of the unstoppable climate change. Perhaps I am myself a bit crazed with all this tension, but I wish things started being simpler. Let's eliminate low-cost flying and mass tourism, go vegetarian, buy less, stop squandering fossil fuels. Let's lead in short a much simpler life, which will probably be also happier. We missed that train when Covid-19 started, but it is passing by again, courtesy of the tyrant Putin; let's board it now.

Focusing more narrowly on teaching, it is my intention to work on approaching students on a better informed basis in the compulsory core subject 'Victorian Literature'. By this I mean that I intend to begin the first lecture by asking students who they are on the basis of a small questionnaire and that they sign a contract with me. I will follow in this one of the many examples that can be found online. I happen to like Prof. Howard Culbertson's example, which I will adapt to suit my own needs. My university insists that the syllabus (or Guia Docent) is a contract, but in my view it is too focused on what needs to be done to pass a subject to the exclusion of how teachers and students should interact.

I want to make that interaction far more explicit because pedagogy is always addressed to supplying the alleged deficiencies of teachers, but routinely forgets that students have no clue about what they are supposed to do. This refers to a series of important matters, from class etiquette to how use most productively study time at home. I feel that we, teachers, tend to take it for granted that this is just common sense but the open expression of boredom from our students suggests that something is very wrong. So that's my aim in this academic year: kill off boredom by explaining how to be a student. I learned from reading the nautical novels of Patrick O'Brian that captains take pride in running a 'happy' ship (that is a tight, functioning machine) and I want to run a 'happy' class. We'll see if I can.

We also begin this new academic year having heard not only of the 'great resignation' by which so many Americans have abandoned their exploitative jobs but also of this new concept, 'quiet quitting'. This refers to a stance by which workers refuse to do any tasks beyond what their contract specifies on the grounds that doing more means endorsing one's own exploitation. As a worker expected to do much more than the weekly 37'5 hours of my contract, I sympathize. If we manage to have a future despite the catastrophe looming in the horizon, we need to prepare the younger generations for a more human work environment, with shorter working weeks and days, and with regulated commitment.

I believe that all workers have a right to leading a satisfactory personal life beyond work, and this means limiting the use of working time to what is fair. At the same time, I am not sure about whether students will import the quiet quitting philosophy into the classroom and how this will affect study. The ECTS system tried to limit study by specifying that each credit should amount to 25 hours of work for the student, so that each academic year would consist of 1500 working hours, or 60 ECTS. My own workload amounts officially to about 1700 hours. If students and teachers stick to those hours, I'm afraid that there is simply not enough room for reading and studying. In that sense quiet quitting is rather a threat for education, though I certainly intend as a worker to get rid of all the extra tasks I need not do. There is already a certain concern that if many

academics do that peer reviewing, which is done as an extra, might die, and so will editing journals and other key academic tasks.

So, to sum up, in my thirty-one years as a teacher, this is the first time I cannot think with clarity of the future of the species. My impression is that so far, Covid-19 included, we were thinking of the future on an individual basis, perhaps a national one (I'm thinking here for instance of the bid for Scottish or Catalan independence). Putin has made it clear that patriarchal fascism is once again part of our current history, and might, together with climate change, end civilization as we know it. If Covid-19 mutates into a more dangerous variety or a new virus emerges, then this will only accelerate a process of decay that has indeed started. How to be an educator in these circumstances is significantly much more difficult as, by definition, our task aims at the future. If our students have no future because patriarchal villainy is destroying it, then we don't even have a present. From next Monday onward, as the new academic year unfolds, we'll have to take matter one step at a time, and learn to survive.

## 14 September 2022 / MOURNING CITIZEN ELIZABETH WINDSOR: HOPING FOR A NEW BRITISH REPUBLIC

Queen Elizabeth II passed away last Thursday, 8 September, and in the following days we have seen a public demonstration of sorrow that gives no signs of abating. The state funeral scheduled for Monday 19 will mark a climax and put a formal end to the second Elizabethan era, though it is still to be seen whether future historians will refer to the period 1952-2022 as such.

In the days since Elizabeth Windsor died, I have been waiting for signs of increasing republican unrest but by now it is obvious that these are feeble and that the Queen's passing may even have increased pro-monarchic feeling. The new King, Charles III, has already shown in two of his official appearances that he has a rather short temper, but despite this so far his popularity is increasing. Not even the many tweets celebrating the late Princess Diana as the real Queen, instead of Queen Consort Camilla, seem to have dented that popularity; suggestions that Prince William should be crowned instead of his father are nowhere to be found. Only Prince Andrew, heckled by a disgruntled Scotsman as a 'dirty old man' (because of his association with Jeffrey Epstein) during the Edinburgh funeral procession, has attracted some negative feeling, tiny as this appears to be.

While I remain appalled by Prof. Uju Anya's infamous tweet ("I heard the chief monarch of a thieving and raping genocidal empire is finally dying. May her pain be excruciating") for its ugliness and cruelty, it is certainly the case that this is what Elizabeth II was. BIPOC persons both in the United Kingdom and in the former colonies have much to rejoice in the end of her reign, though attacks against an elderly dying person seem to me in very poor taste. The images of her weeping subjects are not universally white, but this is the right time to start an overdue conversation about the participation of the British monarchy in slavery, the horrifying effects of colonialism and imperialism all over the world, and the abnormal situation by which King Charles III will still be formally the head of state of fourteen former colonies. New Zealand's Prime Minister Jacinta Arden has made it known that the nation she leads is in no hurry to proclaim itself a republic, which astonishes me, but we'll see what happens when Australia takes that path, as it will soon enough (though possibly after the Caribbean nations still subjected to British monarchy). Let's hope for a domino effect.

Apart from Twitter and other social media, where at any rate the flood of condolences, mourning, and tears overwhelms the negative response, the more

progressive British media have truly disappointed me. And, yes, I mean *The Guardian*. Only yesterday, five days after the Queen's demise, did this newspaper start publishing opinion columns and cartoons questioning the events surrounding this death, from the mindboggling display of totally outdated ceremony and pageantry, to the issue of Elizabeth's colonial legacy, perpetuated through the fantasy that somehow the Commonwealth would go on and become an alternative to the European Union.

A mantra that has been invoked in the media and the social media is that now is not the time to raise delicate political issues, as the United Kingdom is in mourning and the late Queen deserves respect for her long service to the nation. I don't agree. This is indeed the time, though I understand that any conversation is complicated by the memory of the sweet-looking granny that Elizabeth Windsor had become in recent years. If, excuse me, the funeral were that of the far less popular and far less nice-looking Charles, matters would be very different. I find it, additionally, both unfortunate and controversial that he will reign as Charles III, reminding everyone that whereas the first Charles was executed to ease the inauguration of the only British republic so far, the second Charles restored monarchy for good. I believe Charles III is warning the world that he is the kind of monarch that stays put, not the kind that is deposed. He could have chosen to reign as King Arthur I, think about it, using one of his first names (the others are Phillip and George).

Discussing these matters with my family, one of my brothers argued that, on the whole, obnoxious as the ideas of monarchy and inherited power are, he does not believe for a moment that a republican president and his family are cheaper to maintain. He is possibly right, but beyond the matter of the cost and the ridiculousness of having a random child named heir to the throne the moment s/he is born to a certain family regardless of public consent, the case of the British (and the Spanish) monarchy connects now uncomfortably closely with politics. You might think that the whole point of the monarchy is political but since monarchs have no power and are now representative figures, their links in Britain and Spain to the appalling politics of the recent past make them deeply questionable in terms of national representation.

King Juan Carlos I, as we know, had to abdicate because of the many financial and personal scandals he has been involved in, but the main scandal is that he was dictator Franco's chosen heir and, as such, he did nothing for long years to bring in democracy. Elizabeth II has never been attached to any personal scandals (excepting how poorly she reacted to Charles's ill-treatment of Diana, or that she bought the silence of her son Andrew's victim of sexual abuse), but she did nothing personally to acknowledge the crimes committed by the British Empire. Many more voices need to dispute her silence, and Charles III needs to be forced to acknowledge those crimes, much as it would be necessary that Felipe VI does the same regarding the ugly occupation of Central and South America.

As a Catalan, perhaps the part I understand less of all the servile homage surrounding the passing away of the Queen is the situation in Scotland. Catalan independentism is on the wane, despite the claims of the Assemblea Nacional de Catalunya, but it has managed to increase the already palpable anti-monarchic, republican feeling in Catalonia. No member of the current Royal Family would think of keeping a residence like Balmoral in Catalonia, and their stays are limited to as short a time as possible, and no doubt private visits we know nothing about. If, God helps us, King Juan Carlos I or King Felipe died in Catalonia, it would be just a very bad idea to parade the body all along Catalonia as it has been done with Elizabeth II in Scotland. There would be protests, if not riots, and I'm sure that the body should have to be swiftly flown to Madrid. The funeral procession along Eastern Scotland and Edinburgh's Royal Mile and the lying-in-state at St. Giles Cathedral are just incomprehensible to me, as I expected a strong independentist reaction and protests.

I was amazed to learn that former Scottish First Minister Alex Salmond wanted Queen Elizabeth to remain head of state supposing Scotland became independent, for I always assumed, as it is assumed in Catalonia, that independence passes necessarily through the declaration of a republic. Somehow, I felt humiliated by proxy by the presence of Elizabeth II's body in Edinburgh, even though I don't call myself an independentist. Funnily, King Charles III vowed to protect the freedom of the Presbyterian Church of Scotland during his proclamation last Saturday, as he needs to do as Head of the Anglican Church, but nothing was said of the right to their freedom of the current British nations. I extend my perplexity about Scotland, of course, to (Northern) Ireland and Wales. The Welsh, if you recall, have been told that William and Kate are now Prince and Princess of Wales, whether they like it or not.

One word about the late Diana, Princess of Wales. As it is well known, , thanks to the series *The Crown*, even though young Charles was deeply in love with Camilla Shand, she was not considered adequate to marry him, for reasons that had to do with her lifestyle and not being aristocratic enough. In a horrid exercise of manipulation and hypocrisy, and once Camilla had married someone else tired of waiting, Charles proposed (or was told to propose) to 19-year-old Lady Diana Spencer, a woman naïve enough to believe he loved her. What followed was the stuff of major scandal: Charles and Camilla eventually started an affair, Diana started many others in retaliation, the couple divorced and Lady Di died tragically aged 36, now 25 years ago, in a car crash provoked by the paparazzi chasing her. Charles married finally Camilla after her own divorce and, protected by the late Queen, the King's former mistress is about to be crowned Queen Consort. I can't help thinking what William and Harry must be feeling, but it is perhaps good for the cause of republicanism that Camilla and not Diana is crowned Queen. With the attractive, extremely popular Diana by her side, in an imaginary happy marriage, King Charles III would be invincible. With the far less glamorous Camilla, excuse my sexist remark, he is not, for she may be loved (to my surprise) but is not revered as Diana was, no matter how inexplicable that reverence might be.

London Bridge has fallen down, as the secret code to name Elizabeth II's passing read, but London stands still as the seat of the British monarchy. Since only persons of 96 years or more have known a world without Queen Elizabeth, perhaps what we are seeing now in her sentimental public mourning is a certain fear that things may change even for the worse. Which is, in many ways, funny. In the 70 years of her long reign, let's recall, Britain has seen the loss of its Empire and of its influence over Europe with Brexit, and it has faced several major economic crises, of which the one now looming on the horizon might be one of the worst. Elizabeth Windsor's presence created a false illusion that things were stable and business as usual but 1952, the year when she was crowned, is now a very distant memory of a world hardly connected with ours.

As I have noted, her persona as the nation's sweet granny has become a magnet for national mourning in ways the late Queen would not have been had she died in, for instance, her sixties. In that sense, Charles has nothing to offer, not being at all a beloved grandfatherly figure or just an appealing man. Perhaps his selfishness shows best in his having never considered passing the crown to his much younger heir, but, then, I assume that being finally King justifies his whole life. May that life be very long and free from sorrow, but may Britons are given the chance to decide how long his reign should be, a feeling I share as a frustrated republican seeing monarchy inexplicably survive all over Europe.

## 26 September 2022 / EXPERIENCING MUSIC: LOST HABITS

Next semester I will teaching an MA subject on popular music and masculinity as a sort of sequel to the BA course I taught last year which led to the publication of the collective e-book by the students *Songs of Empowerment: Women in 21st Century Popular Music* (downloadable for free here). I wrote a post presenting the volume in which I wondered whether the e-book on men might be called *Songs of Entitlement* in the worst case scenario. We'll see…

In preparation for the subject I have read Sam de Boise's *Men, Masculinity, Music and Emotions* (2015) which is, basically, the most complete study on this topic at least as regards music consumption. You might think that there are many volumes on gender and popular music but this is not the case, much less so on masculinity. There is quite a longish list of volumes on women (in the style of *Women and Popular Music: Sexuality, Identity and Subjectivity* by Sheila Whiteley (2000)), but nothing that systematic on men, and I find Stan Hawkins's edited volume *The Routledge Research Companion to Popular Music and Gender* (2017) too miscellaneous for the needs of the subject and my students. Incidentally, I've had to buy a copy of de Boise's book for the library because I can hardly ask my students to pay 135 euros for the hardback, nor 106 for the e-book. But that's a matter for another post.

De Boise's thesis is that our understanding of gender is vitiated by the supposition that since emotion is naturally coded feminine and rationality masculine, men who are in touch with their emotions are taking a progressive, pro-feminist path. He makes the point that music is one of the areas of culture in which men have shown and are showing emotion without the intervention of any pro-feminist ideologies and, so, we need to end the fallacy that men are in essence inextricably bounded to rationality. As you can see, de Boise's thesis is a minefield. On the one hand, he is denying the patriarchal premise by which 'feminine' emotion is less valuable than 'masculine' rationality and thus assuming an anti-patriarchal stance by which emotion is presented as an integral aspect of masculinity, whether hegemonic men like it or not. On the other hand, by exaggerating the extent to which rationality is coded masculine, he forgets that patriarchy allows men to show emotion in certain areas, such as sports or partying to better control and suppress emotion in other areas of life. De Boise claims that the emotions men feel when listening to music prove that they are certainly emotional individuals in all aspects of life; my view is, rather, that being emotional in one field of life does not mean that a person is emotional in all fields. Hitler loved his German shepherd bitch Blondi but that seems to have been the whole range of his positive emotions.

At any rate, de Boise has plenty to say about masculinity and emotion particularly as regards the consumption of music, and he offers very interesting glimpses into what could be called the musical autobiography of his interviewees (his volume is a sociological study). This set me thinking about my own musical autobiography and the approach I am going to use in the subject, which will begin with the students exploring their own autobiographical relation to music. From what I saw last year among my students, everyone young listens to music but from what my own experience reveals, not everyone older enjoys it. Actually, I taught the course on women and pop hoping to revive my lost pleasure in listening to music but I'm sorry to say it has not returned despite the magnificent effort the students made to take me back onto the right path. This failure has started a reflexion on my side about what has gone wrong and when, considering that I used to tell myself that the day I stopped listening to popular music I would no longer be me.

So, let me trace the basic stages of music consumption along life, what I am calling a musical autobiography, and see where you are in this process. There are a variety of factors to take into account, some of which we tend to neglect (for instance

portability, to which I will return). I'd like to note that I am referring here to popular music, which gathers together a variety of styles usually focused on the song. Opera, which we regard as part of classical music but used to be a popular genre (closer to Spanish *zarzuela* than we assume) also depends on singing, but whereas one may sing any popular song (hence the popularity of karaoke), you need vocal training to be able to sing opera (except in the privacy of your shower). Songs, as we know them in current pop, rock, and other popular styles are enjoyed in three main ways: listening, singing along, and dancing. How, where, and with whom we enjoy these three facets of songs shape our habits of consumption, but also help to undermine them.

In many ways, personal autonomy is defined when a child starts listening to their own music, after passively listening to their parents' or siblings' choices. Personal choice depends both on individual taste and peer interaction, or even pressure. For my own demographic, information on popular music used to come from specialized TV shows imitating *Top of the Pops*, the radio and the print music media; of course, the internet altered all that and now YouTube and Spotify are the platforms that help children to find new music. I will insist that childhood and not adolescence as it is always assumed is where music consumption is defined.

Adolescence brings an intensification of the need for autonomy, and a new freedom to attend gigs and enjoy dancing in clubs, making music a more collective experience. If you're lucky, that is. In my own case, I never came across friends with the same musical tastes (I was into indie all the time), which means that I didn't attend many gigs before I was in my twenties; as for disco dancing (the word 'club' was popularized later) I wasn't that lucky, either. I love dancing, but I hated disco music and by the 1990s when other styles flourished, my life had taken other directions. Interestingly, many of de Boise's interviewees distinguish between private music listening and music consumption with friends, or housemates, or partners. In this second case, they say, one must be willing to subordinate musical preferences to socializing and to keeping romantic relationships alive. I think I never learned that lesson…

An interesting phenomenon that I have witnessed in my lifetime is the extension to all ages of gigs. It used to be the case that both clubbing and attending gigs were limited to those under 25, or 30 at the most. Clubbing is still very much an ageist affair because it is connected with flirting and/or hooking up. I would not dream of going dancing, alone or with friends, to any of Barcelona's main clubs for that reason, though I do miss dancing (and I hate clubs for boomers with 1980s music I never liked). Yet, going to gigs is no problem at all, which is great. I would never have gone with a parent to a gig, but I was delighted to discover that people my age are taking their children to gigs when a student told me she had attended with her dad the same Depeche Mode concert I had enjoyed. I think it is wonderful that young people have adapted to enjoying the music of the former generations and that they are not creating barriers for older people to enjoy new music, though now that I am writing this I am wondering how many persons over thirty can be found at a concert by Rosalía (or rather performance since there is no live music in her shows).

Listening to popular music went through a tremendous revolution when artists started selling big quantities of phonographic records, following the launch of the first Gramola in 1924. The gramophone and radio brought music into the homes, and gradually music found its way into the teens' bedrooms, in the 1960s. There is, of course, a strong link between recorded music, the privacy of the teen's bedroom, and the autonomous choice of music, which, I'm sure, many scholars have explored. At a personal level, the hours spent listening to songs in English and trying to understand the lyrics were, no doubt, one of the main foundations of my career in English Studies. I'm sure similar experiences have been shared by many of my peers across the globe, for, logically, an interest in songs in English always precedes an interest in books in English,

if only because the lyrics and shorter. The inner sleeves of my LPs, where lyrics used to be printed, were awfully crowded with my many mistranslations into Spanish; I absurdly assumed that lyrics would make sense once translated but, of course, as Kurt Cobain always noted, lyrics are supposed to be cool, not meaningful. The next revolution happened in 1979, when Sony launched the Walkman, and, suddenly, you could take your favourite music with you anywhere, beyond what the portable radios played, and take the private mental space of your bedroom into public places. I was nineteen, I think, when I got my first Walkman, and that was a very happy experience. Naturally, children who have grown up with a smartphone in their hands might not realize how amazing it was to be listening to your own music in the middle of a crowd, but that certainly was a turning point.

I have not stopped attending gigs (though I don't like festivals), but, as I have noted, I have stopped listening to music despite having a bigger choice than ever and advanced technology to enjoy it at home or elsewhere. What happened was that I gradually lost the ability to listen to music as I worked, and I started enjoying silence in my leisure time, when I mostly read. I marvel that until about twelve years ago I could mark exams, prepare lectures, and so on with the music on, and still hear the lyrics. I could not write and listen to songs, but I discovered movie soundtracks and they worked beautifully as musical background (I am totally illiterate regarding classical music). Little my little, though, I realized that I was no longer listening to the music, not even hearing it, as I worked, so I stopped playing it. Working in silence increased my appetite for further silence, and though I am happy enough watching concerts on the streaming platforms or YouTube, I haven't done in a long time what I used to do as a teen: sit on the sofa, take an album, focus on the lyrics and, yes, sing along. Poor neighbours! An additional problem is that although I tried listening to music on the train as I commute, the machine's noise requires playing music very loud and my doctor told me I was risking going deaf – as many young people whose music I can hear through their headphones do.

I could spend half an hour, or even one hour, a day listening to music with my tablet, instead of reading the press as I do. I love music videos, so that could be another way of engaging again with music. Yet, the impulse is gone, perhaps because I don't like the more commercial music and finding indie alternatives, as I did as a teen, feels a little bit like research. Work, not leisure. Or perhaps, following de Boise, because the emotions popular music brought me until about a decade ago are no longer as essential for me as they used to be. If I listen to music I like, they do return, but the impulse to seek them out is just too mild. Reading has colonized all the mental space that music used to occupy, though I still haven't lost hope. If I had, I would not be getting ready to teach a course again on gender and music, and face the music for having given up on what I used to love so much.

## 3 October 2022 / STOP DYSTOPIAS: HOPEPUNK, AND A WARNING ABOUT THE GENERALIZED GRIMDARK

On September 14, the Spanish Ministry of Social Rights and Agenda 2030 led by Ione Belarra, Secretary General of left-wing party Podemos, launched the campaign #BastaDeDistopías [#StopDystopias] to encourage the debate around the current general discouragement, especially among the young. The main piece is a 1-minute video in which various characters are seen in what are assumed to be dystopian narratives freeing themselves from grime and apathy to smile again. The text accompanying the video is "Whenever we think about the world of the future, we imagine a worse world, right? A toxic world, an unbreathable, brutal and uninhabitable

atmosphere, an unequal, unjust, repressive and cruel society, a stark technology, a dark future for the next generations. But nothing is written. Everything depends on us, and what we are able to imagine is what we are capable of doing".

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which partly lends its name to the Ministry, was approved by the UN in 2015, as a plan for the short-range future with 17 sustainable development goals (or SDGs) that can be called utopian but that should be pure common sense, since they include eradicating poverty and guaranteeing equal rights and a good quality of life for all (see here). Perhaps you have noticed that Spanish President Pedro Sánchez wears a colourful circular pin with the 17 colours of the SDGs. The agenda, however, has not aroused any popular enthusiasm and it is quite possible that the Ministry headed by Belarra will rather help to undermine it because of the little political credit that Podemos currently enjoys. As it is often the case with these rather vague agendas, the Government's effort to follow the UN mandate is seen as a mere excuse to throw around empty slogans and, as they say, milk the institutional teat. The campaign against dystopia has therefore been the object in the social networks of mockery and hatred, and of criticisms in the media about its cost and irrelevance. The main complaint is that an institution that is part of the dystopia we live in can only ask citizens to embrace utopia in an exercise of total hypocrisy.

I subscribe the complaint, but also the content of the ad and the campaign, which is necessary whoever it comes from. The students we have received this year at the university were four years old when the 2008 crisis broke out and have known nothing but an uncertain future, articulated by an economic crisis deepened by evident climate change, the pandemic caused by Covid-19, and the warmongering madness of Vladimir Putin. They are a generation that has been receiving an avalanche of dystopian texts, started much earlier in the 80s, in novels, cinema, series and video games. There may be a promise of regeneration in some of these texts (think of *The Hunger Games*) but it is as a whole an extremely depressing narrative, and so ubiquitous that everyone understands what the Ministry's campaign refers to. Feelings such as happiness or joy sound very hollow today, and when they are expressed they are often associated to the falsehood of the heavily doctored images posted in social networks. And I don't just mean by young people. The world is going to hell and room for manoeuvre seems slim. That the inefficient UN believes that the 2030 Agenda will work is nothing but a joke in view of its inability to stop Putin right now, and avoid the environmental and humanitarian catastrophe that his invasion of Ukraine is already costing.

Since the Ministry's campaign alludes if only tangentially to dystopia within science fiction, it would have been appropriate for Belarra to open consultations with authors, fans, and scholars of the genre, who surely would have been happy to collaborate. In fact, the concern about the predominance of dystopia has already generated some interesting proposals, such as the Decalogue of the Movimiento Pragma promoted in 2018 by the Fundación Asimov. This decalogue has some frankly questionable points, such as "5. Avoid political, ideological or identity dogmas in the proposals for change", which indicate how far it is from the left-wing policies of feminist Minister Belarra, but at least it shows a similar concern for the need to regenerate the narratives that dominate us. We are stuck, basically, in a model created in the United States at the height of the Cold War, between 1982 and 1986, when it seemed perfectly possible that civilization would end with a nuclear holocaust, and we haven't moved away from that dystopia in forty years. That Putin threatens nuclear war is a sign that in international politics we are still in the Cold War, but all narrative dystopia works in favour of that political stagnation.

The Fundación Asimov mentions movements within sf such as solarpunk, ecopunk and hopepunk, which must be paid attention to despite the fact that the suffix 'punk' always points towards dystopian cyberpunk. In his review of the anthology

*Sunvault: Stories of Solarpunk and Eco-speculation* (2017), edited by Phoebe Wagner and Brontë Christopher Wieland, Rhys Williams explains that this genre "prioritizes hope and resilience in the face of the climate crisis" and sees solutions "in recognition, and in encouraging the potential of each individual". In solarpunk, solar energy is not only renewable, but above all "open to dialogue, loving, full of joy in relating". Cat Sparks, co-editor with Liz Grzyb of the anthology *Ecopunk!* (2017) explains in an interview that ecopunk is part of the science fiction about climate change that includes solarpunk, but while this genre "focuses specifically on the solutions offered by solar energy and its transformations, as the name suggests, ecopunk leaves the door open to other sustainable technological solutions and transformations", beyond using the sun's energy. As for hopepunk, the term comes from fantasy author Alexandra Rowland who in 2017 offered the label on Tumblr with the intention of countering the weight of grimdark, a subgenre of speculative fiction "particularly dystopian, amoral, and violent", Wikipedia reports, inspired by the *Warhammer 40,000* slogan "In the grim darkness of the far future there is only war". Also according to Wikipedia, the greatest recognition received by hopepunk has been the awarding in 2019 of the Nebula and the Hugo to the novel *The Calculating Stars* by Mary Robinette-Kowal.

It might seem that all these genres of science fiction have little to do with the ministerial campaign and the daily concerns of ordinary Spanish citizens but the truth is that the stories we consume are an index of our sorrows and hopes. This week the most watched audiovisual products in Spain have been the HBO series *House of the Dragon* (although Amazon's *The Rings of Power* is very close) and the Netflix mini-series *Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story*, about the Milwaukee serial killer. That half the country is watching two stories of absolute darkness in their violence, misogyny and homophobia instead of reading solarpunk, ecopunk or hopepunk says a lot about our mood but also about what Minister Belarra does not comment: it is not ordinary citizens who have cemented this dystopian climate but the corporations that offer us news and entertainment and that, for their own interests, want us scared and docile. The objective of the campaign #BastaDeUtopías, therefore, should be those corporations that put fear in our bodies and that should change their tone right now. I do not mean that what is happening in Ukraine and in the other 24 wars active today on the planet can or should be hidden (remember the definition of grimdark) but that the flood of catastrophic news and narratives should be replaced with a stronger stream of hopeful and positive news and narratives.

I therefore suggest to the Minister that she takes a step further, forms a council of citizens capable of contributing positive ideas in a new progressive way (including the people who write and love science fiction) and that she devotes her own efforts to imagining what utopia consists of. Taking each of the 17 sustainable development goals a positive story could be written to start turning around so much cyberpunk and so much grimdark, with more than just a slogan and a flashy but empty campaign. I am aware that, whatever is done by this or any other government, the call to embrace utopia will be met with mockery, disdain, anger and even pain. As good Spaniards, we will chatter on without reflecting beyond the dislike our rulers inspire. Decades of cynicism and despair have left us in the hands of dystopia, and it is now very difficult to imagine from the left a real egalitarian world. From the (far) right this is quite easy, in contrast: the new British Prime Minister Liz Truss has ruined her country in just three weeks of mandate, favouring the rich with large tax cuts so that they remain installed in their utopia while the rest of the population sinks into the misery that the many dystopias have been announcing for years. The hopepunk of Belarra's ministerial left-wing message may be laughable but the alternative, you see, is a generalized right-wing grimdark. Be warned.

## 11 October 2022 / WHAT I DIDN'T KNOW: THOUGHTS ON TEACHING

I've been reading these days a delicious book edited by non-fiction guru Lee Gutkind, *What I Didn't Know: True Stories of Becoming a Teacher*, and I'm borrowing his title for my post (you can take a peek at the book on Google). This lovely volume gathers together twenty brief memoirs by a variety of US teachers focused on the beginning of their careers, some going back to the 1960s (most authors are women, by the way).

Despite the different circumstances and approaches, the memoirs share a similar pattern. A person chooses a career in teaching, either as a first choice or a second chance in life, either in primary or in secondary school, only to find that the actual practice of teaching is very different from what they had imagined and how they had been trained. This is an optimistic book and so most of the memoirs begin with a period of great difficulties, followed by necessary adjustment leading, finally, to a happy career. All the teachers face the same main obstacle: the bureaucratization of teaching, which has turned students into cogs in an immense testing machinery rather than into the protagonists of their own learning process, as they should be.

I am awed and humbled by the energy these teachers and many others have employed in educating so many children in the USA and elsewhere. It is obvious to me, as it should be to everyone, that primary and secondary school teachers never receive the acknowledgment they deserve from parents and from society in general. As happens in all professions, there are bound to be a number of totally useless teachers but my impression is that as a whole the teachers are doing their best given the pitiful state of education these days. Readers of Gutkind's edited volume will wonder at why teachers need to battle so much disrespect in the classroom, even from very young children, but this is an attitude that reflects the general disrespect for their task. Children no longer hear at home positive opinions of teachers and possibly also disrespecting their parents they project onto their teachers the aversion they feel for the whole adult world. Most teachers in the volume focus precisely on how they won their students' respect after much effort, but they never present themselves as master manipulators of the children in their classroom. They try to understand the children's background and the moment they do this opens up new avenues for mutual empathy.

I wish there were a similar volume on the experiences of university teachers. If there is one, please let me know. My impression is that when we speak of teaching we hardly ever think of the university, perhaps because the institution itself does not care much about this aspect of our profession. One of the teachers in Gutkind's volume is a former scientist with a PhD and some college teaching in her CV. She is made quite angry by a headmistress who not only wrongly assumes that doing research takes a couple of hours a day but who tells her that having a PhD does not mean you know how to teach a subject. I should think that in this point she is perfectly right. We now have at my university a programme designed to give new teachers basic training (I'm not sure how many actually take it) but it has been traditionally assumed that a good researcher must be a good teacher. This is, clearly, a very wrong assumption since generating and communicating knowledge require different sets of skills. We all have been as students the victims of academic luminaries with an erratic sense of grading and a tendency to regard lectures as time detracted from precious research. There seem to be fewer of these unempathetic teachers (if they deserve the title) but surely they still exist, if only among the oldest segments of the profession.

I have written frequently here about how the hardest part of being a university teacher is not the disrespect that plagues elementary and secondary school teachers, but the obligation to be entertaining. University students have a very low tolerance of boredom and a too high expectation that learning must be fun because this a message they have received again and again. In the case of my own area, I remember plenty of

language schools advertising their English courses as great fun rather than hard study. This possibly explains why so very few Spaniards can maintain a basic conversation in English (22% at the last count, and this seems high to me).

Whereas the teachers whose memoirs I have been reading narrate a process of coming to terms with their students' realities and reaching a compromise, I find myself getting increasingly crankier and being less than willing to be entertaining. A student once defined me as 'proud' and maybe what she meant was that my inflexibility has been growing. I acknowledge that: words like 'gamification' make me cringe, concepts like 'teaching innovation through digitalization' seem to me abhorrent. Of course I use my virtual classroom as an extension of my physical classroom, but as I have been writing again and again no teaching innovation can happen without working on what students contribute to their own teaching. As things are, they are treated as rather passive participants in most pedagogical currents.

Perhaps a problem hardly ever mentioned is that we teach for too long. I was aghast to discover that Maitland Jones Jr., the teacher recently dismissed by NYU following a letter of complaint by 82 of his 350 students, is 84. He started teaching at Princeton in 1964, which means that his career spans now 58 years. He may be the best teacher in the world, for all I know, or the worst but there is a turning point after which the generational gap is just too big. You need to consider that the students' entrance age is 18: by the time a teacher hits 36, that's twice their age; at 54, that's three times their age; by 72, which should be the absolute limit, the teacher is four times older. You don't want students to be taught by their grandparents' generation, in my humble opinion. Ideally, they should be taught by persons not older than 60, but this view probably comes from my having been a teacher already for 31 years, even though I'm only 56. I'm just very, very tired and shudder at having to face more 20-year-olds for at least 11 more years. Not because they misbehave (not at all!) but because I am beginning to lack the energy my job requires, much more so the energy to be entertaining. Can I please be old and boring?

This takes me back to my first day in the job, back in September 1991, when I was 25 and, so, only seven years older than my students. I don't remember any details and it would be impossible for me to contribute to a volume like the one edited by Gutkind, but I do recall that my main concern was being a better teacher than my own teachers. I was beginning my doctoral studies, which included two full academic years of tuition, and I believe that being both teacher and student in that period helped me very much. I did not receive, as I have noted, any specific training (I had taken a course but aimed at secondary school teaching) and I often felt lost and lonely. I recall preparing classes down to the last detail in crowded worksheets, a habit I have progressively lost. My class notes are now just a few lines because the best part of the Literature class are the spaces for discussion that open up as we debate, and that cannot be fully controlled. My best lectures, I think, are always the ones that begin at one point and branch out in unexpected ways because a student makes a clever comment. In fact, that's what I love best as a teacher: not knowing 100% what's going to happen in class.

So, what I didn't know on that first day of class is precisely this: how to relax and take it for granted that not everything is under control in the classroom. Unlike the teachers in Gutkind's volume, I have no external board checking that I have completed my programme, but I have learned to plan content in more realistic ways than I did at the beginning of my career. Gutkind's teachers obsess about making their students ready for their final tests, I worry that mine meet deadlines but, basically, I respond to no authority (only to my Victorian sense of duty). The way we work, the students are adults entitled to lodging complaints if things do not work well, but we are not monitored subject by subject by the university (each degree is monitored every few years and, of course, each degree Coordinator keeps an eye on us).

This means that the teaching experiences at university level are immensely varied, possibly even within the same degree and Departament. We don't really discuss them much, though at least in my Department we meet once a year for a workshop I have been running since 2014, Teaching English Language, Literature and Culture. My colleagues have shown so far interest, but not really enthusiasm… I wonder what would happen if I proposed that we write something along the lines of Gutkind's volume. Now that I think about it, I'll propose that as the topic of our next workshop. And I'll let you know next January what we didn't know that we now know as teachers.

## 17 October 2022 / WHY THE VILLAIN CANNOT BE ROMANTIC: *THE RINGS OF POWER* AND THAT SCENE ON THE RAFT

[WARNING: THIS POST DISCUSSES EPISODE 8, "ALLOYED", OF AMAZON'S SERIES *THE RINGS OF POWER*]

I've been watching with a mixture of boredom and annoyance Amazon's *The Rings of Power*, telling myself there was no point in writing about it to vent my indignation as a Tolkien reader (though not a big fan). I agree with the many who have concluded that the series is not truly an adaptation but ultra-expensive fan fiction, a conclusion which helps to put up with the heavy distortion of Tolkien's characters (and I don't mean here in terms of race) and the slow-moving plot. A good adaptation needn't be faithful to the original and certainly the best adaptations offer rich readings of their sources, even surpassing them in interest. What Amazon is offering is not, however, an enriching, fulfilling adaptation, as Peter Jackson's films were, but a reinvention which only tangentially refers to the essence of Tolkien's universe. In fact it corrupts it, as I will argue.

If I am writing today about *The Rings of Power* this is because whereas Tolkien knows very well where the boundary between good and evil lies, the series' finale contained a scene in which that distinction is being blurred, and I find that extremely dangerous in the context of the rise of fascism we are seeing today. As I have mentioned here, I published in 2020 a book called *Masculinity and Patriarchal Villainy in the British Novel: From Hitler to Voldemort*, which makes me a sort of world authority on villainy (there are actually very few volumes on this topic). The book has a chapter on the villains Morgoth and Sauron, whom Tolkien presents as relentless evildoers. In my reading, Morgoth, originally named Melkor, is in part a victim of his creator Eru/Iluvatar's restrictions in the use of his power of creation, which is expressed through music. Nothing excuses Morgoth's later use of that power for destruction and domination and my reading is very critical of the inefficiency of the divine Valar to curb down their sibling's power. Sauron, a Maiar (like Gandalf or Saruman) who becomes Morgoth's most trusted lieutenant, decides to display all his villainy once his master is sent to eternal prison (for both are immortal). He has a moment of doubt, prompted by the fear of being caught, but once he realises that the Valar are rather useless and he learns to control Elves, Men and Dwarves through the Rings, and though the machinery of war, Sauron tries by all means to stay in power. Until, as we know, Sauron's Ring falls in Frodo's hands and the villain gets his come-uppance, at it must happen.

In the American narrative discourse, however, villains are no longer the monsters of evil they used to be in the classic discourse, a trend perhaps started by Darth Vader in *Star Wars*. George Lucas not only redeemed his villain, but also used the second trilogy (Episodes I-III) to explain how Anakin Skywalker fell to the dark side (tellingly, the real archvillain, Emperor Palpatine, was played by a British actor, Ian McDiarmid). Disney has contributed to this trend of defanging the villain by re-writing dark fairy Maleficent as a

victim of a form of brutal rape. For you to see where I am going, please remember that J.K. Rowling, a British writer and a clever Tolkienian reader, has no doubts that Voldemort is a monster of evil and never thinks of condoning him, even though she offers an origins story to explain where he comes from and to theorize why he is evil. The British, I am arguing, who saw evil face-to-face in WWI and WWII, have created very potent fictions of villainy as warnings against the rise of fascism. The Americans, in contrast, have been falling in love with the villain for a very long time, and Episode 8 of *The Rings of Power* contains a scene that encapsulates that tempting love. Yes, I mean the infamous raft scene.

The show's Galadriel (who is most emphatically not Tolkien's Galadriel), dupes herself into believing that handsome Halbrand is the King of the Southern Lands, and even though he never confirms her assumption, the deluded Galadriel convinces the Númenóreans to launch an attack against the Orcs pestering Middle Earth. This misguided enterprise results in the creation of Mordor, but not content to have caused that disaster, Galadriel, who is half-besotted with Halbrand, takes him to Lindon, the main Elf city, to be cured of his life-threatening wounds. There, Galadriel finally thinks of checking the historical records, only to discover that the line of kings to which Halbrand purportedly belongs died out one thousand years before. The spectators who had long suspected that Halbrand might be Sauron are finally rewarded for their patience with a revelation scene set on the raft where Galadriel first met Halbrand, when both were castaways. Sauron spirits her magically to that primal scene after failing to approach her embodying her dead brother who, by the way, was killed by his henchmen (henchorcs?).

I grant that actors Morfydd Clark (as Galadriel) and Charlie Vickers (as Sauron), do a very good job in the few minutes the scene lasts, possibly their best performance in the whole series. I am interested here, however, in the dialogue, which I am quoting in its entirety. The scene begins with a chagrined Galadriel refusing to look at Sauron; both are standing on the raft, as the wind whooshes and clouds gather:

SAURON: Galadriel. Look at me! Galadriel. Look at me. You know who I am. I am your friend.
GALADRIEL: You are a friend of Morgoth's.
SAURON: When Morgoth was defeated, it was as if a great, clenched fist had released its grasp from my neck. And in the stillness of that first sunrise, at last, I felt the light of The One again. And I knew if ever I was to be forgiven... That I had to heal everything that I had helped ruin.

This should set all the alarms ringing. Tolkien's Sauron is known as the Deceiver and Amazon's Sauron has been deceiving Galadriel all along, and it might well be he is still deceiving her by pretending that he was enslaved by Morgoth and, once he was gone, he started looking forward to being forgiven by The One (Eru/Illúvatar). It is important, however, to note that Mairon (Sauron's original Maiar name) was not enslaved but suborned (or persuaded, or seduced) by Tolkien's Morgoth. In the British discourse on evil there is willing subordination that cannot be forgiven; this is replaced in the American version with forced enslavement open to forgiveness, for Sauron is not really evil but made evil by greater forces (i.e. Morgoth). The scene continues:

GALADRIEL: No penance could ever erase the evil you have done.
SAURON: That is not what you believe.
GALADRIEL: Do not tell me what I believe.
SAURON: No. You told me. After our victory, you said that whatever I'd done before I could be free of it now.
GALADRIEL: You deceived me.

SAURON: I told you the truth. I told you that I had done evil, and you did not care. Because you knew that our past meant nothing, weighed against our future.

Amazon's Galadriel is here exposed as an utter fool. That she was deceived is true enough, but that she was also easy to deceive, given her feelings for Halbrand, is another inescapable truth. You cannot 'free' a person from the evil they acknowledge having committed, without asking what that evil consisted of. Just please try to imagine this is not Sauron but Hitler, and see how indefensible Galadriel's position is, and how it benefits Sauron. Let's move on, as the storm gathers:

GALADRIEL: There is no such future.
SAURON: Isn't there? All others look on you with doubt. I alone can see your greatness. I alone can see your light.
GALADRIEL: You would make me a tyrant.
SAURON: I would make you a queen. Fair as the sea and the Sun. Stronger than the foundations of the earth.
GALADRIEL: And you. My king. The Dark Lord.
SAURON: No. Not dark. Not with you at my side. You told me once, that we were brought together for a purpose. This is it. [Sauron passes her brother's dagger to her] You bind me to the light. And I bind you to power. Together, we can save this Middle-earth.
GALADRIEL: Save? Or rule?
SAURON: I see no difference.
GALADRIEL: And that is why... I will never be at your side. [she puts dagger to his neck]

Deep sigh… I was horrified by how many on Twitter found this segment of the scene romantic, particularly the reflection on the water showing Sauron in kingly armour and Galadriel by his side. To begin with, this is NOT romantic. Sauron is flattering Galadriel to control her. Instead of plunging the dagger straight away into his heart, however, she imagines what their union would be like, even suggesting that she could be transformed by him ('you would make me a tyrant'). Sauron uses cliched florid language knowing how foolish she is, and then offers the argument that they have a 'purpose' together because 'You bind me to the light. And I bind you to power'. Another big NO: light (=good) and power as Sauron understands it (=evil) are NOT compatible. Benevolent absolute monarchy has NEVER existed.

But let's move on. Galadriel shakes herself out of her musings about absolute power and reacts by threatening Sauron (still not attacking him). Here the 'romantic' villain shows his true colours, as thunder rumbles. Sauron ends the scene yelling:

SAURON: You have no choice. Without me, your people will fade. And the shadow will spread and darken to cover all the world. You need me.
GALADRIEL: I should have left you on the sea.
SAURON: A sea you were on because the Elves cast you out. They cast you out for deigning to beg them for a few petty soldiers. What will they do when you tell them that you were my ally? When you tell them that Sauron lives because of you? And you will die because of me.

I do wonder what those who read the scene as a romantic moment see in it. Here's a strong, intelligent woman who has the chance to destroy the enemy she has been seeking, and who instead rescues him, not once but twice: from the raft and from his mortal wounds after battling Adar's Orcs. I do not know whether she can actually kill

Sauron in this scene, as this is a vision happening in her mind controlled by him, but why doesn't she try? (yes, I know: Season 2 is being shot already).

What irks about Galadriel, as she is written by the showrunners, is that she helped Halbrand because she had a crush on him, which she disguises to herself as a preposterous, silly mission to return a lost King to his land. Incidentally, for her crush to be 'legitimate', the showrunners made their Galadriel a widow, killing off her husband Celeborn. A Twitter user wrote about how surprised Tolkien would be seeing contemporary audiences invested in 'shipping' Galadriel and Halbrand, but beyond the stupidity of always wanting to include romance in all narratives, what worries me is that the series has made the villain attractive. Charlie Vickers is not as beautiful as Sauron is in his incarnation as Annatar, the Lord of Gifts, a persona he assumes to trick the Númenóreans into submission, but the series has presented him as an erotic object of general interest for the spectators and in particular for Galadriel, which is never the case with Annatar. Indeed, Halbrand often recalls Viggo Mortensen's Aragorn in Jackson's films, where, by the way, Sauron never speaks and is always seen in armour (the only naked thing we see about him is his eye). This is, in short, a dirty trick to play. Every comment enthusing about how hot Charlie Vickers/Halbrand/Sauron is helps villainy. I shudder to think what would happen if Vladimir Putin were a handsome man, though I am sure you have noticed that no powerful man is handsome. That's so for a very simple reason: handsome men need not seek absolute power to compensate for any deficiencies.

I don't know how *The Rings of Power* is going to progress, and how the showrunners are going to rewrite Tolkien's Annatar subplot (visions of Númenor's destruction, for which the villain is indirectly responsible, have been already included in the series), unless another actor plays Sauron in disguise. My request is that the lines are kept clear and that audiences are not lured into rooting for handsome men who turn out to be appalling villains. This is what Sauron did to the Númenóreans, and look how they ended. Tolkien sent a potent warning many decades ago about allowing yourself to be deceived by attractive false appearances and it's time we heed it. And also that we finally understand that the villain is NOT a romantic character, no matter how handsome he may be.

## 24 October 2022 / SEX WORK IN JAMES S.A. COREY'S *THE EXPANSE*: A SAMPLE OF THE 24TH CENTURY (OR NOT)

*The Expanse* (2011-2021) is a nine-volume space opera series by James S.A. Corey (the joint penname of the duo Daniel Abraham and Ty Franck), or a ten-volume series if you take into account the book gathering the associated short fiction. The novels have been adapted as a TV series, first by SyFy and later by Amazon, up to a sixth season, which also roughly corresponds to the saga up to the sixth novel (the seventh season has just been announced). I read the first novel, *Leviathan Wakes*, in the process of selecting works for a book on science fiction and masculinity which I aim to write next year. Reading about the TV series and some reviews of this novel indicated that Captain James Holden might be an interesting character to consider in my future book. I quickly gave up on him, however, because of a scene in which he tells himself that he is quite a good guy for not trying to have sex with his drunken XO, Naomi Nagata, but I thought that this might be the start of a narrative arc from asshole to hero, as it has turned out to be. At the point I am now (the seventh novel, *Persepolis Rising*) Holden has proved himself a hero several times over and a caring lover of Nagata, being in a relationship with her for

decades. So, definitely, he will be the object of one of my chapters, if I manage to discuss in 6000 words a narrative arc comprising about 5000 pages in total.

My focus today, however, is not just Holden but also another member of the *Rocinante's* crew that he leads, the mechanic Amos Burton. Holden names his ship after Don Quijote's famelic horse to underline his own idealism, and it might be argued that the other members of the original crew (the Martian pilot Alex, the Belter XO Naomi) and Burton himself (another Earthman like Holden) play collectively the role of Sancho Panza, above all Nagata. Holden, as I have noted, is in a long romantic relationship with this woman in which she plays the roles of supporting girlfriend, moral conscience, and awesome spaceship engineer all in one. Apart from the *faux pas* of the scene I loathed in the first book, Holden turns out to be quite a good guy (of the white, heterosexual traditional kind), though with an irritating penchant to believe that the human species needs to be saved by him from the aliens and an assorted list of patriarchal villains. As men, Alex and Amos complement Holden by contributing skills he lacks as, respectively, a pilot and a mechanic, but Burton is also there to highlight Holden's reluctance to kill if he can avoid it, and, let's say it, his normative sexuality, though in a very uncomfortable way for me as a female reader. At one point, Holden asks Naomi why she never had sex with Amos (when they were part of the crew of another ship, before they became a couple), seeing that the burly fellow has a sort of rough attractive and she replies that it was because of his sexuality, thus highlighted as problematic. The problem with Burton, Naomi and Holden know, and this bothers me, is that he only has sex with sex workers.

This needs to be commented on from two angles: the personal one referred to Amos Burton's biography and the general one referred to the 24th-century setting of the books (action begins around 2350). Burton is the protagonist of the novella "The Churn", which narrates how he left behind a life of crime on Earth to become, thanks to a combination of violence and sheer luck, a valued spaceship mechanic. We know from this novella (and other comments in the novels) that Amos (born Timmy) was the child of an unlicensed prostitute, active in Baltimore. When she dies (sorry, but I can't recall whether she is murdered), little Timmy is fostered by one of his mother's friends, Lydia, who eventually becomes his lover when he is still technically a child. Lydia is a good mother/lover to the boy but cannot prevent him from growing in a criminal atmosphere, in which young Timmy stands out for his big body, physical strength, and lack of scruples to murder if he thinks it necessary (a nasty feature he keeps in adult age and that is condoned and even celebrated by the authors and the *Roci's* crew members). The question is that the authors suppose that because of his origins and diverse Freudian traumas Amos Burton can only have sex with prostitutes. When they finally find a love interest for him, the relationship remains platonic, and inexplicable to all.

Nagata's view of Burton's sexuality as anomalous is not, however, quite right for, after all, in the 24th-century Solar system in which they live there is prostitution, both of the unlicensed and the licensed types. Burton's sexuality would be anomalous if, say, he killed the women he has sex with, or enjoyed raping children, or indulged in other sex crimes. As far as the world he lives in is concerned, he is just a client using a service controlled mostly by the authorities that license the brothels. I have not counted the times that the word 'brothel' appears in the series, but my guess is that this kind of establishment is mentioned at least twice in each novel as part of the services that any planet or planetoid provides. This is a universe in which whenever the *Rocinante* lands for repairs or a break, Burton goes off to find a brothel and have sex with prostitutes openly, not at all behind the backs of his crewmates. They are not bothered but I am. *The Expanse* is full of interesting women characters, from Nagata herself to Martian soldier Bobbie Draper, passing through fierce, foul-mouthed UN politician Chrisjen Avasarala. Yet, these women live in a universe in which fellow crew members use sex workers and in which prostitution appears to have been regulated but not curbed down. You might

say that prostitution has existed for millennia and is unlikely to die in the near future, but the point I am making is that sex work should not have a place in a 24th century in which women are 100% men's equals. Or, alternatively, it should offer services to all. I have been waiting for six novels already for Bobbie to accompany Burton in one of his excursions, to buy male company, but this has not happened so far. Authors, readers, and main characters seem fine with Amos's enjoyment of paid sex, and although this is hypocritically presented as part of his warped sexuality, the fact is that in his society it is still a male prerogative to pay women for sex.

In *Babylon's Ashes* (the sixth novel) there is a particularly relevant chapter as regards this topic, narrated from Amos's point of view (what the authors call 'close third person'). Chapter 35 begins with Burton reflecting on why he uses brothels: we learn that he cannot feel the emotions associated to love ("just seemed like making shit up"), and that he acknowledges the sexual desire building up in his body during the long journeys as "he would anything powerful and dangerous that was sharing his workspace". Instead of hooking up with one of his crewmates, however, he uses brothels because there "he knew what all the dangers looked like", meaning he knew how to avoid emotions. I don't see anything anomalous here, but just a candid account of how the male user of sex work operates. Of the girl sleeping by his side, Maddie, we read that she "was someone he'd used and been used by", as if client and worker were equals; she, it is reported, was an unlicensed prostitute as a kid, before she joined "the legal trade". Apparently, this makes post-coital talk easy, for since Amos had been raised among illegal prostitutes, "she knew he wouldn't pull any of that 'you're better than this' soul-saving bullshit. He also wouldn't start calling her a bitch and being abusive out of shame the way some johns did". Amos, who can't sleep, feels generous leaving her to enjoy the bed he has paid for the whole night, and even more generous because, once what's nagging him is solved, he decides not to go back to her and demand her services again.

There is in the meantime an absolutely crucial conversation between Amos Burton and Jim Holden, as regards the events in the latest confrontation between the *Rocinante* and the Free Navy's rebel Marco Inaros. This is the first long conversation Burton and Holden have in the series, and as I have noted, it takes place in the sixth novel, when the two men have been working together for possibly one decade. Burton has noticed something odd in the missiles launched against Inaros's spaceship and the suspicion that Holden may have manipulated them is what keeps him awake that particular night with Maddie. He demands an explanation from Holden (which I will not reproduce here to avoid spoilers), and seeing that the captain might not be in a position to finally eliminate Inaros, Burton asks the key question any hero needs to ponder: "Are you the right guy for this job?". Holden faces the unexpected test of manhood with his proverbial honesty: "No. But I'm the guy who got it. So I'm going to do it". Holden thanks Burton, who is "not certain what he was being thanked for", and declines the mechanic's offer to take the responsibility of killing off his hands. "My hands are fine", Holden replies.

Here's the little joke, or not so little, that the authors play. The reader might think that what is bothering Amos that night is finally realizing that he has feelings for one of his crewmates, either Bobbie or, more likely, the frail woman he has rescued from Earth's devastation. When he returns to the *Roci*, I expected a scene between Burton and this woman, in which he would (perhaps) declare his love but tell her she is too pure for him to have sex with, or some other heteronormative nonsense. I was quite surprised to find out that what bothered Amos was Jim Holden's performance as a proper masculine hero, particularly because, as noted, the men have no intimate conversations at all; in fact, all intimate conversations on board the *Roci* are between Holden and Nagata. She cannot be part of the conversation about Inaros at this point (there is later an intimate conversation in which Holden reproduces his talk with Amos), and, so, Burton, replaces Naomi in the scene.

What is inconceivable in the gruff masculine universe of *The Expanse*, no matter how soft Holden's masculinity may be in comparison to that of the traditional space opera hero, is a conversation in which the captain helps his mechanic realize that love and sex with a woman can go together, as he has learned in his relationship with Nagata. That would be too uncomfortably close. There are polyamorous marriages in *The Expanse* (Holden is the child of one), gays and lesbians, and Holden is even the object of a gay offer of sex (which he politely rejects), but there is no space for male intimacy in which to discuss why Burton's sexuality is 'anomalous' (not really…) and how he could enjoy more fulfilling alternatives than prostitution.

I am partly thankful to the authors for approaching the topic of sex work and being so candid about it, but I am also disappointed that women's progress as they see it has not eliminated the "trade". As far as Maddie is concerned, although moving from illegality to legality seems an improvement, the fact that sex work still exists in the 24th century says little about the general progress of women and of the human species. And if you are the type of person who thinks that sex work is like any other work, just ask yourself whether you'd like your young daughter/niece/cousin to announce she wants to be a professional in that trade. (Did you answer 'yes'? Really?). The debate on prostitution, or sex work, is now at a point when clients have been criminalized in some countries following the Swedish model implanted in 1999, while sex workers have been decriminalized (not legalized). This model has actually been resisted by many sex workers on the grounds that it has made their work more dangerous, as the drop in the number of clients forces them to accept riskier encounters and has diminished their earnings (see here). They also complaint that there are, besides, few jobs for the women who wish to give up sex work.

What the case of Amos Burton shows, however, is that without a better sex education that can heal traumas and teach men that sex should be born of mutual respect and consent (and indeed of mutual seduction), sex work will continue well beyond the 24th century. What is wrong with that, you may ask? Well, again: ask yourself whether this is a career you would choose for a young person (girl or boy) that you love, and there is your answer. Or imagine going on a business trip with your male workmates and how you would feel if you knew they were going to brothels at each stop, for this is what Naomi and Bobbie see. I would be uncomfortable, to say the least, and if in Sweden could call the cops…Yet, from what I see the Swedish model is not part of *The Expanse*. So much for the future of women, let's hope it is better than the authors imagine.

## 8 November 2022 / JUDGING A BOOK BY ITS COVER

This post is inspired by the article "Seventy-five years of richly illustrated literary classics – in pictures", which celebrates the work of The Folio Society. This is a British independent publisher, established in 1947, which has so far published 2400 beautifully designed editions for book lovers. Not knowing anything about them, I was astonished not only by the selection which the article offers but also by the catalogue you can browse on their website. Take a look and enjoy! And buy, if you can, for some of the volumes, which run from the highly literary to the popular, are really pricey. Not all, though.

Going further down this road, you might like to admire LitHub's "The 25 Most Iconic Book Covers in History". This is really a different kettle of fish since the article on The Folio Society highlights the first-rank artists that have collaborated with this publisher, whereas LitHub celebrates book covers whose artists are far more anonymous. I had no idea, for instance, that Leslie Holland is the author of the iconic cover for the original 1932 edition of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, or that the not

less iconic cover for Mario Puzo's *The Godfather* (1969) was designed by S. Neil Fujita and illustrated by John Kashiwabara. In fact, I wonder how come I recognize these book covers since I have read other later editions and the textbooks I read as a student had no pictures in them. I do own some of the books reproduced in the article, but even so I wonder how the images in book covers circulate. I assume matters have changed because of the internet, or that I have forgotten press articles that do carry those covers.

A peculiarity of book covers is that translations often use a different one, which in my view makes sense only partially depending on whether you believe that translations are a completely separate text (as translation specialist Laurence Venturi does) or a version of the same text. I assume that book covers must be negotiated separately, like translations, hence the variations. This means that each book has a different public image depending on the language version, which is not something we tend to consider, A singular case are the covers that publisher Silvia Sesé of Destino commissioned from Catalan-Mexican artist Gino Rubert for the Spanish translation of the *Millennium* trilogy by Stig Larsson. As José Antonio González Puentes reports in his blog, the artist suggested using some of his already existing work. Sesé chose a series in which Rubert's then girlfriend, Argentinian artist Tamara Villoslada, was portrayed and the photoshopped images showing Villoslada as a sort of anorexic *femme fatale* clad in red attracted a huge readership even though the book covers had little to do with the novels' content. I wonder if she has got any royalties for lending her image though I think this is unlikely.

Covers, on the other hand, can be an obstacle. It took me years to get past the colourful covers by Josh Kirby for the novels by Terry Pratchett, stubbornly believing that Kirby's quirky caricatures of the characters could only be advertising trash. My PhD co-supervisor David Punter was astounded by what I can only call my stupidity and ordered me to start reading Pratchett at once. I must clarify that possibly what flabbergasted me about Kirby's book covers is that they ran from front to back, hardly leaving room for the title and the back blurb. They felt a bit too much, but as I say I love them now. Once I learned to enjoy the beautiful correspondence between Kirby's and Pratchett's satirical spirits I had to accept, like the rest of his fans, the equally great work by Paul Kidby, once Kirby passed away in 2001. I have seen this weekend an exhibition of illustrations of Pratchett's characters by other artists and I have this feeling that they are intruding into someone else's territory. Their version of the characters does not seem real, which is contradictory considering that Kirby's and Kidby's illustrations cannot be called real either, because they are illustrations (not photos!) and, anyway, reproduce imaginary individuals.

I cannot write a post about book covers without paying homage to the two best Spanish designers of book covers: Daniel Gil and his, so to speak, successor Manuel Estrada. Estrada himself offers in a blog post, a celebration of Gil, whose conceptual covers usually featuring enigmatic photos of no less enigmatic objects is tied to the magnificent experience of reading Alianza's series 'El libro de bolsillo' in the 1970s and 1980s. I was asked to read, aged 14, John Holt's *El fracaso de la escuela*, and that cover with the picture of a faceless girl student has stayed in my memory for many years. Manuel Estrada renewed many of Alianza's book covers from 2008, following in Gil's steps but also contributing his own strong, personal vision. I cannot think of any other publisher in Spain that has been blessed with such wonderful book cover artists, though the pity is that few readers can name either Gil or Estrada as the authors of the covers.

My own experience as regards the covers of my volumes can be subdivided into two areas: the covers I have chosen or designed, and the covers that others have chosen. Academic publishing works in mysterious ways and, so, I cannot explain why Routledge does not have a different cover for each book. They have now gone past their blue period (for their uniformly dark blue covers) and authors can now choose between about 25 variations, all with nice geometrical patterns and colours but quite repetitive. There may

be dozens of books with the same cover as that for my book *Masculinity and Patriarchal Villainy in the British Novel: From Hitler to Voldemort*, which is not something I am very happy with. In contrast, the Universidad of Zaragoza has accepted my proposal of a book cover that fuses the main features of Hitler and Voldemort in one caricature for my forthcoming self-translation. For my other books I have also been able to choose the book covers. My favourite needs to be the one for *Representations of Masculinity in Literature and Film: Focus on Men*, which shows a lovely selfie of my nephew Alex. For *Typescript of the Second Origin*, my translation of Manuel de Pedrolo's *Mecanoscrit del segon origen*, my publishers ended up using an image which I myself found: it comes from a trailer for a zombie movie that was never made and shows Barcelona's Plaça d'Espanya absolutely devastated, which goes very well with Pedrolo's theme of an alien invasion.

As regards the e-books I have self-published, this is a completely different panorama. I have never published on Amazon but I know that there is a booming industry offering design services to self-published authors that want to go a little bit beyond the basic standard. In my case, I have published 10 e-books gathering together my students' work, and a volume with my academic articles on science fiction. If you look at the books by the students you will see that my skills are totally amateurish but I have made an effort to improve and experiment with different looks. I think my favourite is the cover for *Gender in 21st Century Animated Children's Cinema*. For my e-book on SF, I learned to design the book with a font that immediately suggested this genre, for beyond the book cover I have been trying new designs for each volume. I wanted very much a picture of a nebula on the cover (NASA has many copyright-free images), but my husband showed me that the stunning nebula I had initially chosen had been used *ad nauseam* in Amazon self-published books. I switched then to another, less popular but equally stunning nebula.

I enjoy very much the process of editing text, designing a look for each book, choosing a cover. My father used to be a printer in a company specialising in advertising (leaflets, catalogues and so on) and I seem to have imbibed something from his job, particularly from his annoyed comments when some aspect of a job had gone wrong. I learned the lesson that how printed paper looks does matter though, ironically, I am applying those lessons to digital works (and I'm not at all a bibliophile that treasures particular editions of any volume). In any case, since I am myself designing books, if only in the most amateurish way, I have a high appreciation for the artists who do that professionally, and who should be much better known. Since I cannot afford their services, I wish I had the time to learn a bit more and make my modest productions better-looking. Considering how much text we academics are constantly editing, perhaps that kind of training should be part of our jobs… Right, colleagues?

## 14 November 2022 / READING A LONG NOVEL SERIES (FOR ACADEMIC PURPOSES): *THE EXPANSE*

I'm returning to James S.A. Corey's *The Expanse*, which I discussed two posts ago, this time to reflect on the strategies required to face such a long read for academic purposes.

Whereas mainstream and literary novels are usually published as stand-alone volumes, series abound in genre fiction. They are sometimes bound by the presence of a particular protagonist, whether this is Agatha Christie's Miss Marple (present in her detective novels between 1930 and 1976) or Louise McMaster Bujold's Miles Vorkosigan (present in her SF novels since 1986). Terry Pratchett's Discworld fantasy satirical series (1986-2015) was bound by its location and growing cast of characters, present in 45

novels. The marine adventure Aubrey-Maturin series by Patrick O'Brian ran to 20 truly exciting novels, whereas Benito Pérez-Galdós penned a formidable series of 46 historical novels for his *Episodios Nacionales* (1872-1912). And these are by no means the longest series. Cole Salao calls attention in a post titled "12 of the Longest Book Series That Ever Existed" to heroic fantasy series the *Guin Saga* by Japanese author Kaoru Kurimoto (1953-2009) as the longest series ever. The series stretched to 147 volumes and 26 side-story novels, Wikipedia informs, "with the last seventeen volumes (+ five side stories) published posthumously".

I don't have in mind, however, extremely long series like the ones I have mentioned, but series like *The Expanse* which are longer than average (trilogy to heptalogy) but far shorter than these maxiseries. Fantasy and SF are plagued now by trilogies and longer series, and by this I mean that it is rarer and rarer to find stand-alone novels. Publishers, obviously, prefer to milk the cow dry if they see in a first volume the promise of later successful volumes, and writers go along with this practice exploiting a particular universe to death (sometimes literally), but for readers who (like me) prefer the variety of stand-alone novels rather than committing to a series, this is a nuisance.

In a recent conversation with friends in the Catalan SF circuit, some were commenting on how by the time the following volume appears you have forgotten what the previous one was about, supposing you're lucky and the author does not leave you hanging out dry, as George R.R. Martin has done. Like my friends, I have passed on countless novels that have a continuation or have decided to wait until the series is over, which may be less exciting but makes more sense to me as a reader (also, increasingly, as a TV viewer of series). In the case of *Harry Potter*, I caught the series half-way, in the fifth volume, with two more to go, and once Rowling was done, I read it again, head to toe; this is when I really enjoyed her series. I am well aware that many readers, particularly of fantasy, love long series but, let me stress it, this is not my cup of tea.

I mentioned in my other post on *The Expanse* that I'm preparing a book on SF and masculinities and let me tell you that as far as research and teaching are concerned series are a major problem. My book will have fifteen shortish (6000 words) chapters, but covers fifty main novels because I need to consider series and trilogies in most cases. Choosing the novels has been quite a nightmare because I've had to read twice as many novels until I chose my final list. This has taken many, many, many hours along the last two years, whereas in comparison for my latest book (*American Masculinities in Contemporary Documentary Film: Up Close behind the Mask*, forthcoming) I have spent about 200 hours watching documentaries.

I do know that novelists do not think of researchers or teachers but of readers who want to be entertained for as long as possible when writing, yet what I'm saying here is that research and teaching are limited by time constraints and we might end up with a vision of genre fiction limited to the stand-alone novels which has little to do with its reality. I have taught *Harry Potter* to a class of students already familiar with the heptalogy, but if I were to teach a semestral course on newer SF or fantasy, the current popularity of the series would be a problem, for I cannot fit more than five books into a semester (around 1500 pages at the most). I could not, for instance, teach *The Expanse*, nor propose to a student that they write a BA or MA dissertation on it; I could perhaps suggest that it could be material for a chapter in a PhD dissertation, as it will be the subject for a chapter in my book but even so, nine novels are a lot. The last PhD dissertation I have read was based on just eight.

Specifically, the nine novels by James S.A. Corey (penname of Daniel Abraham and Ty Franck) are 4941 pages long: *Leviathan Wakes* (561), *Caliban's War* (595), *Abbadon's Gate* (539), *Cibola Burn* (581), *Nemesis Games* (530), *Babylon's Ashes* (536), *Persepolis Rising* (549), *Tiamat's Rage* (531) and *Leviathan Falls* (519), to which you need to add *Memory's Legion*, the volume of associated short fiction (422), with a total

of 5363 pages. I'm not writing here as a 'common reader', following Virginia Woolf's label, but as an academic making decisions to use her time for a particular project. As I commented before, I read the first *Expanse* novel when looking for works to analyze in my book and didn't like it, but, going through countless readers' comments in GoodReads, I realized that I could not discuss SF and masculinity without a chapter on Captain Holden, the Quixotic holy fool. So, I bought the books (112 euros invested on just one chapter), and braced myself.

I usually re-read the books I write about twice at least, if not three times, but I just can't read ten volumes twice (well, I have read the first novel twice). This has been a real challenge in terms of how to make notes because I had to track everything the authors said about Holden while making sense of the plot. Fortunately for me, this is an action-driven series and the authors very generously summarize every now and then what has happened and how Holden has participated in the events, but even so I will end up with lots and lots of quotations, and notes. Possibly 25000 words.

I have spent about six weeks reading no other books but *The Expanse*, pencil in hand, some days for one hour, others for six hours, all the time thinking 'this is about Holden and I need as few quotations as possible, for my chapter is only 6000 words long'. For a stand-alone novel of 500 odd pages I would normally make a note of perhaps 50 passages, take 100 notes, and go deep into it. Here I have mostly limited myself to about twelve passages each novel, but I still have to deal with 108 passages in total (more or less), when I have room for perhaps ten in the chapter. Yes, I have thought of using all the time I have spent reading, and the note-taking and so on, to write other articles, though at this point I think I should write a companion…

My reading of *The Expanse* has been so intensive and immersive that it has taken me a week to go back to reading other books (and I am a person who reads every day). I have read so far essays, but I just can't read novels yet. Have I enjoyed myself? Yes, immensely. Once I got past the first book, it's been great fun (isn't that the point of academic life?). The authors are very clever people and they write shortish chapters, between ten and fifteen pages, which keep you reading (one more, just one more…). Also, they focalize the chapters through a variety of characters, avoiding both omniscience and a first person point of view (they call it 'close third'), and this contributes to the reader's enjoyment. The plot has very little that is new and it's even at some points both pulpish and clichéd but I appreciate that the authors have made an effort to keep the pot boiling very nicely for so many thousands of pages. The hardest part of reading *The Expanse* has been combining its planetary wars and megalomaniac villains with the real-life events of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. At some points Vladimir Putin and villain Winston Duarte seemed to be the same madman, three centuries apart.

Now I know a lot about James Holden but here comes my next problem: how do I make sense of that knowledge in 6000 words, including at least fifteen secondary sources? I have decided to finish making notes and taking quotations and then write a draft without looking at them, see what my minds thinks is important or trivial. It's funny how I can summarize 5363 pages in 25 words (it's a story about how the manipulation of dangerous alien technology threatens human apocalypse when another alien species, who exterminated the original aliens, gets angry) but feel unable to analyze the protagonist in under 6000 words. I'm, by the way, the kind of literary scholar who truly enjoys commenting on texts, rather than paying homage to literary theory, which means that right now I feel very frustrated that I cannot show in all its extension how thoroughly James S.A. Corey characterizes Holden. I think I have found a pattern in how his girlfriend Naomi Nagata reacts to his bouts of Quixotic heroism (she's mostly angry), and hopefully this will give me the key to the chapter. As for the rest of the chapters in my book, I feel now that if I can manage to comment on ten books in one chapter, the rest will be as we

say in Spanish "pan comido" ("eaten bread"). This is, by the way, the reason I have decided to begin with *The Expanse*.

In short, it has been my intention in this post to, on the one hand, comment on the problem that (print) genre fiction series suppose for research and teaching and, on the other hand, encourage researchers to work on them. I cannot teach *The Expanse*, due to time constraints and the amount of reading students are willing to accept, but I can write about it, and I intend to do so. It is being a singular experience, but I have enjoyed my time in the company of James Holden and his *Rocinante*'s crew, perhaps because he is a Quixotic character and what we do keeping alive literary studies today is likewise Quixotic. So, thank you James S.A. Corey, may we find a way to reach other stars and free humankind from all inner and outer threats.

## 21 November 2022 / CHRONICLING THE DEATH OF LITERARY CRITICISM: THE WOMEN WRITERS THE MEDIA DO NOT REVIEW

Back in August I wrote a post called "Chronicling the Death of Literature (II): The Writer as Influencer" in which I referred mainly to top-selling American author Colleen Hoover as the main example of the writer who succeeds despite lacking the support of the conventional media and thanks to the social media. I return to this topic today inspired by an article published a few days ago in *El País* by Begoña Gómez Ursáiz, "Las autoras hiperventas que apenas salen en los medios de comunicación" [The hiper-selling women authors who hardly ever appear in the media]. This is illustrated with portraits of Elísabet Benavent, Luz Gabás, Alice Kellen and Megan Maxwell, the top-selling women Spanish authors (Kellen and Maxwell are pennames).

The subtitle of the article is "The hierarchies already smashed decades ago in the world of music and cinema persist in the book world, where a system prevails that keeps segregated best-sellers from literary fiction" (my translation). There is a lot to unpack in this sentence. Gómez Ursáiz means that quality publications (newspapers, magazines) routinely review popular cinema and music, so that nobody is surprised if a superhero movie or Taylor Swift's newest album are reviewed. Reviewing is not limited, certainly, as it used to be decades ago, to arthouse cinema or classical/cultured music, but this does not mean that the 'hierarchy' is totally gone in all artistic fields. Swift may reap many Grammys, but no summer blockbuster has reaped many Oscars (an award that is becoming increasingly irrelevant because of that). In fact, not even the Grammys are that open: Rosalía lost to Swift in this edition, and was awarded 'only' Latino Grammys. The Queen of Pop is the Queen of Pop, and she is an Anglophone native speaker. When superhero movies are reviewed, I'll add, they don't get the same respect as the latest film by any unknown director from Kazakhstan. I watch religiously La 2's *Días de cine* every Friday and I know what I am talking about. I always end up choosing the films to watch by checking their ratings on IMDB.

Returning to Gómez Ursáiz subtitle, she alludes to the 'system' that keeps best-sellers segregated from literary fiction. This is a classic error of the Spanish media: any best-selling book is automatically assumed to be non-literary commercial fiction, which makes it impossible to explain the high sales of some literary fiction. The journalist actually means that the Spanish media only review literary fiction (of the kind that might win a 'Nacional de Narrativa' or a Nobel prize), whereas genre fiction is generally ignored, with some exceptions mainly constituted by detective fiction and historical novels. In contrast, *The Guardian*, for instance, reviews all types of genres, from the highly literary to children's fiction. For me the problem, then, is not that the Spanish media do not review best-selling fiction but that their literary critics do not know how to review genre fiction.

Gómez Ursáiz misses reviews of, in essence, romance fiction; I miss reviews of science fiction and, in general, a capacity to explain why particular books succeed.

So, the gist of the matter is that the Spanish top-selling women writers are not being reviewed in the media because of the genres they practice and not really because they are women, as the journalist hints. Their best-selling male peers are reviewed because they usually practice genres that have passed the media's snobbish cut, though my impression is that the men who write romance or YA fiction face similar problems (I'm thinking here of John Green). Gómez Ursáiz seems convinced that there is a prejudice against Benavent, Gabás, Kellen, Maxwell and others because they are women writing for women and practising genres usually addressed to women, but although I do acknowledge that misogyny is part of the problem, I think that she fails to exert any critical judgement on their work. The more critical attention popular fiction accrues, the better its prose becomes, as it is known from the cases of detective fiction, historical fiction, fantasy, the gothic, and so on. The misogynistic prejudice has prevented much YA and romance from being taken seriously as objects of review, which means that nobody has pointed out to writers or readers how these novels could be improved. The writers, of course, do not work with an eye on the reviews (which usually makes authors take care of their standards) but to please an audience guided only by popular taste. And they are pleased indeed.

Here I sound as horrifyingly snobbish as *Babelia*'s critic Domingo Ródenas de Moya, a professor of Literature at Universitat Pompeu Fabra in Barcelona, whose opinions, quoted in Gómez Ursáiz's article are rather alarming. According to him, culture supplements in newspapers have the mission to guide demanding readers and, so, if these readers come across a review of a novel by, for instance, Elísabet Benavent, they might wrongly assume "this is literature, and in my opinion it is not. Those books must be dealt in the pages of newspapers as what they are, phenomena of cultural sociology". This means that only the sociologist can explain the success of Benavent, Gabás, Kellen or Maxwell, when it is really up to us, academic literary critics, to do our job and explain why certain genres attract readers, what kinds of readers they are and whether they apply any critical judgement to what they read. My main worry is how critics defending Ródenas's same position have failed to educate the reading public for them to demand more sophisticated prose, though perhaps the case is that very few people read *Babelia* and similar supplements. For me, the main problem is not at all what the authors narrate but how they narrate it. I did try to read Gabás's *Palmeras en la nieve* but although I cared very much for her plot, I couldn't stand her corny prose.

I have narrated here, however, my own problems to read *Moby Dick*, and I'd like to approach the issue I am discussing from this other angle: form. Naturally, when we read we pay attention simultaneously to two aspects: content and form. If the content is exciting we may accept as readers limitations in form (including style); this is usually the case in the top-selling fiction that literary critics do not review, from your basic formula novel to the authors I have mentioned here. When content and form are balanced, by which I mean that the excitement of reading is not spoiled by bad dialogue or purple prose, then you reach that middlebrow level at which the media start paying attention, whether this is genre fiction or general realist fiction, from Stephen King to Arturo Pérez Reverte, from Hillary Mantel to Sally Rooney. The more demanding literary critics, like Ródenas, are mostly interested, however, in the novels whose form is far more visible than its content; only that explains that Modernist fiction like *Ulysses* still fascinates and that postmodern monstrosities like *Gravity's Rainbow* are considered masterpieces. In *Moby Dick* the form overwhelms the content, which almost kills the joy of reading for the story. In the novels by the women novelists mentioned here all the energy is focused on the storytelling, which far less care for the form. Readers who just don't care too much for form are pleased enough and, it seems, entertained, which is the whole point.

The media literary critics should make a note of this because they are being bypassed by the social media, from which the majority of readers get the information on books. I have mentioned many times here how I check GoodReads before I begin a book, as I read it, and when I finish it. I do write reviews of academic work because I still think that they are necessary, but when it comes to fiction I just think that reading one person's opinion is too limited. GoodReads carries readers' reviews of all types but, on the whole, I find that ratings are reliable. You can be sure that a 4-star book is fine, provided you are interested in the subject matter of the book in question. If you don't like love stories you won't care for a romance novel, no matter how highly valued this is. As for literary fiction, one thing I find is that readers are usually very honest about its merits because they are not thinking of posterity, or the history of literature, but about whether a book is worth reading. Masterpieces I teach in class as the best fiction inherited from the past often receive damning reviews in GoodReads; books that should sink into oblivion are praised to the skies.

So, to conclude, it's funny that newspapers like *El País* reflect on the best-selling women novelists in Spain but still fail to reflect on the increasingly absurd role that newspapers' cultural supplements are playing today, in a world dominated by social media. Correcting Ródenas, what sociologists should examine is how the literary critic of his type still has any authority (or simply power to guide others) in the world of social media. I am not saying that the media and academia should make no effort to judge quality, whatever that means, and offer guidance to as many readers as possible. What I am saying is that we are, and have always been, part of a much larger world of opinion, expressed in sales for centuries and in the social media in the 21st century. Get used to it. And give these novelists a try, they might have something interesting to say even to us, academic snobs.

## 28 November 2022 / ON THE USE OF SECONDARY SOURCES IN LITERARY RESEARCH: HOW FAR BACK CAN WE GO?

When I introduce second-year students to the basics of writing academic papers and they submit their first paper proposal (title, 100-abstract, 3-item valid academic bibliography) I warn them to use only post-1995 bibliography (perhaps I should update that to 21st century bibliography?). As I explain, even though in the paper they can use older sources, they need to show that they are conversant with the most recent developments in their chosen topic. I feel that about thirty years is a generous timespan in that sense, speaking of course as a humanist, not a scientist.

Although by this point students are familiar with bibliography as a concept, and have used the library resources, what is new to them is the idea of engaging as rookie authors of academic papers with the secondary sources. What they discover every year, and so do I, is that a classic may have generated hundreds, even thousands, of academic works but this does not mean that the specific topic they have chosen has been covered in the last twenty-five years or three decades. This happens all the time because literary research follows, as we know, fashions. Besides, from the 1990s onward it has been dominated by theory, which has almost managed to kill actual criticism based on close reading and textual evidence—what we teach students to produce at this stage.

I'm thinking of my second-year students because I have started research for a paper on *Great Expectations*, the novel on which they have written their papers in the last ten years or so, as long as I've teaching it. My topic is the lawyer Jaggers and his decision to rob his client Molly, a woman he frees from execution for murder, of his two-year old daughter and then place her in Miss Havisham's home as her adoptive daughter.

I'm interested in how this decision is not only the fulcrum on which the whole plot hinges but also an essential element to characterize Jaggers as a hard man with an unexpected vulnerable spot. Jaggers is not a major character but the scene of Chapter LI in which he acknowledges to Pip how he intervened to find a better home for the little girl who Miss Havisham re-named Estella is crucial. I have found, therefore, sufficient bibliography, though the question is that most of it is pre-1995. I seem to be contradicting my own instructions to students.

Note that I have written the 'question', not the 'problem' since I have managed to find enough relevant 21st century bibliography to complete a list of 25 items, an average amount in current articles for journals (my own record are 50 entries, but I grant that was a bit over the top). My works cited list has ten 21st-century sources but also four 1990s sources, four 1980s sources, four 1970s sources, one from the 1960s, and one from the 1920s (E.M. Forster's classic *Aspects from the Novel*). In fact, I refer to another 1960s source, quoted in a later article. I could find all the sources online in databases, which is both convenient and lovely, except the 1960s source, Andrew Gordon's "Jaggers and the Moral Scheme of *Great Expectations*" (*The Dickensian*, no. 65, 1969, pp. 3–11), though UAB's library found it for me in a database we don't subscribe. I was told initially that this service would cost me 18 euros, though I was happy to finally pay 4'84 euros. Yes, out of my own pocket.

Gordon's article is the inspiration for this post because usually I would have discarded such an old secondary source. Jaggers, however, has not been the object of many academic works (I only found other three articles focused on him), which means that I could not ignore Gordon's essay. Once I read it, however, I became aware of a singular problem: he cites older sources in which Jaggers is mentioned, but it's been a long time since I last saw 1950s sources quoted, and I drew the line at Gordon himself. Incidentally, Gordon's article quotes just from one collective volume and one article, apart from referencing a monograph, which shows how much things have changed regarding the use of secondary sources. My second-year students may use just three sources, but there is no way at all a postgrad or professional researcher can get an article published with even ten sources. Twenty to thirty are expected as a matter of fact.

It would have been lovely to follow the thread, read Gordon's sources and their own sources until reaching the first instance of Jaggers's appearance in a piece of academic literary criticism, but that would be archaeology of a kind nobody practices. This leads me to the question of academic obsolescence but also to the suspicion of whether we researchers might be rediscovering topics already dealt with in much older publications we know nothing about. I assumed from the beginning that Jaggers could have been the object of interest in the remote pre-1990s past because he is the kind of controversial secondary character that attracts attention. I was worried indeed that the ideas I want to develop have been already developed by others and done to death. This is partially the case, as I have found out, but at the time the flow of new research on plot and characterization gives me some leeway to approach Jaggers differently from the most recent author who has discussed him (Tritter in 1997). I will also throw some Masculinities Studies into the mix, for good measure, and see how much I can get out of Jaggers's odd vulnerability before the pretty child Estella was. But, yes, on the whole I am treading old territory as it is almost inevitably the case when dealing with a classic.

At this point, I have no idea about how the peer reviewers will react to what might be read as an old-fashioned bibliography and an old-fashioned approach to *Great Expectations*. Just for us to understand each other, Dickensian scholar Neil Forsyth has gone from publishing an article containing an extremely detailed chronology of events in this novel ("Wonderful Chains: Dickens and Coincidence". *Modern Philology: Critical and Historical Studies in Literature, Medieval Through Contemporary*, vol 83, no. 2, November 1985, pp. 151–165) to pure speculation on "Hands in Dickens: Neuroscience

and Interpretation" (*Dickens Quarterly*, vol. 32, no. 3, September 2015, pp. 211–220). Forsyth's approach is not as heavy-handedly scientific as the title hints but he ends up declaring that a basic knowledge of neuroscience "will not necessarily change our reaction to such passages as those I have been quoting, but it may well make us a little more conscious of the ways we read and react. The neurologists have added a further, physical layer of explanation for our responses to the hands of a skilful, deliberately sensuous writer like Dickens" (220). Perhaps, or not at all and what we still need is what Forsyth used to offer forty years ago: an explanation of how complex novels like *Great Expectations* work as narrative constructions.

Reading Gordon's 1969 article, which is delightful, I find that while we have not really progressed (invoking neuroscience is not progressing), we have lost much in literary research. Many of my peers are telling me they wish they could be more creative, meaning they wish academic literary criticism could shed its robotic pseudo-scientific prose and became more human, more humanistic. I certainly don't write here as I write in my proper academic publications (in fact I started this blog to write with more freedom about academic matters), and reading Gordon's article I have been reminded that there used to be a time when it was possible to offer intelligent judgement of literary works without the cumbersome apparatus of multiple quotations, unintelligible jargon and endless works cited list we use now.

That time, however is gone and, what is worse, many of its treasures buried never to be disinterred again. Unless they are unburied out of sheer necessity, or stubbornness, which is always helpful and enriching. Gordon's writing is certainly illuminated by other much newer sources I am using (Hillary P. Dannenberg's *Coincidence and Counterfactuality: Plotting Time and Space in Narrative Fiction*, University of Nebraska Press, 2008, is just great) but in Wendy Veronica Xin's "Reading for the Plotter" (*New Literary History: A Journal of Theory and Interpretation*, vol. 49, no. 1, Winter 2018, pp. 93–118), Jaggers is not even mentioned in the key section on *Great Expectations*, which would have surprised Gordon since both are more or less saying the same: minor character in whose hands the writer leaves essential plot twists turn out to be the moral centre of novels. Or, perhaps, that's what I'm saying based on their work.

I can imagine one of my second-year students, or even postgrad tutorees, protesting that I am cheating by quoting from a source as old as Gordon's article. My defence, of course, is that I'm combining his work with that of Xin (my most recent source). The venerable journal to which I am the article on Jaggers might respect this combination, but I am not 100% sure that it will. I think that MLA's newer referencing system by which parenthetical references carry no date—(Martín 118) rather than (Martín 2019: 118), for example—helps not to discriminate between old and new secondary sources. Even so, I wonder whether we are committing a certain sin of ageism by considering obsolete the literary criticism published before 1990 (again: blame literary theory for that) by scholars who, poor things, were not aware of postmodern literary criticism.

I'll let you know how things progress and whether my peer reviewers welcome, ignore or condemn the presence of Gordon's article in my works cited list. In the meantime, let me encourage you to dig for secondary sources back beyond 1990s. It's really rewarding.

## 13 December 2022 / MUSINGS ON WOMEN, SCIENCE, AND SCIENCE FICTION: DIVERGING PATHS?

A couple of weeks ago I gave a lecture for a general audience on women and science fiction, which was also the closing session in a course organized by Jordi-Agustí Font at Badalona's Espai Betúlia. I was the only woman lecturer in a series of six sessions and, typically, I was asked to lecture on women, even though, as happens, I am now writing a book on *men* in science fiction. Also typically, the audience for my lecture was significantly lower (I was told) than for the previous sessions (on SF by men), even though the attendees, mostly elderly ladies and gentlemen, were wonderful and asked me very relevant questions.

A doubt I shared with them was whether the section I had included in the lecture on women and science was pertinent at all. I presented a basic overview of women's difficulties to participate in science and be acknowledged, from Ada Lovelace to the last Nobel Prize winners, to argue that women SF writers have the duty to popularize women scientists and engineers as role models for young girls. Science fiction by men has always awakened vocations among young boys, inspiring them to dream of their future careers and I believe that if girls are now showing a diminished interest in STEM degrees this is due to a great extent to the lack of role models. There are indeed many women scientists and engineers but they have a very low visibility in the media news and in fiction in comparison to other types of women, professional or not. My Badalona audience agreed with me: no little girl will ever dream of being a great scientist or engineer if she is not inspired by a successful woman, whether real or fictional.

My argument, however, is quite marginal in the academic field of feminist science fiction, whose latest battles are all focused on identity issues to an extent that seems frankly counterproductive. I attended the same week when I gave my talk the Foundation/University of Glasgow online conference 'When It Changed', which, alluding to Joanna Russ's classic short story, examined to what extent the position of women in SF has improved. I mean in all fields: as readers, scholars, authors and characters. I participated with an incendiary paper (or so I thought) on how the treatment of non-white women SF authors as a special category is damaging their careers and proposing instead that we either stop using racial indicators or use them for all, including white authors, but no scholars seem interested in discussing my concerns. I used as case study Vandana Singh, a brilliant short story writer originally from India who has been working as a scientist for decades in Boston. Singh has asked again and again that her stories be read through the double prism of her scientific interests and her Indian heritage, but her professional background is ignored by most commentators. She is seen, absurdly as I argued, as some kind of South Asian representative imported to fill in a gap in Western (=American) readership.

Technically, Singh writes SFF, that is to say science-fiction fantasy, a clumsy label to describe SF with, well, some elements of fantasy. SFF is now, as I could see from the conference, the preferred genre mix among women readers and writers. The label 'speculative fiction', which author Robert Heinlein offered as an alternative to John W. Campbell's 'science fiction' (itself an improvement on Hugo Gernsback's 'scientifiction'), is now being extended beyond SF. The Routledge Speculative Fiction Series, for instance, advertises itself claiming that it offers studies of "science fiction, fantasy, horror, apocalyptic/post-apocalyptic, utopian/dystopian literatures, and supernatural fiction." I am the first to grant that 'science fiction' is not a very useful label in many cases, and that the 'what if…?' that, according to Darko Suvin, defines a SF plot can be extended beyond that genre into other forms of speculative fiction ('what if… ghosts existed?'). But what makes me quite nervous is a general tendency in women-authored speculative fiction to place magic at the same level as science or above it. There are no women with magical

powers and if we want to empower women we need to give them a far more solid education in the sciences and in engineering. They will not get it, I insist, for as long as teen girls keep on reading fiction in which magic, not science, dominates.

The problem, obviously, is that the course which science has taken is mostly dominated by patriarchal concerns. The planet is being destroyed by the application of a selfish male technoscience that never took into account its impact. Reading these days Andrea Wulf's magnificent volume *The Invention of Nature: Alexander von Humboldt's New World*, it is quite clear that pioneers scientists like von Humboldt already understood in the late 18th century how technoscience was damaging the planet (yes, not all men support patriarchal science). Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) is also a very early warning of how the work of just one male scientist can bring destruction on all *Homo sapiens*. Unfortunately, then, science and technology are now seen as monsters out of control, which possibly explains the ridiculous attitude of the antivaxxers. I had to use Google to recall the names of the wife and husband team that developed Pfizer's miraculous anti-Covid vaccines: Ugur Sahin, 55, and Ozlem Tureci, 53, based in the German city of Mainz. This is not right. They should be immensely popular heroes, household names everyone should be able to recognize.

In short, because of the negative reactions that capitalist corporate technoscience elicits (particularly that in the hands of tech billionaires like the obstreperous Elon Musk), there is not, then, any kind of hero worship for scientists and engineers in current SF by women. Or by men. At least in what I am reading by men I am also finding plenty of technophobia; the main interest, if any, seems to be the adventure that follows from fighting criminal corporations, or interplanetary villains.

The keyword dominating most sessions of the conference I attended was 'indigenous' and, a concept new to me, 'indigenous science'. The corresponding Wikipedia entry, which has a rather long bibliography, explains that indigenous science consists of the "knowledge and experiences" traditionally passed down "orally from generation to generation" and defends the idea that indigenous science "has an empirical basis and has traditionally been used to predict and understand the world." Surely, indigenous science is particularly relevant to redress the environmental damage done by what Wikipedia coyly calls "scientific knowledge" but I do worry very much that it points at an idealized tribal past which has never existed. The concept also erases lines of research which link tradition and modernity in the so-called West. For instance, aspirin was born when chemist Charles Frédéric Gerhardt mixed sodium salicylate, the element in willow bark traditionally used to treat pain, with acetyl chloride thus producing acetylsalicylic acid. On the other hand, the syrup I am taking to cope with my chest cold is 100% plant-based.

There was, in short, no talk of science and technology, apart from allusions to indigenous science, in the conference on women and SF I attended, which I find perplexing, to be honest. Climate change was very much present, but as a sort of dystopian given, not in stories in which women engineers came up with the solution to stop the oncoming disaster (at least not in the papers I attended).

A last caveat goes to the real impact of women's SF and whether, as the conference wondered, things have changed. Everyone in the field is aware that the two major awards, the Hugo (given by the fans) and the Nebula (given by the SF authors themselves) are now mostly in the hands of women, with men being a minority also among the nominees. Cheryl Morgan gave an excellent lecture on the evolution of women's presence in the history of these awards, making the important point that women had been always much more present than we assume, and had won a considerable number of awards in the 1990s. Yet when I asked her how this new visibility of SF women authors translates into sales, her reply was that it doesn't because book distribution is dominated by men from top to bottom, chain to bookstore. Wordsrated's 'Science Fiction

Book Sales Statistics [2022]' is, to say the least, depressing. The ten best-selling SF novels are *Dune* (1966) by Frank Herbert, *1984* (1949) by George Orwell, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (1979) by Douglas Adams, the *Foundation Series* (1942-1993) by Isaac Asimov, *Ender's Game* (1985) by Orson Scott Card, *The Time Machine* (1895) by H.G. Wells, *Cat's Cradle* (1963) by Kurt Vonnegut, *The Martian* (2011) by Andy Weir, *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) by Arthur C. Clarke and *Ready Player One* (2011) by Ernest Cline. Perhaps, if you add the sales of all the SF by women writers you get many volumes sold, but the top 10 remains male, white and old-fashioned.

I'll close my musings by mentioning the wonderful Sara García Alonso, selected by ESA together with Pablo Álvarez Fernández, as the first Spanish candidate astronaut who might travel to the Moon. Sara is one of the 8 women, among 17 astronauts, chosen by ESA in a call that has attracted 25% female candidates, a "big increase", she notes, in relation to the previous call. Sara has an impressive record as a biotechnological cancer researcher and she is indeed the kind of woman who can be a potent role model for girls, a real influencer unlike the vapid women reigning in the social media. I just wonder what kind of SF she saw and read as a little girl that inspired her to want to be an astronaut… and which SF women writers are working on stories with successful women like her as protagonists. Many, I hope.

## 20 December 2022 / THE UNPROFESSIONALIZATION OF WRITING: DWINDLING EARNINGS AND THE FUTURE OF AUTHORS

When I started thinking about today's post, I had a certain feeling of déjà vu. Checking previous posts I found one of January 2014 titled "Underpaid and Overrated Authors: Hierarchical Reading in the Age of Globalization" in which I discussed an article published in *The Guardian* according to which, as the title reads, "Most writers earn less than £600 a year". Today I am considering again the matter of authors' earnings because of an article by Joanne Harris, current Chair of the management committee of the UK Society of Authors apart from being a very well-known author. The article is called "Horribly low pay is pushing out my fellow authors – and yes, that really does matter".

Harris cites a survey by the Authors' Licensing and Collecting Society's (ALCS), the fourth since 2006. This is the subject of another article, by Sarah Shaffi, "Writers' earnings have plummeted – with women, Black and mixed race authors worst hit". According to the ALCS's report (actually carried out by the UK Copyright and Creative Economy Research Centre, CREATe, based at the University of Glasgow), British "professional authors are earning a median of just £7,000 a year", which suggests that the word 'professional' is becoming an oxymoron. The ALCS has painted accordingly a bleak picture by which writing might become "the preserve of the privileged". Shaffi's article notes that there has been a drop of 33% in writers' earnings since 2018, and of 43% since 2007, "when the median income was £12,330," still too low to guarantee a reasonable standard of living.

In her article, Harris speaks of writers being subjected to the vagaries of luck once they publish their books, in an erratic market which favours big names over newcomers. The figures indicate that 10% authors (guess their names) receive 47% of all earnings. Harris warns that "We need to start seeing contracts with fair payment, higher advances, better payment terms, better control of rights and clearer accounting, as we've called for in the Society of Authors' Creator campaign". In the article by Shaffi, Nicola Solomon, chief executive of the Society, refers with bitterness to publishers' boasting "record profits" while writers struggle to earn "a living wage." It seems, then, that the root of the

conflict is the approach of publishers to writing as a generator of big hits rather than a sustainable market for all authors.

The ALCS report, Sarah Shaffi informs, "also found a gender pay gap of 41.4% between men and women", with female authors' earning diminishing faster than men's. Likewise, Black and mixed race authors earn far less than white authors, and "experience steeper losses year to year". All this constitutes a harsh reality check against the optimistic impression that awards and progressive scholarship are producing in relation to an increasingly inclusive book market. I am returning to the point I made in my previous post about how women's current dominance of awards in the SF field is not resulting in an upheaval in sales, still very much dominated by traditional white male authors.

It all possibly boils down to how much money readers have in their pockets, which is considerably less than before the 2008 crisis. In a pre-crisis context, many readers, including myself, would regularly go to bookshops and spend money on lesser known books in a sort of fun gamble. I used to go to Gigamesh here in Barcelona and return home with a bag full of SF paperbacks cheap enough to try my luck with no qualms. In a post-2008 crisis, we are all more careful with our money. Readers who buy very few books a year have started buying even fewer (perhaps just one book for Sant Jordi, our local Book Day). Readers who read frequently have started using libraries more often and, yes, downloading books illegally. As we all know, one thing are sales and quite another how many times a book is read by legal or illegal means. In short, the very high sales of the top 10% are easy to explain: readers prefer spending money on safe choices. I don't think that the lower sales of the 90% writers outside the top have anything to do with their gender or race, but with readers' increasing reluctance to spend money on books they are less familiar with.

Concerns about the devaluation of creative work are widespread too in other artistic areas, from music to photography. I don't know what the situation is in the world of art, in which the unique object still dominates and copies are seen as frauds, but all the cultural products that can circulate as illegally downloadable copies have seen their markets drastically diminished. Platform subscription may have decreased piracy but it is not helping authors to earn what they deserve (I'm thinking here of Spotify). It has, besides, killed the sales of CDs or, for films, of DVDs. Subscription platforms for books have not really taken off, perhaps with the exception of Audible for audiobooks, but that might also be a factor for the future of authorship. Additionally, it is clear to all concerned that, whether we work for a small independent press or a corporate behemoth, we authors are still trapped by business conventions absolutely exploitative. That authors receive between 8 and 10% for royalties is, simply, disgraceful. It is clear to me that authors should always make more money than their publishers but the possible solution to that problem, the dream by which each author would directly sell their books through their websites, has never materialized. Even self-published authors put their work in the hands of Amazon, where it is not really more likely to be noticed than on their own website.

Perhaps, and this is just an unsettling thought, the book market is not big enough to guarantee the professionalization of most writers. Authors appear to be trapped between the publishers' expectations of profit and the readers' lack of funds to invest on purchasing books, but perhaps their median income is so low because the market is saturated. For writers to earn a middle-class income, which is, arguably, what most authors expect seeing their more successful peers, the market should have to grow. Publishers will logically resist offering better contracts unless the market grows, but reading is not right now the kind of activity that can attract more persons. Reading will not expand among the adult population (it did expand during lockdown), and the young appear to be interested in the genres aimed at them (YA fiction) but not in reading *per se*. In fact, the only cultural industry that is still fast growing are videogames, with gamers

now found in all demographics below sixty. Maybe aspiring authors should consider starting careers as videogame writers.

Something that puzzles me in the two articles I am commenting on is what I can only call a sense of entitlement relative to language. Authors who write in English (or Spanish, or Mandarin) may aspire to professionalization because their language is spoken by hundreds of millions. Matters are very different for authors writing in other languages, with just a handful of millions or fewer. In the Catalan-language area, with about 10 million speakers, there are very few professional writers even though the book market is lively enough. Iceland, with a population of just 372,295 (2021) publishes 1500 titles a year in Icelandic, which is simply amazing, though I doubt that any of its writers are full-time professionals. In contrast, I have met young British writers who had abandoned less glamorous occupations the moment their first book had sold past 50,000 copies. This, which appears to be immensely successful, might not be enough, however, to sustain a long career in such a volatile book market. My assumption is that a Catalan, or an Icelandic writer, would keep their breadwinning jobs and be less keen on professionalization.

We need to wonder, too, whether professionalization is a desirable goal. Obviously, anyone with a strong vocation will argue that nobody can be a ballerina or a sculptor part time, and that, ideally, a talented person should be able to use all their time in the pursuit of their art. I happen to be quite sceptical of this claim in relation to writing. There are countless examples of writers who have produced high quality work while working eight hours a day in another profession. Just to name two, Anthony Trollope was a mail service inspector, Philip Larkin was a librarian. A truly vocational writer, like a truly vocational reader, finds time for books. If the books an author writes make enough money to free them from employment in another profession that is great, but authors also need to be realistic and not expect their writing to be a means to make a living.

Each author works for a particular market and must know the rules of that market. Nobody that publishes academic books would dream of quitting teaching for full-time employment as a writer in that genre because our market is tiny and our profits next to non-existent (I wish I made £7,000 a year, or even £600!). Novelists work for a much larger market but even so few can support themselves by writing novels, so why should any of them suppose that their earnings should be enough for a living? Perhaps they have joined the book market expecting to be the next Stephen King, but being so successful will only happen to 1% of all novelists. King also did his share of humble jobs, by the way, before becoming the King we know today.

To sum up: yes, the book market needs to grow (it can grow indeed if reading becomes as fashionable as playing videogames) and yes, authors should be earning much more thanks to better contracts. However, authors need to be realistic and understand that their market (our market) is rather small and much overcrowded, taking into account besides that the number of readers is not really growing and that they are much poorer than they were in 2008. I am not telling authors, young or old, that they should quit writing. I'm arguing that they should not approach writing as a full-time profession but as a complementary activity, as it has been for many other writers in the past. This is realistic. A vision of the profession in which most authors make, say, £50,000 a year is not. The book market has never operated in that way and it never will – except for that lucky 10% at the top.

## 23 December 2022 / READING JAN MORRIS'S *CONUMDRUM* (1972): THOUGHTS ON CISGENDERISM

Writing about transgenderism being a cisgender person is always complicated and a potential minefield. Today (22 December), however, the Spanish Parliament will presumably pass the new "Ley para la igualdad real y efectiva de las personas trans y para la garantía de los derechos de las personas LGTBI", simply known as "Ley Trans", which Minister for Equality Irene Montero has promoted, and this seems a good moment to consider matters. The new law, as we know, has divided Spanish feminism into a pro-trans and a TERF front, but since I do not know its text sufficiently I don't have an opinion to express. I believe in the defence of personal rights, but I see that in some fields (such as sports) there are matters to solve given the obvious biological differences between trans and cisgender women.

The inspiration for my post today is plain curiosity. I have had so far two trans students but as a teacher it would have been totally improper for me to ask them how they knew their body did not match their gender, as it would be equally inadequate to ask an LGTBI+ student (or any student) a personal question to satisfy my curiosity. This is what memoirs and autobiographies are for and, so, having learned about the amazing story of reputed Welsh journalist and writer Jan Morris, I have read her memoirs *Conundrum* (1972).

What makes Morris's story special is perhaps not so much her own individual experience but her relationship with Elizabeth Tuckniss. Morris, born in 1923, always knew she was a woman but wanted very much to have children, which she could only do as a male. In 1949 she married Tuckniss, who was always aware of her husband's transgenderism, and they parented four children together. Morris presented herself as both male and female for a few years, in her mid-thirties, but decided to transition once the elder kids were in their late teens, undergoing surgery in 1972 (in Casablanca, with the famed Dr. Georges Burou). After Morris legally became Jan, abandoning for good her male dead name, the couple had to divorce, as two women could not be legally married. They, however, maintained their relationship alive and formally entered a civil partnership in 2008, after the UK legalized same-sex unions (though not marriage). In *Conundrum* Jan writes that although she was a heterosexual woman attracted to men, she never considered marrying a man, for "unless some blinding passion intervenes with one or the other of us, [Elizabeth and I] propose to share our lives happily ever after" (Ch 17). Indeed, the two women were buried together and the epitaph engraved on their tombstone reads "Here are two friends, Jan and Elizabeth, at the end of one life". Sadly, there is too little about Elizabeth in Jan's memoirs and, as it seems, she never commented on her singular love story. When Jan writes "With Elizabeth's *loving help* I abandoned the attempt to live on as a male, and took the first steps towards a physical change of sex" (Chapter 11, my italics), the memoir elicits much curiosity hat, regrettably, is never satisfied.

Morris, who died in 2020, re-issued *Conundrum* in 2001 and wrote in the Introduction that although "the years have made some parts of my book seem quaintly anachronistic, they have not in the least altered its fundamental attitudes". She "amended only a few words" for "purely factual" reasons. This is quite surprising. Her publisher should have pointed out to her that many of her comments sound painfully classist, colonialist, racist, homophobic, and even misogynistic. I was astonished particularly by how unaware she is of her own privilege. The memoir begins with the famous sentences "I was three or perhaps four years old when I realized that I had been born into the wrong body, and should really be a girl. I remember the moment well, and it is the earliest memory of my life" (Chapter 1). In this scene the child is beneath her mother's piano, as she plays Sibelius in her comfortable upper-middle class home. Later, when Jan

undergoes surgery, the high fee that Dr. Burou demands is mentioned at least twice (the British public health system offered the operation for free but the surgeon decided at the last moment he would only operate on Jan if she first divorced Elizabeth, which she refused to do then).

In the introduction Jan writes that she always thought of her "conundrum" as "a matter of the spirit, a kind of divine allegory" for which explanations "were not very important anyway". Her story ("Thirty-five years as a male, (…), ten in between, and the rest of my life as me", Chapter 16) is not narrated as a story of liberation but as a story of normalization and it is in that sense if not quite placid (Jan claims she would have killed herself if surgery had not been available) at least devoid of high drama, no doubt because, I insist, as a respected journalist and writer Jan could make a number of choices unavailable to less privileged persons. What is striking to a contemporary reader is how small a part sexuality plays in her experience, to the point that she sees herself as a member of a future asexual avantgarde, and how accepting she is of the subordinated condition of women in the 1970s, when she transitioned, in the middle of the second feminist wave.

I was quite shocked not only by her revelation that she received her first "carnal" kiss as a woman from a male taxi driver who, in essence, sexually assaulted her, but also by passages like this one: "Men treated me more and more as a junior (…); and so, addressed every day of my life as an inferior, involuntarily, month by month I accepted the condition" (Ch 17). This set me thinking of what is quite obvious: transitioning is conditioned by the state of medicine and the understanding of gender at the time when a person decides to undergo this major change. I am sure that Dr. Burou would be very much surprised by how far others have taken his teachings (though so far full biological transitioning is not yet possible), but there is also a vast difference between the patriarchal ideas of womanhood that shaped Jan Morris's transition and how we understand gender today.

*Conundrum*, in any case, got me thinking about how cisgender persons experience gender and, secondarily (or not), sexuality. The question to ask, I think, is not 'how did you know you were a trans person?' but 'how do you know you are a cisgender person?' Jan Morris writes, if you recall, that despite having been born a male she knew by age three or four that she "should really be a girl", which constituted "the earliest memory of my life" (Chapter 1). I challenge any cisgender person to produce a matching memory of knowing that early in life that they were a boy or a girl with no trace of gender dysphoria and in full intuition of how body and gender connect. I don't personally have that kind of memory, just as I don't recall understanding that I am heterosexual. I might in fact argue that I don't know for sure that I am a woman and a heterosexual person because I lack a turning point in my life in which I was aware of my own identity and knew about other options, other choices.

I was told by those surrounding me that, given the shape of my genitalia, I was a girl and I was at each point of my childhood told what was right or wrong for a girl, in the patriarchal, sexist circumstances of 1960 and 1970s Spain. Some injunctions never got through (to this day I don't wear make-up except for lipstick and I am very uncomfortable in high-heeled shoes), and I made other choices based on my personality, friends, and education. And body shape, I must stress. I grew up very much confused about why other girls seemed to perform femininity with total ease, whereas I was always having difficulties to look a certain way, attract the boys I was interested in, or think of myself as a future mother. I admired certain types of women but I was always very far from being one of them, and I still am. This is why I am so puzzled that trans persons know with such certainty who they are in gender terms. I am cisgender and I do not yet whether I am truly a woman, though I am a biological female who happens to be heterosexual. Or so I feel.

The new Spanish law will allow trans persons to declare their chosen gender before a judge and make it official, with no need for bodily transitioning. I believe that the law should not interfere in this matter and we should all be free to live our gender as we please. Yet, perhaps it would be necessary for cisgender people to come out as such and also make a formal declaration before the judge for us to understand who we are. The same applies to heterosexuality, a condition most people assume without fully understanding why or what it is (not a tool for the reproduction of the species since many heterosexuals do not wish to have children). It is in that sense totally unfair that the cisgender heterosexuals who make the laws are asking other persons to explain themselves when we cannot explain ourselves except by mumbling that our condition is natural and normative (it is neither). We need to be ready, besides, for that future when medicine will allow individuals to fully transition and to reverse transition, so that, as happens in so many SF novels, persons can be biological mothers and fathers if they wish so at different periods of their lives (yes, I'm thinking of *The Left Hand of Darkness*).

The conundrum that Jan Morris describes, in short, is a conundrum for all gendered persons. We have no idea why we go one way or another in our gender and sexual preferences, despite the abundant research on the influence of chromosomes, hormones, the physiology of the brain, personal psychology and so on. Perhaps subconsciously James Morris wished to be Jan since the age of three because she didn't want to be subjected to the terrible fate of her father, Walter Henry Morris, a man who died (when she was 12), unable to overcome the traumatic experience of being gassed in the First World War. Likewise, there must be a social reason behind the growing numbers of persons who wish to transition, the fact that they are younger than ever and the fact that they are mostly women (though not by a very high percentage). I would say that something is very wrong with the normative cisgender model when so many young persons are uncomfortable with it and willing to risk dangerous extensive bodily modifications to heal that discomfort. According to WHO only between 0'3 and 0'5% of the world's population is trans (about 39 million people), but beyond their numbers what matters is how they are questioning gender models that 95% of the population has so far taken for granted. Time to rethink them, then, and reconsider cisgenderism.

## 4 January 2023 / AGEING MEN IN ACTION CINEMA: A DYING BREED WITH NO REPLACEMENT

My post today is inspired by Daniel Soufi's article for *El País* "Salvar el mundo por no jubilarse: los héroes de más de 60 años llenan las pantallas de cine" [Saving the World to Avoid Retirement: Over-60 Heroes Fill the Cinema Screens]. Soufi wonders why ageing male actors are still playing action heroes and names Will Smith (54), Nicolas Cage (58), Keanu Reeves (58), Brad Pitt (59), Tom Cruise (60), Antonio Banderas (62), Mel Gibson (66), Denzel Washington (68), Liam Neeson (70), Jeff Bridges (73), Sylvester Stallone (76), and Harrison Ford (80) as examples of this peculiar phenomenon. Soufi quotes another journalist, Alberto Olmos, who has invented the label "retromasculinity" to describe a type of nostalgic masculinity that does not fit younger male stars, like Tom Holland or Timothée Chalamet. The nostalgia for this retromasculinity might explain the very long careers of these ageing male stars, a dying breed in almost a literal sense.

Even though the tough female hero is now common, the action movie is a staple of men's cinema that was consolidated in the 1980s with the rise of 'musculinity', to use Yvonne Tasker's word. She and Susan Jeffords were the first to describe how on-screen masculinity was rebuilt in that decade along harder lines, both in behaviour and in bodily appearance, during Ronald Reagan's mandate (1980-88). Soufi names Chuck Norris,

Jean-Claude Van Damme, Sylvester Stallone, Bruce Willis, Steven Seagal and Arnold Schwarzenegger as the type of actor that became then famous for their muscles rather than their acting skills. The display of muscled male anatomies has in fact increased to the point that practically all male actors train in gyms for that shirtless shot that is so much in demand in current films. Yet, it is clear that the muscled male body does not convey today the same impression of relentless masculinity that the 1980s male stars embodied. Perhaps the difference lies in the fact that 1980s action movie actors set a standard, whereas later male actors are imitating that standard without truly believing in it.

Hypermuscled or not, displaying white hairs and wrinkles, the men Soufi names and others above 50 (Vin Diesel and Jason Statham are 55, Dwayne Johnson is 50) are performing physical feats on screen very much outside the range of average men their age. A muscled man in his 30s can be a model for other young men in the audience, but in my view far from being models these ageing action men are becoming pure fantasy even for themselves. I am willing to believe that Keanu Reeves still performs all his stunts, but I very much doubt Harrison Ford has performed any of his in the new *Indiana Jones* film (to be soon released). The effect, in any case, is not so different. Few 50-something men watching Reeves will feel that they could move as swiftly as he does if only they hit the gym; as for the 80-year-old men watching Ford on screen, I must wonder what they feel for I can hardly imagine. The 80-something men in my family are mainly concerned with staying alive; saving the world in an action movie is as fantastic for them as travelling to the Moon. Here's a good joke: Sean Connery was 69 when he played Harrison Ford's father in *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*. Ford was then actually 57, only 12 years younger, but the film's comedy depended on how old Connery was for adventure. Now the hero, as noted, is 80.

If we consider the age gap between Dwayne Johnson and Harrison Ford, we can see there has been a generational renewal in the action movie, which can be extended to the superhero movie, in which even Tom Holland (26) participates, and other young actors. Nobody can deny that Ryan Gosling (42) and Ryan Reynolds (46), and the three Chrises (Evans 41; Pine 42; Hemsworth 39) have consolidated their careers in and outside the action movie, together with a number of other 40-something male actors. They are not, however, as iconic as the 1980s and 1990s actors were, for reasons that are hard to me to explain. I still see myself putting a poster of Keanu Reeves on my office wall (he has always been my man), but why should I put a poster of the Ryans or the Chrises? I believe that Hemsworth is as close as possible to what a charismatic male film star could be, but despite his beauty, nice personality, correct acting skills, sense of humour and great image as a family man, something is missing which prevents him from being the megastar Harrison Ford is in spite of lacking many of his qualities. This is not a matter of whether any of the younger male stars are credible in violent action or superhero movies, for they all are, but an indefinable something else.

Recently reading Paul Newman's fascinating *The Extraordinary Life of an Ordinary Man: A Memoir* I was reminded that male film stars are also constructions whose iconicity is never natural. Newman presents himself as an insecure man who only understood his value as an icon when he met Joanne Woodward. Even so, their apparently successful marriage concealed a long history of alcoholism on his side, which Newman only started overcoming when he hit 50 and freed himself from the weight of the icon 'Paul Newman'. The last male star whose photo found a place in my office, Sam Worthington, in 2009, when *Avatar* was released, seemed to me to have that kind of iconic charisma (also to director James Cameron, who cast him when Worthington was a nobody), but he suddenly faded. In a recent interview, Worthington (now 46) explained that sudden fame made him quickly lose his balance, plunging him into rampant alcoholism and bolstering a sense of entitlement that almost destroyed his career. Only his wife's support saved him. So much for male iconicity, then.

I am thinking that perhaps these ageing male stars are not that happy still being iconic action men, though, surely, they must love the money that goes with it. As Soufi notes, Neeson only became an action man in his 60s, when the brilliant career he had followed after playing the lead in Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993), when he was 41, took that peculiar turn. There is much talk about how difficult it is for ageing female actors to be given interesting roles past 40, but the fact is that this barrier was crossed long ago and we are seeing many women in their 50s and even 70s (Susan Sarandon is 76) playing great roles. My impression, however, is that just as the women are welcome to playing older women provided they still look great, ageing male actors are also being prevented from playing average men their age. That is to say: audiences just don't want to see stories about ageing people on the screen. The young simply reject them, whereas older audiences (call us boomers, if you want) are happy to see ageing men and women provided they don't appear in films about the problems of ageing. The men must look active, the women must look great. This is not at all a fantasy of empowerment but a mixture of nostalgia and fear of one's mortality.

As happens, I love action films with male leads but I cannot sustain any longer my suspension of disbelief when the hero is too old. One line of argumentation suggests that the problem with action films is that the type of white heterosexual masculinity they used to celebrate is now toxic, and, therefore, no younger male actor can play it safely. The sub-genre can only survive, the argument goes, if women play the lead. *Prey* (2022), the latest instalment in the *Predator* franchise, followed that path by casting Native American Amber Midthunder (then 20 though she plays 15-year-old Naru) as the hero fighting the monstrous predator (in a script by two men). I loved the idea of having the extraterrestrial monster clash against Native Americans in the early 18th century, but I did not believe for a second that tiny Naru could fight him alone. That was ridiculous. The film needed to update Arnold Schwarzenneger's iconic macho role in the first *Predator* (1987) but a chanced was missed to have Naru fight the creature together with her male peers. I would have loved to see that kind of collaboration.

To conclude this rambling post, I believe that action films offer good escapist fun though they are indeed in need of renewal, either by casting more charismatic, younger male leads (perhaps non-white, or queer) or following a collaborative model (*Rogue One* comes to mind). No tiny, skinny women please. Funnily, I personally feel uncomfortable watching men past 60 play action roles but I am not sure what other roles these ageing movie male stars should play. Perhaps it is their fault for making limiting careers choices, unlike others like Tom Hanks (66) or Ralph Fiennes (60). I don't know if this is a matter of talent or a matter of the roles they are being offered. As for the younger actors, I believe we need more like the late Chadwick Boseman, a talented man nobody would accuse of embodying toxic masculinity. Clearly, the older generations of action movie male actors are not retiring because they have no rivals among their younger peers, a situation many will celebrate as an end to the reign of white heterosexual masculinity but that I see as a worrying lack of newer, attractive male icons. You may think they are not needed, but I think they are very much necessary if only to prevent the rise of far more toxic alternatives. You all know who I mean.

## 16 January 2023 / NOT RADICAL ENOUGH: PRINCE HARRY'S *SPARE*

Prince Harry's memoirs *Spare* were published only six days ago but it is already difficult to have something new to say about them, given the flood of opinion articles and blog posts that has greeted them. I'll try, though.

I'll begin by noting that I remain flabbergasted by two things: that this man still presents himself as a Prince and a Duke (of Sussex) after renouncing his life as a Royal, and that he insists on being called Prince Harry. I understand that he can be Harry for his friends or family (even though his actual name is Henry, Prince William and King Charles call him Harold and Meghan Haz), but I don't understand that he uses the informal Harry as a Prince. His brother, after all, is Prince William, not Prince Willy. The USA have had Presidents called Bill and Joe, but I take the moniker Prince Harry as an indicator of this man's confusion about whether he wants to be a Royal personage or a plain citizen.

As a memoir, *Spare* has a great title. I didn't know about the concept of the 'heir and the spare', that is to say, the second in the line of succession whose function is as ill-defined as that the Vice-President of the USA unless the officeholder is, somehow, incapacitated. Prince Harry claims that when he was born his father thanked his wife, Princess Diana, for having given him an heir and a spare, one of the cruellest anecdotes in the book. Precisely, as a text intended to build an alternative narrative to the official one presented by the British media and the Palace, *Spare* relies a little bit too much on the anecdote, an effect increased by the media's highlighting of certain passages.

In his interview with James Colbert (which was quite good), Prince Harry insisted that the anecdotes need to be taken into context. Yet, if his intention is to demolish the way the British monarchy currently operates, there should be no room in *Spare* for the (long) anecdote about how his 'todger' got frostnip during a charity trip to the North Pole for which Prince Harry was not well-equipped. The long section on Afghanistan may be relevant to spell out the message that Harry is a regular chap that would have been happy in the military, the career choice he seems to prefer, but even so in many points the narrative is unfocused. I believe that most readers would have preferred a sharper memoir exclusively centred on Megxit, with less detail about Prince Harry's life before he met his future wife. As it is, *Spare* does not truly go into the process by which the couple decided to leave Britain and the Royal family in much depth and, disappointingly, adds few details to what was more or less publicly known.

Overall, the impression is that *Spare* is designed to convince readers that the British Royal family is highly dysfunctional—cold in a very English way—and that, reversing the roles, Meghan Markle, the warm-hearted American, rescued the prince from the ivory tower, paying a high price for it (and for being biracial). Harry himself is not presented as a tragic figure, but as a man who is at a loss about how to live his life apart from the Palace, his bodyguards and the paps (his hate name for the paparazzi) that pester him at all times. Logically, Prince Harry complains throughout *Spare* about the bizarre persecution by the tabloid press of the Royal family, which cost his mother Lady Diana her life, and which no human being should have to endure. Yet, he seems less aware of how odd it is to grow up in the constant presence of bodyguards. I cannot imagine what sense of privacy he, or any other privileged person, has if they are always in need of security.

If being privileged amounts to living in constant fear of being kidnapped or killed, then this is not really privilege, but a strange form of captivity. *Spare*, however, insists on Harry's fear of having no security team nearby, particularly in Canada and the USA, where his different homes have been always at risk of being invaded by prying members of the sensationalist press, whom he presents as a pack of slavering wolves. His two main British tormentors, nicknamed Tweedle Dumb and Tweedle Dumber, turn out to have enriched themselves with the lucrative sales of images that should have always remain private, a point that the raging negative reviews of *Spare* published in the tabloids are, of course, ignoring.

The function of the memoir, then, is not so much to justify Megxit as to describe what it is like to grow in a family in which people don't hug and always in the presence of bodyguards and paparazzi, as Prince Harry tries to convince his readers that he is

overcoming his childhood traumas, among which the main one is the untimely death of his mother in that appalling car crash in Paris, on 31 August 1997. One of the most interesting questions Stephen Colbert asked Harry is how he feels about being older than his mother was when she died, aged 36 (the prince is now 38). Prince Harry replied that there must be some symbolic significance in the fact that he decided to abandon his duties as a Royal aged 36.

Indeed, *Spare* can also be approached as a Freudian text in which Prince Harry closes a long process of mourning lasting twenty-five years by finally coming to terms with the death of his mother. I found the recollection of the night when Prince Charles announced to him Diana's death absolutely chilling, since, if we are to believe Harry, he was left with no comfort from any member of his family for many hours (if not permanently), and then made to walk behind his mother's hearse the next day while processing a loss he could not understand for many years because he never saw his mother's dead body. There are also cheesy moments in which Harry claims that he can feel his mother's ghostly presence at key times and quite a few jabs at current Queen Consort Camilla, whom he refuses to present as an evil stepmother but who emerges as a cunning manipulator bent on marrying Charles and being his Queen. Many children have the experience of seeing their father marry his former mistress after a bitter divorce, but given the very public circumstances it must have been truly difficult for William and Harry to accept Camilla's presence in their lives. It seems quite clear that Harry's hidden rejection of the third person in his parents' marriage is one of the main sources of the indignation expressed in *Spare*.

Prince Harry acknowledges that he was always a bad student, unlike his father, whom he presents as a fine scholar very much interested in History and a man of extensive culture. This is a flaw that has made it necessary for Harry to engage the services of ghost writer, J.R. Moehringer (he earned $1 million for his professional help, lasting for about one year, against Harry's $20 million advance). Moehringer, a Pulitzer Prize winner for his journalism, is well-known for his ghost writing of celebrity memoirs, including tennis champion Andre Agassi's *Open* and Nike co-founder Phil Knight's *Shoe Dog*. He is also the author of *The Tender Bar*, an autobiography adapted into a rather good film by Ben Affleck, in which he narrates how he found comfort as a child in his Uncle Charlie and his barfly friends after his father abandoned his mother.

I assume that the collaboration between Prince Harry and Moehringer is based on hundreds of hours of interviews from which the journalist extracted a draft which the Royal accepted as the closest possible version to what he would have written on his own. There is, however, always less pleasure in reading a ghost-written memoir for obvious reasons: the reader never knows where the presence of the ghost writer is intruding too far into the text. One thing is an editor, who would shape up a text originally written by the memoirist, and quite another a ghost writer who, I assume, acts as editor and author on the basis of interviews. In a way, I would have preferred in this case a collection of interviews (in the style for instance of Mark Salisbury's *Burton on Burton*, on filmmaker Tim Burton) than a memoir in which readers never know which words are truly Harry's. Particularly, because this is a book in which revealing who Prince Harry truly is appears to be primordial.

*Spare* is not radical enough to shake the foundations of the British monarchy and, anyway, as I am seeing these days in newspapers like *The Daily Mail* or *The Daily Mirror*, it has reinforced the (racist) hatred for Harry and Meghan that led them into their peculiar self-exile. When Prince Harry considers why the Royals tolerate the impertinence of the tabloids he speculates that King Charles finds much solace for his battered ego in the moments when he is praised (Charles endured a long history of bullying as a child). Perhaps Harry and Meghan serve as scapegoats to sustain the whole unstable fabric of the British monarchy for it seems clear that, once Elizabeth II is gone, the tabloids could

easily sink Charles and Camilla, William and Kate, if they decided that Republicanism is more convenient.

The situation by which the Royal family puts up with the tabloids for mutual benefit is outrageous but at the same time it seems to, more or less, work. A problem, as I am arguing, is that Harry and Meghan have gone far, but not far enough to dismantle it. If they had renounced all their titles, chosen to live in a far modest home, and had taken regular jobs instead of monetising their private life, they would have gained much respect. Perhaps Harry Wales might even head a new British Republican party and present himself as the future first President of the British Republic (though Oliver Cromwell casts a heavy shadow). As the man signing a book he has not even written, however, Prince Harry is a sort of modern Prince Hamlet, with an Ophelia that often seems closer to Lady Macbeth, if only according to the tabloids. Besides, he is a very rich guy, no matter how penniless he claims to be in *Spare*, which plays against our possible sympathies.

In any case, as a Republican Spaniard, I marvel at this type of Royal memoir. In our case, the one who has chosen self-exile is rogue King Juan Carlos I; the last thing his son King Felipe VI might need is a memoir by him (*Call Me Don Juan…*). It would be interesting, however, to get an insider's look for instance from the former sons-in-law of the emeritus, Jaime de Marichalar or Iñaki Urdangarín. I assume, however, that they are under NDAs in both cases. So, thanks Prince Harry for *Spare*, I hope it sets an example and rocks all monarchies to their core. But, please take the full steps to stop being a Royal, become plain citizen Harry and clarify whether sales of *Spare*, including the juicy advance, will really go to charities as you announced. That would be great and much to your credit.

## 23 January 2023 / THE GRADUAL EROSION OF LITERACY: OF PODCASTS, AUDIOBOOKS, VIDEOS AND CHATBOT GPT

You may have noticed that newspapers have started carrying audio versions of a selection of articles, perhaps in some cases of all their articles. I first noticed this in *La Vanguardia*, which offers the audio version only to its subscribers, considering it a premium service. Obviously, the audio versions are not uploaded for the benefit of blind readers, but as part of changing trends brought on by the increasingly popular podcasts and by a general loss of the ability to read. I have taken a random article with an audio version of 4:16 minutes and it seems to me that scrolling through the whole text possibly takes longer for average readers; yet, it is not clear to me who are the target demographic that newspapers are trying to attract. The young who don't read, perhaps? I wonder.

As for podcasts, of course I see their attractive but I just lack patience to listen. I assume that both podcasts and audiobooks are increasingly popular because they are consumed while listeners multitask, perhaps jogging, on a long commute, or at home doing domestic chores, just as they may listen to music. With age, I have found it increasingly difficult to engage my brain in listening to either music or words while I multitask, to the point that I just don't. I either read books and articles or watch audiovisual products (from YouTube videos to series), activities that keep me fully occupied. I just don't have the patience, either, to sit on the sofa and just listen to music or recorded voices. I fret. So, no podcasts or audiobooks for me. By the way: I have been told several times that I should offer audio versions of each post in this blog but the whole point of my work is inviting people to *read* (besides, I hate the sound of my recorded voice).

Having said that, I have no objection to podcasts and audiobooks being integrated in the Literature class, as long as they don't push printed texts out. Everything can be a

useful resource provided it is well used, and as long as students learn I do not object to any source. A friend told me that her son is not allowed to quote from YouTube videos as a source in his BA dissertation and that seems absurd to me. Of course, most secondary sources in dissertations need to be academic print sources, but why not have audio or video sources? I have myself quoted from interviews available on video, and would quote from podcasts with no problem at all. In fact, one of the beauties of the 21st century is how vast the archive of audio and audiovisual sources is and how well you can get to know living authors and their books. This is so obvious that I am beginning to sound silly. But, as you can see, not all teachers have reached that point perhaps for fear that once you lower the barrier, dissertations will stop using mainly print sources, as they should.

As for audiobooks, I have followed a recent debate on *The Guardian* about whether you can actually claim to have read a book if you have only listened to it. Yes, a bit byzantine. There was a time we have all forgotten when culture was transmitted orally, until writing was invented and, many centuries later, printing. Some participants in the debate argued that listening is by definition a passive exercise, whereas reading is far more active. I would agree with that but please let's recall that most 19th century authors expected to be read aloud, with a main reader thus transmitting the text to a household or other types of audiences (in Cuba a worker would read aloud to their peers in cigar factories).

If Dickens were alive, surely he would record himself the audiobooks of his novels. I have no doubt then that by listening to the audiobook you can claim to have 'read' it, though perhaps we need a new verb for the experience. If, however, my students tell me that they have listened to the audiobook but not read the text, I would grumble; they are still learning English and need to work with the print text. Perhaps the best experience is reading with the audiobook on. I learned that lesson from a dyslexic student who explained to me that was how she had managed to do very well in my Victorian Literature course. In fact, I am going to recommend to my students that they follow her method, which has all the advantages and, as far as I can see, no disadvantages.

To recap, I have argued so far that audio versions of articles, podcasts, audiobooks and videos can be great aids to personal enjoyment and education, and should be used as sources in teaching and in research. I have, however, expressed some doubts about their possible impact on literacy, which is the downside of their popularity.

As happens, my brother told me recently that, although he is not at all a reader, he considers himself well informed about current issues and sufficiently educated. He questioned the need for print textuality, if only on the side of the consumer. By this I mean that people tend to forget that for audiovisual products to exist, there needs to be a script, which is almost always a written text, unless one is improvising. Needless to say, audiobooks are versions of texts; all TV and cinema depend on scripts (and so do most radio shows), and I suppose that many podcasts and YouTube videos also have a certain written basis.

In any case, my brother's views set me thinking about whether reading skills might eventually be lost. In the debate on audiobooks, it was quite clear that many younger users (18-35) lack the ability to read for a minimally long stretch (say 1 hour) but are fine listening for that amount of time or more. I blame this on the stupid decision made at primary education level to delay the age in which children start reading. My mother was taught to read by her own (working-class) father at age four before going to school and she has always been a great reader. I was taught to read at the same age by my school teachers, like all my generation, and I can see that this has worked reasonably well. By age seven most of us could read children's fiction like *Alice in Wonderland* or longer with no problem. Now children start reading around age six or seven, with 'experts' claiming that an earlier start is no guarantee of better literacy (please!). With podcasts being now

extended to that early age, it might well be that, little by little, teachers find it just impossible to consolidate any budding reading skills.

Literacy, of course, refers both to reading and writing, so I need to refer to the main debate these days: whether bots like Chatbot GTP will destroy our current model of university and secondary education. This chatbot, as you probably know by now, can compose acceptable essays of the type we require as home assignments. Students have started cheating by submitting as their own texts 'written' (composed?) by Chatbot GTP, which has led to anxious reactions from educational establishments and authorities in diverse nations. We might have to use again in-class exams (which I abhor) to make sure that the texts we mark are 100% produced by the student we are assessing.

I'll go deeper into this topic in future posts. Here I just need to argue that, although students have always cheated on teachers (it seems that the first market for students' papers authored by someone else opened at Harvard as soon as typewriters were commercialized and personal handwriting no longer identified student authors), the less skilled students are at reading, the more they will use bots to supply deficiencies in research and writing skills. I myself use Word's bot to translate the posts in this blog into Spanish, but this is quite different from feeding Chatbot GTP a few keywords and ask it to write a post I could pass as my own production. As I will warn students on the first day of class the second semester, by using bots you're not cheating on the educational system but depriving yourself of learning the skills you're paying us to teach you.

If, to sum up, reading skills are undermined by rising audio textuality and writing skills are undermined by the misuse of bots, then there is a possibility that, as my brother argued, print textuality becomes residual soon enough. This is, of course, potentially catastrophic if, for whatever reason, apocalypse happens and, in the worst case scenario, electricity is lost. Without going so far, however, writing and reading are still the best possible ways to transmit information, though I would agree that print narrative is not necessarily more enjoyable than audiovisual narrative.

To keep the world going, I am 100% sure about it, we need to improve everyone's literacy. This may include audio and audiovisual literacy (I marvel at how good young persons are at editing video), but we just cannot afford the luxury of losing hard-won reading and writing skills that have emancipated so many from oppression. Look at what the Taliban are doing to Afghan women, if you want an example of the tragic consequences of being deprived of your basic human right to an education. Read and write texts, just don't throw away the best tools to educate yourself and understand the world, hopefully to make it a better place. As a Literature teacher, this is what I need so say.

## 30 January 2023 / POST-APOCALYPSE NOW!: PLAGUES, CLIMATE CHANGE AND ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (IN MANDEL AND KINGSNORTH)

When I wrote the post 'Preparing for Disaster: Reading Post-Apocalyptic Fiction' in 2015, Covid-19 was still almost five years away into the future (the virus broke out in China's city of Wuhan in December 2019, hence its name, but it spread worldwide in early 2020, with a three-month state of alarm and lockdown being declared on 14 March in Spain). I'd like to comment today on how it feels to read post-apocalyptic fiction in 2023, basically to stress how lucky we have been that Covid-19 is only moderately lethal and to remind myself and whatever readers I have that we might suffer at any moment a much worse pandemic. The Spanish authorities have more or less declared the official end of the Covid-19 disaster by allowing us to stop using facemasks on public transport on 7 February. This will put an end to the last restriction still enforced (health centres and

pharmacist's shops are the only exception). Yet, my impression is that this is just the end of one stage on a long road towards a distressing future.

Those who were surprised by the outbreak must have lived on an alternative universe, for Anglophone science-fiction had been narrating a post-plague apocalyptic scenario for many decades, if not centuries (Mary Shelley's apocalyptic novel *The Last Man* was published in 1826). The post-apocalyptic novels I recommended in my 2015 post are not, however, all post-plague; some blame the loss of civilization on nuclear holocaust, climate change or other factors. Here they are again: *After London* (Richard Jefferies, 1885), *The Scarlet Plague* (Jack London, 1912), *Earth Abides* (George R. Stewart, 1949), *I am Legend* (Richard Matheson, 1954), *The Chrysalids* (John Wyndham, 1955), *The Death of Grass/No Blade of Grass* (John Christopher, 1956), *On the Beach* (Nevil Shute, 1957), *Alas, Babylon* (Pat Frank, 1959), *A Canticle for Leibowitz* (Walter M. Miller, Jr., 1960), *The Drowned World* (J.G. Ballard, 1962), *Lucifer's Hammer* (Jerry Pournelle and Larry Niven, 1977), *The Stand* (Stephen King, 1978), *Riddley Walker* (Russell Hoban, 1980), *The Handmaid's Tale* (Margaret Atwood, 1985), *The Children of Men* (PD James, 1992), *The Road* (Cormac McCarthy, 2006), *World War Z* (Max Brooks, 2006), *The Passage* (Justin Cronin, 2010), *Wool* (Hugh Howey, 2011) and *Seveneves* (Neal Stephenson, 2014).

There are other, far more complete lists like the one at LitHub, with fifty novels, including one of the two I want to comment on today: Emily St. John Mandel's acclaimed *Station Eleven* (2014, a winner of the Arthur C. Clarke Award). The other is Paul Kingsnorth's *Alexandria* (2020). Whereas Mandel narrates the consequences of the deadly onslaught of a swine flu virus, originating in the Republic of Georgia, which kills more than 99% of humankind, Kingsnorth mixes an ecological catastrophe with the rise of artificial intelligence. Mandel narrates what life is like twenty years after the collapse, with glimpses into the past of the characters and into the onset of the pandemic, whereas Kingsnorth focuses on a time nine hundred years after an apocalypse that his characters can't recall and treat as a legend associated with Atlantis.

To be honest, I have enjoyed neither novel. I attended Paul Kingsnorth's interview with Karen Madrid in Festival 42 last November, and although the author came across as a likeable guy, I didn't rush to buy his Buckmaster trilogy (*The Wake* 2014, longlisted for The Man Booker Prize; *Beast* 2016, and *Alexandria* 2020) because I mistrust writers who want to give ultra-realistic approaches to the distant past (*The Wake* is set after the Norman invasion) and the distant future. I also mistrust people who, like Kingsnorth, have escaped to the country and cut off themselves from e-mail, the internet, and cellphones. He is in fact co-author of *Uncivilization: The Dark Mountain Manifesto* (2019) with Dougald Hine, which inspired the Dark Mountain Project, that type of post-hippie utopia that can easily veer into fascism.

I read *Alexandria* eventually because it has been selected as the first novel for El Biblionauta's new book club focused on SF translated into Catalan, Club Fahrenheit 451; except for Karen Madrid, the guest in charge of defending the novel, the rest of us were satisfied to have read *Alexandria* but most noted they would have abandoned it if it were not for the book club because it reads as an anti-AI pamphlet rather than fiction. As for Mandel's novel, I have finished it after four attempts, having abandoned it the last time half way into the book. I have actually made the effort because the next novel in the club is Mandel's newest book, *The Sea of Tranquility* (2022), and I really wanted to be done with *Station Eleven*. Both writers, I must note, are literary authors (he is English, she is Canadian) who use science-fictional, dystopian elements, as it is fashionable to do today, rather than genre authors.

As I have noted, in Mandel's novel (the inspiration for an HBO-Max mini-series of 2021) a virus kills off almost all of humankind. Since the incubation period is just a few hours and most patients die in under two days, the collapse of civilization is fast and

sudden. Kirsten, the twenty-eight-year-old protagonist, has very conveniently for Mandel forgotten what happened in the Great Lakes area where the novel is set while she was on the road with her brother in year one. Mandel mentions that humans abandoned cities to survive in small towns, saying little about how exactly they managed that miracle; later in the novel she narrates how an international community of stranded passengers survived in an airport… apparently living off hunting deer. I have never believed for a moment that civilization could survive the brutal collapse *Station Eleven* narrates even though Mandel's novel is, in fact, a sort of softer version of McCarthy's far grittier *The Road*.

As of today (29 January 2023) a total of 6,804,491 Covid-related deaths have been reported to WHO. Even supposing that figure is ten times higher, there are (since November 2022) 8 billion persons on the planet. If a virus caused 7.2 billion deaths (that's 90% of the population) there is no way at all civilization could continue, not even if only 25% of the population died. With Covid-19 work was quickly reorganized between those who still had to provide in-person services and those who could work from home. Even though many died, the provision of essential supplies (power, water, gas, oil) was never halted. If some supermarkets were emptied this was due to panic rather than a failure in the supply chain. Thinking of this while reading Mandel, who seems above all concerned by the disappearance of the Internet following the loss of power, I was overcome by two simultaneous feelings: we were bloody lucky that Covid-19 is not really very lethal and life could go on more or less normally even in lockdown, yet we stupidly forget that the Internet was commercialized around 1995, less than thirty years ago, and that the British managed to build their astonishing Victorian civilization with no electricity except in the last years. So, what collapse are we talking about?

This is more or less the point that Kingsnorth is making with the notion of 'uncivilization': that we could gradually shed superfluous habits and in this way reach a stage which, while not necessarily primitive, might stop climate change. In his novel, set in the Fens of East England, people live a tribal existence in a sub-tropical land (Britain used to be tropical in prehistory), following matriarchal lines and the cult of the Lady. This life, however, is being eroded by Wayland, an artificial intelligence that, apparently, emancipated itself and has become a sort of digital Gaia. Wayland's emissaries, like the post-human K., have the mission of luring tribespeople to Alexandria, a virtual domain where they are promised that immortality awaits. In fact, if I understood the rather vague end correctly, Wayland's plans for the humans are far more sinister, though possibly liberating for the planet.

It's funny how novels like Mandel's annoy me because how poorly they understand life before electricity (and the Internet!) whereas novels like Kingsnorth's irritate me for how they tend to forget how much people suffered before modern medicine emerged. I can very well imagine living an 'uncivilized' life with no cell phones, no Internet, no low-cost international flying, and eating only local food because that was life not too long ago, in the 1980s. But even though Mandel has one of her minor characters act as a doctor when he is only a medic, and worry about the loss of medical schools, only very minor characters suffer pain or die for causes that could be cured today. One of Kingsnorth's characters dies of old age (though it is unclear how old he is), but fear of disease is not a key factor in his novel. This is very important for, after all, modern medicine has managed the feat of producing an anti-Covid-19 vaccine in under one year that has saved many lives, whatever the anti-vaxxers say. If civilization collapses that would be the greatest loss. Not the Internet…

I'll stress my main argument once more: I may not have enjoyed Mandel's *Station Eleven*, but reading it has been a most relevant experience, a reminder that we got lucky with Covid-19 but might not get lucky again. In Kingsnorth's novel the effects of climate change are rounded off by Wayland's devious intervention to, possibly, reboot the planet

with no humans on it. Together, both novels spell out a similar message: civilization as we know it is too fragile to survive catastrophe, whether man-made or not. I never thought back in 2015 that I would actually see a pandemic in my lifetime, perhaps because the 1918 flu seemed so long ago. My impression now is that I will probably see a much worse pandemic and even perhaps an end to current civilization. If this is sudden, as in Mandel's novel, we will not survive. If it is gradual, we might 'uncivilize' and adapt, but, as the news we are seeing these recent weeks suggests, the predecessor of an AI like Wayland might be already waiting for our apocalypse.

I'll re-read this post in eight years (remember I started by referring to a post of 2015?), and, if you and I are still here, I will write an update. I wonder what it will contain. How scary.

## 27 February 2023 / THE OTHER PROCESSES OF WRITING: PROOFREADING AND WRITING AN INDEX

I am finally breaking a silence of four weeks after being snowed under a prodigious mountain of proofreading and being also busy writing indexes, aspects of writing we never discuss. I'm breaking that bad habit here.

I used my time off the classroom in 2022 to work on four volumes to be published in 2023: a collective book co-edited with Isabel Santaulària (*Detoxing Masculinity in Anglophone Literature and Culture: In Search of Good Men*, Palgrave); my self-translation into Spanish of *Masculinity and Patriarchal Villainy in the British Novel: From Hitler to Voldemort* (Routledge) to be issued as *De Hitler a Voldemort: retrato del Villano* (Prensas Universitarias de Zaragoza); my new monograph *American Masculinities in Contemporary Documentary Film: Up Close Behind the Mask* (Routledge) and my Spanish self-translation (*Detrás de la máscara: masculinidades americanas en el documental contemporáneo*, Universitat de València). There is actually a fifth volume, which gathers together a selection of posts from this blog focused on educational matters, *Passionate Professing: The Context and Practice of English Literature* (Universidad de Jaén) but I still haven't got to the proofreading, index-writing stage.

I never planned for five books, that was sheer madness. Actually, I worked on eight last year, if I count the three already online: *Songs of Empowerment: Women in 21st century Popular Music* (collecting my students' work), *Entre muchos mundos: en torno a la ciencia ficción* (the collection of my articles on SF, also self-translated) and the twelfth annual volume of this blog. As happens I just had a hyper-productive year, never to be repeated again—nothing like keeping yourself busy to cope with complex personal issues. I had scheduled the proofreading and index writing of the five print volumes over a two-month period, but I finally found myself going through four of the books in just one month while I also started teaching a new semester after an accidental sabbatical of fourteen months. It's been hectic, to say the least, though also highly unusual. Never again, as I say.

One thing, as we know, is writing a text and quite another seeing it in print, a process that takes (at least in my experience) a minimum of one year, if not two in some cases. Both journals and book publishers demand that manuscripts be handed in fully edited following scrupulously the rules they prefer, whether these are their own or those of MLA or other conventions. Often, editors and authors are asked to hand in print-ready texts, a work we do for free and that is never compensated in any way. I don't quite understand, besides, the process through which the Word document we hand in eventually becomes the .pdf we proofread and I understand even less why errors creep in during that process, apart from our own typos and glaring mistakes.

What I do know is that whereas the proofreading of an article or a chapter is not that problematic given the limited extension of that type of text whole books are another kettle of fish. No matter how many times you go through the text accidents are bound to happen when reading 250 or 300 pages with varying degrees of attention along several days (I marvel at the capacity for concentration professional copy editors possess). Some errors are never discovered, others shame the author whenever s/he needs to read the book again and a third category will inevitably appear no matter how strongly the author demands they are corrected. All authors have the right and the duty to proofread their texts but there is nothing more excruciating than reading your own words: you may miss painful errors out of pure familiarity with your text, which blinds you to mistakes others may spot. Yet, if you trust someone else to proofread your text, from loving spouse to professional copy editor, they are bound to introduce other errors. I marvel whenever I read books with no errors at all, and so should every reader.

The pains of proofreading are nothing however in comparison to the odious task of writing an index. Word has a function which allows you to select words for the index and links them automatically to the page number. But since page numbering may vary wildly from Word manuscript to the pre-print .pdf version of a book, authors can only hand in a fully finished index (in a separate Word file) when the .pdf proofreading is over. I have myself written the index for the four volumes I have mentioned though in one case I have been spared the tedious task of checking where in the .pdf each item mentioned can be found. This painful process, as I have experienced, can take longer than proofreading.

For those of you who have never paid attention, the index is that list at the end of the volume where names, titles and concepts dealt with in the book can be found, with the corresponding pages where they appear. You might think that writing an index is quite an automatic task, but it is not. You need to put yourself in the shoes of the person who checks your book rather than read through it to see where you mention something that might interest them. One simple option is to include every author and title discussed (I refer here to literary or film criticism), with the doubt of whether any one will ever be interested in something you mention just in passing.

The problem begins when you decide to include concepts. The basic rule is that you do not include in the index concepts that occupy a whole chapter and that the reader can locate checking the table of contents. Yet, this is not that simple because you might have, for instance, a chapter on metaphor and then also discuss metaphor in other chapters; your reader needs to know that. In my case what has driven me crazy is the need to specify in, for instance, my book about villainy where exactly the word appears and which adjectives accompany it (patriarchal villainy, female villainy). You might say that the main topic of a book should not appear in the index, but someone might need to check whether I refer in my book to Nazi villainy or to collective villainy.

The funny thing about the index is that nobody really checks that it works fine. Publishers seem to assume it does, at least I don't think anyone has double-checked my own indexes. Whenever I myself have used an index it has mostly worked. Nonetheless, we all have the experience of hoping that the presence of a certain item in the index will lead to a substantial comment in the main text only to have those hopes dashed with a cursory remark which is basically useless for our own ends. We are all guilty of that crime when writing indexes as inclusive as possible.

There has been a certain debate about whether indexes should appear in e-books since e-book readers have a search function. However, all the e-books I read still carry the index of the print versions, possibly because it is easier to keep it than to suppress it. I feel happy when I find myself reading a long book and I realize that the final pages are just an index that can be skipped. At the same time an index tells you a lot about how a book functions and perhaps they should be read before the first page is read. Writing my

own indexes I have learned plenty about how I organize my own thinking. This is why it is always a good idea to write your own indexes rather than delegate that task to someone else as many scholars do. It also helps to spot typos and errors (it might well be you misspelled a name or a title in the text which you included in the index).

I have great admiration for what English author J.G. Ballard (1930-2009) did in his short story "The Index" (1977), published in his collection *War Fever*. An editor's note informs readers that "the text printed below is the index to the unpublished and perhaps suppressed autobiography of a man who may well have been one of the most remarkable figures of the twentieth century", the utterly fictional Henry Rhodes Hamilton. Ballard manages to narrate through the index (which does include an entry for Hamilton himself) a life full of encounters with illustrious persons and of interventions in world-changing events ("Oswald, Lee Harvey, befriended by HRH, 350; inspired by HRH, 354; discusses failure of the Presidency with HRH, 357–61; invites HRH to Dallas, 372"). Happily for him, Ballard did not have to worry whether the pages do check out since the main text is missing. Mike Bonsall did write Hamilton's autobiography using Ballard's index, though he cheated plenty by redacting most of it.

Please, appreciate the small miracle that a perfectly proofread text is and enjoy the beauty of a well-built index, both are also part of good writing.

## 5 March 2023 / GUIDING READERS: THE HARD TASK OF WRITING A REFERENCE BOOK FOR A LITERARY GENRE

This post was going to be a formal review of a recent book for the *SFRA Review*. However, I eventually decided that I could not submit a text of this nature without fully reading the book in question, a task I found impossible to fulfil. Not because the book was not good enough (it is in fact *very good*) but because I felt overwhelmed. I refer to Rachel S. Cordasco's *Out of This World: Speculative Fiction in Translation from the Cold War to the New Millennium* (University of Illinois Press, 2021).

Cordasco, a US-Italian reviewer and translator, has been running the website Speculative Fiction in Translation since 2016 because "Speculative fiction offers us a unique perspective on the different peoples who call this planet home, and translation is itself a way of turning the alien into the familiar". Her website continues the work done by Israeli SF author Lavie Tidhar in the World SF blog (2009-2013), which he started "partly as an excuse to promote my then-forthcoming anthology of international speculative fiction, The Apex Book of World SF—but mostly out of what can only be described as an ideological drive, a desire to highlight and promote voices seldom heard in genre fiction". The impact of English-language original SF is overwhelming (in this and in most genres), and both Cordasco and Tidhar set out to try to offer a more panoramic vision. Cordasco's website has reviews, interviews, and, most interestingly the section 'SFT Source Language Lists', which offers constantly updated bibliographies of SF translated into English from 57 languages. This is a truly formidable task and I marvel that a woman alone can carry it out, even assuming she has collaborators.

The lists are the origin of the book *Out of This World*, which offers chapters for 14 of these 57 languages: Arabic, Chinese, Czech, Finnish, French, German, Hebrew, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Polish, Russian, Spanish and Swedish. These are the languages with a minimum of ten volume-length texts translated into English. In the Introduction Cordasco herself presents her volume as a reference volume and a guide, and warns that she is extending the field covered in her website to speculative fiction (rather than only SF), fantasy and horror. Each chapter has an introduction by a guest writer from the linguistic area introduced, who briefly surveys the history of SF, fantasy and horror in

their language. This is followed by a second survey by Cordasco of the texts translated into English, briefly describing their contents. Finally, each chapter offers a bibliography of translated primary sources in chronological order by original publication date, notes and a bibliography of secondary sources. I managed to read in full about five chapters, underlining interesting passages in the introduction, until I gave up in despair, unable to go on absorbing so much information. I did read all the introductions, though.

Cordasco's volume, I insist, is a gem, and I cannot praise it sufficiently. But at the same time I don't know what to do with it. To begin with, I had doubts about whether her online SFT Source Language Lists fulfil the same purpose better. They don't because the lists don't have an introduction or comments on each of the texts like the chapters in her book, being pure bibliography. Yet, whenever I come across a reference volume I am mystified by our persistence to publish as print or digital books what should be online resources, perhaps databases. Cordasco insists that her purpose is to help and guide Anglophone readers curious about how their favourite genres work in other languages, though, of course, she is also helping non-native readers of English to reach other SF traditions. In the end, however, I did not add any volumes presented in her book to my reading wish lists because, as I have mentioned, I felt overwhelmed. I suppose that Cordasco wants us to check her volume whenever we feel like reading something different rather than read the book from beginning to end, just as nobody (or almost) reads dictionaries. In that case, though, I just prefer a website, it seems to me more user-friendly.

I'm writing this post at a time when I am considering with my UAB colleague Víctor Martínez-Gil how to produce a history and guide for Catalan speculative fiction. There are countless reviews and a magnificent bibliography by Antoni Munné-Jordà, but not really a history. The volume by journalist Sebastià Roig *El futur dels nostres avis* (2012) covers the birth of the genre in Catalan and its history until 1939, when Franco's appalling regime essentially banned all publications in Catalan (which timidly resurfaced about one decade later). Víctor and I edited last year a monographic issue for the *Catalan Review* (36.1) aimed at guiding interested readers into the work by a few outstanding contemporary SF Catalan authors: Munné-Jordà himself, Jordi de Manuel, Montserrat Galícia, Juan Lluís Lluís, Carme Torras, Marc Pastor, and Enric Herce. We took the chance then to write the introductory article "Present i futur de la ciència ficció catalana" (45-57), which should be a draft of the volume we want to see published.

Yet, the moment Víctor has started organizing a possible structure for that volume we have seen the many difficulties that lie in our path, from the lack of sufficient academic contributors to the problem of how to turn a history/guide into an engaging, readable book. It might seem that the solution lies at some point between David Pringle's popular *Science Fiction: The 100 Best Novels*, a Bible for many neophyte readers (like Miquel Barceló's *Ciencia ficción: guía de lectura*), and *Historia de la ciencia ficción en la cultura española*, coordinated by Teresa López-Pellisa, another book I found both fascinating and overwhelming like Cordasco's. The problem, I insist, is that reference books are not reader-friendly and, arguably, cannot be so because of their very nature. In that sense, I find very interesting what the website *Worlds without End* has done with Pringle's book, turning it into the source for a truly user-friendly webpage within the enormous website. Take a look here.

I'll acknowledge that perhaps the problem is that I am no longer doing the homework that reference books involve, though the degree of difficulty they require varies. I don't know how this works for you but although I keep a list of books to be read I have discovered that it needs to be emptied by the time it reaches at most 15 books. Whenever it gets any longer, I lose interest, start procrastinating and end up reading none of the books. In Pringle's case, for instance, I subdivided the 100 books recommended in subsets: I would read five, then months later another five and so on. I

have not covered the whole list, but even though it has taken me many years I have possibly read 80% of the books he highlighted. Cordasco's volume, in contrast, mentions hundreds of books. I could, for instance, pick one book from each of the 14 languages studied but that would be such a tiny sample that it feels ridiculous, particularly because at no point does she or her contributors indicate where to begin. Everything seems equally enticing and this is why I felt overwhelmed.

The inevitable conclusion is that reference and guides need to be reconsidered if they are to offer valuable information without overwhelming the readers they are supposed to help. Taking tiny steps seems better than gobbling up hundreds of pages with countless allusions to supposedly indispensable books. I don't know in the end how my friend Víctor and I should proceed, but at least I know the pitfalls to avoid. As for Cordasco's book, I hope it finds the readers it aims at, and I wish I could meet them, for they must be a fearless bunch.

## 12 March 2023 / TURNING ANXIETY INTO PRODUCTIVE ANGER: A UTOPIAN PROJECT

Nine months ago I published the post "Depression and Anxiety: The Main Academic Keywords Today" and I return today to the topic out of a need to process a situation that is beginning to make me quite angry.

I am going through a personal complicated period, with immediate material causes that are slowly sorting themselves out (not mental issues *per se*), and I asked my local herbalist to provide me with a bottle of passion flower drops. This was first given to me thirty years ago by another sympathetic herbalist as a means to cope with the constant distress that the research and writing of my PhD dissertation produced, funnily not because of my topic (monstrosity!) but because, as a good hypochondriac, I was overwhelmed by the idea that I would fall ill, never finish the thesis and, hence, deprive my life of its meaning. This sounds quite frivolous and silly now but it was a major cause of anxiety at the time, for three long years.

The passion flower did help (perhaps as a placebo, who knows) and, besides, I did not want to take again diazepam, which I was given once when I was a very nervous undergraduate student that would regularly vomit every day I had an exam. Diazepam made me sleepy and confused, which worsened my anxiety, and I haven't taken any chemical tranquilizers manufactured by pharmas until literally two weeks ago when passion flower stopped working and I realized I needed something stronger. The doctor gave me Trankimazin, that is to say, alprazolam, also known as Xanax.

'Welcome to the land of Trankimazin', he said, as he offered to sign sick leave for me, the very last thing I need right now. The doctor saw in his files that I am a teacher and wrongly assumed that teaching is giving me anxiety. Not at all. I just took two pills and decided they were not helping me to solve the problems causing the anxiety, just to face them with a little less reluctance. The passion flower is also back in the medicine cabinet. I'm just fighting my first-world problems thinking of the truly serious problems I could be having, take your pick.

My good doctor wanted to talk further and stopped me as I was leaving to ask me why so many young people are paralyzed by anxiety. Possibly in his early sixties, the doctor told me he had been bullied in school and had gone through other rough patches in his childhood and youth. 'It's just life', he said. 'So', he added, 'why are young people so anxious?' I run the risk of turning this reflection on a generational comparison that will benefit no one, but I too have a lingering suspicion that something is amiss.

Speaking this morning with one of my doctoral students, who suffers from anxiety and has chosen to process it by writing about climate change and anxiety in fiction, she told me that Greta Thunberg embraced activism as a way to cope with her own anxiety. She turned fear and unease into rage, and there she is, mocking the patriarchal monsters giving us so much apprehension, from Donald Trump to Andrew Tate. The many young women who attended worldwide the feminist demonstrations on 8 March, International Women's Day, are also embracing their anti-patriarcal anger and fighting back.

This includes fighting against the neoliberal institutions and interests that are depressing us, painting a view of life which is almost unmanageable. Christianity teaches that life is a vale of tears, a valley of sorrow, meaning that you have to put up with complications as they come, which is, in my view, very valuable teaching (though I am an atheist). The other part, that if you're good and don't complain too much you are rewarded with heaven is fairy-tale nonsense. And, of course, let's not forget that most early Christians were either slaves or poor people who needed comfort for their situation; the rich have always placed the others in the vale of tears while they have enjoyed a different standard of life, pretending to make up for it through charity (Bill Gates, anyone?). Socialism still makes the best of having unveiled this fundamental hypocrisy by asking disenfranchised people to abandon Christian conformism and fight for the right to a share of the good life on Earth, for all, and in equal terms. Feminism is also, as I have noted, another movement aiming at turning women's dissatisfaction into justice right here, right now.

Neoliberalism, in contrast, gives us all and especially the young crippling anxiety, which used to be a general phrase to describe the low moments of life and is now a mental issue. Therapist Jill E. Daino claims that 30% of Americans will suffer "an anxiety disorder in their lifetime", among which crippling anxiety is the worst. Here are the symptoms: "feelings of fear, panic, or a general unsettled feeling; feeling 'on edge'; feeling irritable and even angry; difficulty sleeping; nausea, stomach aches, and digestive upset; dizziness, feeling unsteady; headaches, neck pain, muscle tension; racing thoughts; nightmares; withdrawing from social situations or isolating yourself; excessive sweating; rapid heartbeat; inability to sit still; and tight breathing". I would agree that suffering from all these for a long time and for no specific reason is worrying indeed; give me Xanax, quick! But what kind of robotic human being goes through life remaining immune to any of these symptoms? The kind of normality that emerges from denying that the symptoms are part of life is not human: nobody floats through without nightmares or never missing sleep. The figure is, then, wrong: 100% of humankind does suffer "an anxiety disorder in their lifetime" because this is how life works. The sources of distress cannot be controlled, not even by multibillionaires of the most privileged disposition who also fall mortally ill, lose beloved persons, fall in and out of love, etc.

The very privileged, in any case, do not care for the others' welfare. In fact, the neoliberal position they uphold is that if you're not physically and mentally healthy that is your fault for being a lazy, limited individual, hence the insistence on your duty to exercise until the day you die and be generally happy. Neoliberalism will not, however, do anything to solve the structural causes of ill-health, from the presence of carcinogens in overprocessed food to an economic system that is pushing more and more people into precarious lives threatened by climate change, financial disaster, the rise of AI and so on.

The young have been told by patriarchal neoliberalism that feeling indignant and angry at their ill-treatment is *passé*, a sort of neo-hippy, neo-1968 hangover that needs to be done with. In the absence of the Christian vale of tears and the loss of the fantasy of heaven, the young are being told that youth consists of having fun. If you feel anxiety because you are not that happy, then you are mentally ill and in need of treatment until you become again a Foucauldian docile body (and mind). Just do not complain. At the same time, and this is peculiar, I see posters in my school about experiments in resilience

(to find out whether students have it or not), the basic human quality that has helped humans survive horrors as unspeakable as World War I or the Nazi Holocaust. Or now the war in Ukraine, or do you think Ukrainians are coping thanks to Xanax?

Jessica Klein has described the United States as a bully society in her eponymous book and I would like to extend that label to the patriarchal neoliberal society that is making all of us so anxious about Earth's limited future and, hence, that of the younger generations. I have no doubt that they feel a very real, wholly justified anxiety but I have no doubt either that the younger generations are falling into the neoliberal trap by which anger is presented as an unwanted emotion. I am not speaking here of the anger that Vladimir Putin is now feeling because he cannot occupy Ukraine. I am talking of the constructive anger that led so many women at the turn of the 20th century to demand rights for women, and to the anger that led so many workers to demand that working hours be cut down to eight and weeks to five working days.

The crippling anxiety so many young persons feel is a result of a bullying so intense by neoliberalism that it has become a replacement for life. Individuals may cope with their own distress with therapy, if they can afford it, but where is the 'therapy' for the socials ills that cause that distress? Buried under a mass of fatality that neoliberal patriarchs are using to curb down any general resistance to their rule is the anger all of us should be feeling at their in-your-face disregard for human life.

I don't have a recipe to heal the 20% students in my own university that are officially diagnosed as suffering from mental health issues, but I have a utopian project for them: try to turn your distress into anger against the bullies that have us eating and breathing trash, that don't care whether hospitals are underfunded and migrants drowning in the sea even though we do need them. Don't let yourselves be told climate change is not happening but don't just accept there is no future. You don't feel crippling anxiety coming from your own mind. Your minds are being crippled by neoliberal patriarchal monsters who know that an anxious person is a controllable person. Please, defend yourselves, fight back.

## 21 March 2023 / DETOXING MASCULINITY IN ANGLOPHONE LITERATURE AND CULTURE: IN SEARCH OF GOOD MEN

The title of today's post is that of the volume I have edited together with my dear friend Isabel Santaulària, *Detoxing Masculinity in Anglophone Literature and Culture: In Search of Good Men*. Published a couple of weeks ago, the volume has been in the making for almost three years from conception to publication, a long process during which the image of men has been further deteriorating.

Isabel and I are concerned that patriarchy will never be demolished unless men (and women) are offered male figures that can be admired and whose behaviour can be imitated, just as we, women, are being offered admirable female figures to serve as our role models. Part of the reason why the toxicity associated to masculinity is growing is that men who are told that their patriarchal conduct cannot be corrected find comfort in aberrant patriarchal men who preach that masculinity can only be patriarchal and blatantly so. I personally believe (and preach…) that masculinity can and should be anti-patriarchal, for patriarchy is a system of oppression based on power which presents itself as masculinity itself when in fact it oppresses many disempowered men. Besides, as we are seeing, many women are keen supporters of patriarchy understood as a hierarchical social organization based on power, hence on violence, bullying and repression against most underprivileged individuals (most of society).

Isabel and I decided that a collective volume rather than a monograph written by the two of us would be more productive regarding our joint project of finding good men in anglophone fiction of all kinds (novels, short fiction, drama, cinema, series) and non-fiction (documentaries, memoirs). That was our main aim: finding characters or men from real life represented in a variety of texts who could be celebrated as examples of detoxed masculinity. For that end, we invited a variety of scholars, mostly based in Spain, with whom we had previously collaborated, or that we simply knew from academic life, and who in many cases we call our friends. Two of the authors, however, we have met for the first time as contributors to our volume, which has been a very nice surprise.

In our call for papers, we explained the purpose of the book and asked our contributors to propose chapters that reflected this need to find good men. In the process, nonetheless, and partly because our editors at Palgrave shifted the order of title and subtitle, what should have been a book about good men already present one way or another among us, has ended up being a book mostly about the problem of whether masculinity can be detoxed, that is to say, separated from patriarchy. The hard process of detoxing masculinity and even narrative itself has become central in about half of the chapters, with only the other half focusing on good men.

Our volume consists of sixteen chapters, subdivided into five sections: literature, transnational fictions, fantasy, science fiction and a section we ended up calling 'close to life'. All editors know that in open calls for papers like ours the main difficulty is organizing the chapters, which might be too miscellaneous to fit any kind of framework. We opted for a chronological order, from Austen to current SF TV series, with the final section as a sort of coda. I know this is for reviewers to say, not for an editor, but I am personally very much satisfied with how the very diverse chapters are in dialogue with each other, highlighting the dark areas where toxic patriarchal masculinity is present and offering hope for an anti-patriarchal liberation of men.

Part I, Literature, begins with David Owen's "The Visible-Invisible Good Man in Jane Austen's *The Watsons*", an article which, intriguingly, proposes that although toxic patriarchal characters apparently dominate this unfinished novel, the author presented in a secondary character a man who deserves much praise from the harassed heroine: a gentlemanly clergyman. Austen, of course, idealized masculinity in characters like Darcy and Mr. Knightley, but she struggled to convince readers that less appealing men (I'm thinking of Edward Ferrars in *Sense and Sensibility*) also embody a desirable type of male goodness. I'll leave the problem of how hard it is to write appealing good men that are not particularly sexy for another post, but I'll just note this is a major problem. In "Ishmael's Detoxing Process: Escaping Domestic Homogeneity in *Moby-Dick*", Rodrigo Andrés stresses how male communities, like the one on board Captain Ahab's Pequod, can be schools for detoxed masculinity; if you wish, we can read indeed Melville's masterpiece as the process by which Ishmael outs as unacceptably toxic his captain's masculinity. Dídac Llorens-Cubedo examines in "From Brutal to Spiritual Men in T.S. Eliot's Poetry and Drama: Sweeney and Beyond", how Eliot passes from the primal, earthy Sweeney of the poems to the more sophisticated, self-conscious male characters of his later plays. Gerardo Rodríguez-Salas discusses in "Hybrid Masculinities in D.H. Lawrence's 'The Blind Man' and Raymond Carver's 'Cathedral'" how masculinity can be detoxed when very different men are forced to be in contact and the inacceptable values of the toxic man are thus exposed to the reader as an anti-model.

The section of transnational fictions opens with Sarah Zapata's "Of Tender Hearts and Good Men: Reading Australian Masculinity in Tim Winton's Fiction", an author my co-editor and I knew nothing about, but who is a well-known example of how Australia can question its own male stereotypes. Winton defends an ethics of care, and a caring masculinity, which I personally see as one of the most feasible strategies to detox masculinity, if men can be convinced that care need not be gendered feminine as it is

still now the case. Bill Phillips "'A Good Man is Hard to Find': The Making of Michael 'Digger' Digson", deals with the fiction by Caribbean novelist Jacob Ross, characterized by an honest, no-frills presentation of toxic patriarchal masculinity but also by the alternative embodied by its protagonist. Pilar Cuder-Domínguez examines in "Black Masculinities in the Age of #BLM: Zadie Smith's *On Beauty*" how difficult it is for bi-racial Levi Belsey to become a good man in view of the prejudices against young males like him, and how tempting it is to embrace them.

The section on fantasy is the one most openly devoted to good men. Auba Llompart celebrates in "'Some Wizards Just Like to Boast that Theirs Are Bigger and Better': Harry Potter and the Rejection of Patriarchal Power", how Rowling's hero demonstrates his innate goodness by rejecting the instruments of his heroic empowerment after managing to control and suppress villainy. In "A Lover Boy with Battle Scars: Romance, War Fiction, and the Construction of Peeta Mellark as a Good Man in The *Hunger Games* Trilogy" Noemí Novell describes how the genres named in her title shape Suzanne Collins's still unsung hero. Listening to Noemí enumerate Peeta's admirable traits a few years ago was truly inspirational, one of the reasons why Isabel and I knew ours is a necessary volume, excuse the lack of modesty. Isabel Clúa pays homage to an author very much missed in "Masculinity and Heroism in Terry Pratchett's Discworld: The Case of Good Captain Carrot" analysing how Carrot, the true heir to Ankh Morpork, chooses service to the community as a policeman rather than power as a monarch, keeping his real identity under wraps.

The section on science fiction begins with "Skywalker: Bad Fathers and Good Sons" by Brian Baker, a chapter in which the author boldly claims that the impossibility of detoxing the Skywalker men, from Anakin to Kylo Ren passing through Luke, results in Rey's paradoxical embodiment of good masculinity (or of goodness itself if you prefer to see her as a degendered, non-binary heroic figure). Paul Mitchell's "Changing the Script of 'Human Is': Re-visioning the Good (Hu)Man in Philip K. Dick's *Electric Dreams*" considers the irony by which, as this episode narrates, Silas Herrick's patriarchal masculinity is suddenly detoxed when his body is occupied by a benevolent alien entity. In "Between Therapy and Revolution: *Mr. Robot*'s Ambivalence Toward Hacker Masculinity", Miguel Sebastián-Martín examines another case of promising but very complex detoxing which requires the healing of a deep split in the mind of the hacker hero.

Finally, the section close to life brings together three chapters focused on the mundane, rather than fantasy or SF. "A Few Good Old Men: Revising Ageing Masculinities in *Last Tango in Halifax*" by Maricel Oró-Piqueras and Katsura Sako proposes that the protagonist of this acclaimed British TV series, Alan Buttershaw (played by Derek Jacobi) is an example of the good old men who have embraced caring and revealed their vulnerability in the process of ageing. I believe Maricel and Katsura are very much right to call attention to how older men have undergone a rather deep process of detoxing which is often overlooked. My own chapter "Let the Little Children Come to Me: Fred Rogers, the Good Man as TV Educator" is a celebration of a truly admirable good man, who made it his life's mission (for he was an ordained Presbyterian minister) to educate American children; his teachings in support of mutual respect were always much more radical than it seemed. Isabel Santaulària's chapter "The Part of the Iceberg That Doesn't Show: Romance, Good Husbands, and Mr Julia Child" vindicates Paul Child as the great good man behind a great woman, the amazing fine cuisine populariser whose career prospered thanks to his support.

I do know that editors (or co-editors) are not supposed to praise their own volumes but here it has been my intention to thank our contributors for their marvellous chapters, which needs to be done. In the Spanish academic world we are obsessed with regimenting every researcher into Ministry-funded research groups, but as I hope Isabel

and I have proven, fruitful research can be done outside that framework and at a very low cost (Palgrave does not charge for publication unlike other publishers I could mention).

I'll conclude by noting that I am writing this celebratory text honouring our contributors and hoping the resulting book is successful after joining a demonstration in my university against a very toxic male colleague whose patriarchal misbehaviour has run rampant for years. Last week, another male colleague received a prison sentence for having sexually harassed a female doctoral student for two years. It is, then, extremely difficult to feel admiration for men right now, after finding myself surrounded by very angry young students (both women and men), tired of the very evident power patriarchy still has and of what appears to be a terrific backlash against fundamental rights. We are seeing in the news, besides, too many reports of horrifying gang rapes by underage males against other female and male minors. Something is terribly amiss. This disheartening feeling and the evidence of criminal conduct convinces me even more that we need urgently positive male figures, as many good men as we can find, so that patriarchal toxicity is finally addressed and, hopefully, eliminated.

## 3 April 2023 / THE POSTHUMAN PATRIARCHAL VILLAIN AS ABSOLUTE FUTURE THREAT: WINSTON DUARTE (AND THE HERO JAMES HOLDEN) IN *THE EXPANSE* NOVEL SERIES

SPOILERS WARNING: this post deals with the nine *Expanse* novels and discusses the series' ending.

*The Expanse* is a series of nine space opera novels—*Leviathan Wakes* (2011), *Caliban's War* (2012), *Abaddon's Gate* (2013), *Cibola Burn* (2014), *Nemesis Games* (2015), *Babylon's Ashes* (2016), *Persepolis Rising* (2017), *Tiamat's Wrath* (2019) and *Leviathan Falls* (2021)—accompanied by a short fiction collection (*Memory's Legion*, 2022), written by American author James S.A. Corey, the penname of Ty Franck and Daniel Abraham. The series, popularized by its SyFy/Amazon adaptation (2013-), narrates how captain James Holden and his crew on board the Rocinante deflect the threat posed by a protomolecule engineered by an extinct alien civilization, which falls into the hands of very human, male patriarchal villains.

Martian Admiral Winston Duarte (who appears in the last three novels and has so far appeared in episodes 6x4 and 6x6 of the TV series, played by Dylan Taylor) takes advantage of the protomolecule to enhance himself and, once thus empowered, establish a multi-planetary military dictatorship. Duarte's difficulties to remain human and his megalomaniac decision to turn humankind into a single hive entity to defeat a more powerful alien species, are the stuff of white-men pulpish space opera. However, the popularity of Corey's highly entertaining novel series means that for many persons the ideas about the posthuman come basically from sf of this type, and not from sophisticated academic intellectual debate.

Corey's *Expanse* series, I argue, uses the trope of the hostile alien species to send a warning about the difficulties of progressing as humans while male patriarchal villainy persists. This warning is sent not only through Duarte but also through the villain Jules Pierre Mao, who runs Protogen, the corporation illegally experimenting with the alien protomolecule that wreaks havoc in the Solar system before Duarte steals it. Also through the hero James Holden, who cannot solve the problem posed by these villains without becoming himself monstrously posthuman.

Following my own work in *Masculinity and Patriarchal Villainy in the British Novel: From Hitler to Voldemort* (2020), I wish to stress here that posthumanism and transhumanism no doubt help enhance patriarchal villainy. Male sf authors lack a clear anti-patriarchal agenda but their anti-posthuman positioning implicitly defends it, as I aim to show. Captain James Holden, the hero who embodies this anti-posthumanist resistance is not a strong enough figure, but this is part, I believe, of the limits of the anti-patriarchal agenda I have mentioned and of white male authors' inability to shift the role of the hero onto women or a community of diverse persons.

The nine-novel series narrates how a protomolecule launched by an ancient alien species billions of years ago to build a system of ring gates as beachheads for either travel or invasion was accidentally stopped on its tracks by Saturn's moon Phoebe. This protomolecule is found there in the 24th century by the Martian government, who commissions private corporation Protogen, ran by Terran tycoon Jules Mao, to exploit it. Protogen, however, soon develops its own plans, including experimentation with humans.

The hero James Holden and his crew, originally humble ice transporters, stumble upon these experiments and, once Mao is defeated, are later involved in the rebellion staged by Belter leader Marco Inaros, a man trying to safeguard the Belt asteroids in the conflict between Earth and Mars. In fact, Inaros turns out to be a tool of rebellious Martian fleet Admiral Duarte, who steals the protomolecule and starts his own military empire, having discovered a second, far more powerful alien species who had eliminated the original aliens. Duarte determines to defeat this other species by remaking himself and later all of humankind as transhumans using the protomolecule. Only the hero Holden, of course, can stop him.

There is nothing, then, surprising or innovative in Corey's highly entertaining space opera, except that it offers a deeper characterization than usual if only because of its extension. Besides, unlike what might be expected, Holden is not the classic macho space captain but a vulnerable man constantly doubting himself, who pursues his heroic mission out of stubbornness rather than any patriarchal principles.

Duarte first appears as a nameless, shadowy figure. In *Nemesis Games*, the fifth novel, he masterminds the robbery of the only remaining sample of the protomolecule. In the sixth novel, *Babylon's Ashes*, while Inaros decimates Earth Duarte stages a coup on his home planet Mars, absconding with one fifth of the military fleet to an unknown location, accessible through the ring gates opened in the Solar system by the alien protomolecule. The seventh novel, *Persepolis Rising*, set thirty years later, reveals that Duarte has been hiding on planet Laconia, named after the Greek Spartan capital, where he has built the formidable half-alien fleet which conquers all the ring gates.

Previous to this turning point, Paolo Cortázar, Duarte's head nanoengineer and a man involved in Protogen's appalling experiments, starts using the protomolecule to turn the villain into an immortal posthuman. Duarte ignores that Cortázar is actually using him as a guinea pig for his own transformation. When Holden is arrested by Duarte's forces and kept prisoner for long years in Laconia, the captain plays the dangerous game of suggesting to Cortázar that he should kill Duarte's only daughter Teresa, a fourteen-year-old girl. Ignoring that Holden has inspired Cortázar's plot against her, Teresa communicates her fears to her already deeply transformed father who eliminates Cortázar. Without the scientist, Duarte's posthuman transformation soon spirals out of control.

In a previous conversation with Cortázar, Duarte comments on the irony of his own position for "I've always rejected the great-man idea (…) And yet here I am" (*PR* 11). The other irony is that his decision to proclaim himself conqueror of the 1300 planets linked by the ring gates comes just when captain Holden's girlfriend Naomi Nagata has finally convinced him that the time to retire has come. "You wouldn't feel like it made you

less of a man?", she cagily asks, but he reassures her that he is ready. Of course, he is not.

According to a report by another main character, UN Secretary Chrisjen Avasarala, Duarte spent decades biding his time, having possibly realized at twenty how he could redo history thanks to the protomolecule. She confirms that Inaros' Balter Free Navy was nothing but a distraction while Duarte fortified Laconia and developed his long-term villainous plans. Not all see them as villainous, though. One of Duarte's lieutenants, Singh, reflects: "All humanity had seen the opportunity of new lands, of new worlds to inhabit, but alone of them all Winston Duarte had recognized the terrible danger that expansion would bring. (…) And he alone had the will to solve the problem" (*PR* 398). Holden is a serious obstacle in this megalomaniac plan because, Singh muses, the captain is "singular in all humanity because he'd bumbled into being in so many of the right places at so many of the right times. If there was one thing Laconia's history taught, it was the power of the right person at the right moment" (*PR* 399).

When Holden meets Duarte on Laconia as his prisoner he warns the villain that he will fail because "You're not picking a fight with the things that made the protomolecule. You're picking a fight with whatever killed *them*" (*PR* 548). Nonchalant, Duarte replies that humanity was bound to use the alien technologies regardless of their origin and possible dangers. He proposes then to Holden that they become allies, "To take the shards of the protomolecule's broken sword and reforge it", turning humankind into "a single community" to "storm heaven" (*PR* 549).

In *Tiamat's Wrath*, Holden describes himself to Teresa as her father's dancing bear, a poor creature kept for amusement to "show power" (*TW* 98). He considers in a key passage Duarte's personality, seeing him as a monster of a rather alluring type, and not as a fairly common product of patriarchal villainy:

> Duarte was a thoughtful, educated, civilized man and a murderer. He was charming and funny and a little melancholy and, as far as Holden could tell, completely unaware of his own monstrous ambition. Like a religious fanatic, the man really believed that everything he'd done was justified by his goal in doing it. Even when it was the push for his own personal immortality—and then his daughter's—before slamming the door behind them, Duarte managed to cast it as a necessary burden for the good of the species. He was above all else a charming little ratfuck. As Holden grew to respect the man, even to like him, he was careful never to lose sight of the fact that Duarte was a monster. (*TW* 252-3)

When Holden's crewmember Amos is found hiding in Laconia, without the captain knowing of his presence, Duarte deprives his dancing bear status of his relative freedom. Holden is tortured for a long time until finally his crew rescues him. Amos's secret friendship with Teresa results in her own anti-patriarchal rebellion, to the extent that helps Holden and escapes on the Rocinante. Duarte is at this point so far gone into his posthuman path of degradation that the runaways are given chase by his henchpersons.

The denouement of the series in *Leviathan Falls* (2021) is thus focused on a hero severely impaired by the PTSD caused by torture and a raving, monstrous posthuman patriarchal villain. Holden feels "annihilated" (*LF* 186) not so much by his physical punishment as by how the dancing bear years had "broken down his sense of himself" (*LF* 186). In a significant conversation with Amos, Holden claims that he no longer fears death but wants "to go out knowing that things will be okay without me" (*LF* 241). Mocking him gently, Amos replies that perhaps "you're not that important and it ain't up to you to fix the universe?" (*LF* 241), a view seconded by Holden's loyal but worn-out girlfriend Naomi (and in many ways by the readers, following her own stance).

To Naomi's consternation, when Holden asks her for permission to do what it takes to defeat Duarte, he has already decided to inject himself with the protomolecule.

When his posthuman transformation begins Holden feels "deeply at ease" (*LF* 413) and healed from his PTSD:

> "His head felt weirdly clear. Even with the distant awareness of the others, the moment was his own. He felt as alone as he ever had, and also a kind of satisfaction. A falling away of doubt. The anxiety that had haunted him since Laconia had cooked off like dew on a warm day. He was only himself now". (*LF* 414)

The authors, however, undermine Holden's healing, masculine re-empowerment by siding with Naomi when she vents her anger after the couple's low-key goodbye. She discloses to crewmate Alex that she is angry because Holden has been healed by the thrill of danger:

> "(…) I saw him again. Just now. I saw him the way he used to be. At his best. And love isn't what got him there. And it wasn't care. And it wasn't time. He saw something incredibly, stupidly dangerous that needed to be done and only he could do. And he just . . ." (*LF* 421, original ellipsis)

While he searches for Duarte, Holden uses his new posthuman might to attach himself to the ring gates and close them, thus saving humankind from the intrusion of the second alien species but also cutting off the 1300 inhabited worlds, at least until interstellar voyage is developed. This combined act of foolishness and heroism destroys him but the fact is that the man who had accused Duarte of deciding selfishly the fate of all humankind does the same, an issue raised by the authors in his final conversation with another key character, the protomolecule puppet Miller. Holden dies in a blaze of power (by which I mean energy) and glory, but reaps no homage. Amos asks Naomi whether she can survive without Holden and she tells herself "that she could. But she wasn't ready to say it out loud" (*LF* 510), preferring instead to focus on how travel again to the lost planets. The hero is just gone.

As for Duarte, the superhuman monster, he dies twice, or in two stages. He abandons Laconia to take the central Ring Station and start building there the human hive mind. However, when Teresa and Holden find him, Duarte is being destroyed by the alien-infested station. Holden kills off his mind when the monster tries to murder Teresa, as the girl frantically pulls her father off the alien black threads binding him. Yet it is officer Aliana Tanaka, a tough Martian fleet officer and one of Duarte's most loyal servants, who sacrifices her life to destroy his body, acting out of the deep anger she feels seeing what her hero has become. Tanaka dies wishing she could shoot dead the monster Holden is also becoming, but he survives her to save humankind, as I have reported.

I have not used here any theorization because it has been my intention to show you the kind of fantasies to which white, heterosexual, cisgender male writers apply their vision of the posthuman. Admiral Winston Duarte is, most transparently, a patriarchal villain interested in accumulating multi-planetary power. He believes that a radical posthuman transformation is the only way in which he can accrue so much power and, faced with an even more powerful alien species, he decides to alter all of humankind, seeing it as just a resource to be exploited for his own ends. The hero James Holden spends many decades trying to stop the villains from exploiting the alien protomolecule. He does succeed, though at the cost of becoming himself as monstrous as his rival, if only for respectable heroic reasons.

What interests me about this rather traditional space opera is how the authors know very well that it is yet another story about a villain and a hero in a patriarchal universe, yet they cannot refrain themselves from telling it. In the end Duarte and Holden come across as reckless, thoughtless men and it is apparent that Naomi and, secondarily, Amos, are the sensible characters whose opinions we should heed as the authorial

delegates in the series. Yet, as I read about Duarte, a character whose narrative arc unfolded in the years of Donald Trump's presidential campaign, mandate and attempted coup, I began to understand why the tale of how Holden defeats this villain is enjoyable as a consolatory fantasy. If even being just plain human, Trump (or Putin) are patriarchal monsters, imagine what they could be like if they were further empowered in ways that could make them posthuman or transhuman. Suddenly, *The Expanse* takes on a darker meaning and appears to be quite a relevant anti-patriarchal, anti-posthuman fable, despite not being at all the kind of gender-progressive science fiction we prefer now. Or is it?

## 17 April 2023 / ON THE EXPERIENCE OF SUPERVISING DOCTORAL DISSERTATIONS (WITH AN APOLOGY)

I have written so far two posts on the matter of supervising PhD students (see "A doctoral student abandons: At a loss what to advise…" of 2014, and "Supervising doctoral students: A complicated task" of 2015). Actually, I have published three more posts on doctoral students, but these two are most directly connected with the post today.

The current post springs from this circumstance: in the same week one of my doctoral students sent me her finished dissertation and another announced that she is quitting the PhD programme. Both have been working with me for slightly over three years, are foreign, and have gone through the Covid-19 crisis, which broke out when they were both beginning work on their dissertations far from home. The student who has just finished had taken our English Studies MA at UAB and simply could not go back home for quite a long time, and, so, she decided to make the best of the circumstance. The student who has quitted moved to Barcelona just two months before Covid-19 erupted and I'm very sorry to say that she has not weathered the circumstance so well. I do not wish, however, to discuss their personal cases but to think out loud again about the work we do as PhD supervisors.

In my case, a peculiarity is that for each dissertation a student completes under my supervision, another fails to do so. I have supervised so far eight dissertations but other eight students have given up on me, usually between the third and the fifth year (part-time students can use up to six years to complete a dissertation at UAB). I am currently supervising four more students and although I trust they will all submit their dissertations on time, I am bracing myself for new desertions. In fact, I have decided not to accept any more doctoral students until at least two of my current students finish. This does not have to do so much with the actual workload (of which more in the next paragraph) but with the terrible disappointment that each unfinished dissertation is. I'm very proud of the eight dissertations successfully submitted, but the other eight are holes in my heart. I loved the topics, otherwise I would not have accepted supervising them, but they are like phantom limbs particularly because I have spent in most cases years guiding the students.

The way my university calculates the hours for PhD supervision has varied over the years. One matter I wish to clarify is that we, supervisors, don't get any extra money for this task, in case anyone was wondering; it's just part of our teaching load. According to the current figures for UAB, supervising a PhD dissertation from beginning to end amounts to 100 hours of work. Our PhD students pass a yearly assessment interview, after which we get credited with 25 hours for the first two years; the remaining 50 hours are added to our personal account when they submit their dissertation and pass the viva. If, however, a student ends up completing their dissertation in four or five years, which is quite common, we don't get any hours after the second year, we just work for free.

Since in the last three years I have been supervising from four to six dissertations, this means I have been giving away quite a good number of hours. In fact, my Department suggested that I should stop accepting new PhD students (a hint I have taken). This means that the maximum number of students we may supervise, which is six, is far in excess of our teaching hours. In practice, a student who abandons in the third year or later means a loss of 50 hours for the final dissertation, or more if supervision extends beyond the third year. But losing them also means losing the hours invested in reading texts they are working on, correcting their written submissions, and of course, the time used in the monthly meetings. By the way, if you're curious, supervising a BA dissertation (6 ECTS) is worth 10'64 hours and an MA dissertation (12 ECTS), 23'52. An important difference is that BA and MA dissertations have a fixed time frame; all my BA students have completed their dissertations on time and only one MA student had to re-submit his. Tutoring them is not a gamble (at least in my experience), whereas tutoring PhD students is indeed a gamble. Of course, I would not abandon a PhD student unless we had a very serious disagreement (or they ran out of extensions); it's been always up to them to quit.

Perhaps a mistake we all make (at least in the two programmes I work for) is not reading the MA dissertation of the unknown students we accept. I believe that the best case scenario is the one in which I have supervised a student's MA dissertation and I am, therefore, well aware of their academic skills when I accept them as my PhD students. Only one of the students who abandoned their dissertation had been my MA tutoree (she quitted because she could not combine a full-time job with writing a dissertation). In the other seven cases, I trusted that the students had the necessary academic skills, but discovered when they started submitting written work that there were problems, in some cases these were rather serious despite their possessing an MA degree. That was not always the case, of course: some brilliant students, like the person I have alluded to, abandoned when they just could not cope with, as I have noted, working full-time and being PhD students. This is a situation that Spanish universities are failing to address, in view of the scant scholarships for PhD students.

I am, then, beginning to learn the lesson the hard way: you need to read their MA dissertation before accepting a new PhD student. Why don't we do that? For a variety of reasons, the main one being a bit of laziness, why not acknowledge this? The programmes I work for require abundant documentation to apply for submission, but in neither case is the MA dissertation itself required, just the diploma certifying the possession of an MA degree. Prospective students' admissions are processed by a committee whose members review the documentation, which includes a PhD dissertation proposal, and then allocate a tutor to the student, if they are admitted. What follows is a direct interview between the student and the prospective tutor, usually based on the proposal rather than the work done so far. Perhaps national and international colleagues will be surprised at the process I am describing here since they do read MA dissertations before taking on a PhD student, but it's not something I have done in my own practice. An alternative, of course, is asking a student to submit a new paper before accepting them, but this might take months. In my own case, by the way, my UAB PhD supervisor had been a member of my MA dissertation tribunal; my other supervisor accepted me as a foreign visiting student for one year because I had a grant, but never asked to read any of my work previous to the PhD dissertation.

I must stress that, in any case, an MA and a PhD dissertation are very different types of work, not only because of the extension (we ask for 50 pages in the MA, 300 in the PhD programme), but also because, as I have noted, the time frame is different. So is the process of accompanying the student. In MA dissertations, the process is started in November when tutors are assigned, and ends in July, after a handful of very specific tutorial sessions: choice of topic, elaboration of a proposal focused on a thesis statement,

reviewing of the proposal, working on the dissertation's structure, submission of a segment to the future examiners and discussion of their feedback, one or two more tutorials to check how the student is progressing, reviewing the finished text, and preparing the viva. Let's say ten sessions. With doctoral dissertations the tutorials devoted to the student's progress vary very much in number (though they are usually about ten/eleven a year). I see my students once a month, whether they are full time or part-time, but I am never sure whether the meetings are fruitful (they're always nice indeed!) until I see chapter drafts. These usually start materializing in the second year if they materialize at all. If a couple of chapters are not drafted by then, it is very unlikely that the student will finish. I understand now, however, that my supervisors must have despaired with me, because I only started writing in my third year and, basically, gave my UAB supervisor the complete text rather than separate chapters.

In one-to-one tutoring, as happens with PhD students, personal affinity is important, I find, but not essential. Unlike BA and MA tutorees, who are always met in the office it is quite habitual to meet PhD students over coffee for tutorials (I've never met individual students for lunch, though I've taken groups out for them to meet and socialize). This may change now at my university after the terrible situation affecting diverse female PhD students sexually preyed on by a couple of male supervisors in different schools. Some male colleagues have expressed their concern that they have shared private cell phone numbers with female students or met them outside the university for coffee (for tutorials, not for socializing). The campus where I work is not attached to any town or city and if supervisor and tutoree live close by, it makes sense for them to meet where they live, hence the use of alternative meeting spaces. Anyway, it is easy to slip into more personal conversations with a PhD student and, as I was saying, personal affinity does play a role in a situation with regular contact over years. None of my students has quitted over personal differences, but this may happen, of course. Besides, let's not forget this, writing a dissertation is awfully stressful and students may see their lives altered in ways they could not foresee when they applied for admission to the programme.

When BA or MA students abandon a programme, it is taken for granted that the teachers are not responsible for their personal decision. In the case of PhD students, however, the teaching staff involved is not a collective but just one person. We need, therefore, to ask ourselves whether we have personally failed when a PhD student quits. In the end, I believe that I have written all this to tell the eight students who will never submit their dissertations that I am sorry I have failed them, and I wish I could have done better by them. They can be assured that I have done my best, but then that is not always sufficient. Sorry.

## 24 April 2023 / ON STUDENTS' ABSENCE FROM THE CLASSROOM: BEGINNING TO WORRY

Whereas my MA students rarely skip classes and only do so for justified reasons, I cannot make sense of the attendance pattern in my BA class. There are 63 students officially registered, of whom 58 appear to be following the course according to the exercises handed in and our online activities. However, classroom attendance varies between 20-30 on Wednesdays and 12-20 on Fridays. I have never seen the 58 students together in class and, what is more, leaving the dozen students who attend regularly, the rest come and go. It is the first time in my 31 years as a teacher that I'm already past mid-semester and I cannot recognize most of my students. I'm concerned to the point that I have asked

my Department this morning to start an official investigation as I know for sure this is not a personal problem but a trend.

In my university attendance is not compulsory but it is expected, as I have told my students again and again (through posts in the Moodle classroom forum and emails since I don't see them in class). I do not know why attendance is not compulsory, but I believe it has something to do with students being responsible adults above 18. For teachers, attendance is absolutely compulsory. The school (or Facultat) keeps track by having us sign up an online app in the classroom computer. Absences need to be justified and permission to attend an academic activity (conference and so on) applied for weeks in advance. Other schools in my university appear to be more lax, but mine discovered some twelve years ago that one of the teachers had skipped the whole semester after offering to grant a pass grade to all his students; one who disagreed because they wanted an A reported him to the Dean. Since then we all sign up for attendance. Students don't.

I started keeping track of attendance in 2009, when we started the new degrees because I invited students to self-assess for class participation (10% of the final mark) and, as I explained to them, I had to be able to check whether they had been in class at all. This worked well until it didn't. One semester about five or six years ago I found myself with a class full of students who clearly didn't want to be there and who were only present because they needed to sign the attendance sheet. Three of them spent the 75 minutes of every one of my lectures hiding behind their laptops chatting quite loudly about God knows what, and I decided then that I would never check attendance again. Let the ones interested come to class and the others stay away.

I was myself a working student who often skipped classes because of my jobs, but I always made the point of explaining to my teachers my situation and worked out with them a system of autonomous study to compensate for my absence. On the other hand, some of my peers were famous for spending their whole degrees at the bar, some playing endless card games. They would cram hard one week before the final exams and most managed to pass. What puzzles me today is that the absences go unexplained and do not have a regular pattern. Some students email me to warn that they are going to miss a class, but most just don't bother. They just show up or not. I came up with the idea of having everyone participate in class discussion with a small compulsory activity but although the sessions go reasonably well and students' contributions are great, this has not increased their presence. I have now in class the habitual dozen and the students who need to participate on that day. The rest stay away. The students' absence on Friday morning, I'm told, mostly corresponds to the fact that they go partying on Thursday, seems many go home on Friday for the weekend, but I have no idea what seems to be the problem on Wednesday.

I would not be writing about all this if it weren't because it is creating two noticeable problems. On the one hand, I find myself clarifying through the class delegate instructions I have given in the classroom that could not be clarified in person because the students were not there. I also leave my instructions on the weekly notes of my Moodle classroom, and send emails (including reminders of when students must be in class for presentations) but there is no way I can go through the calendar or the syllabus with all the students and solve doubts. Of course, missing lectures means that they are necessarily learning less, unless the Covid-19 lockdown turned them into extremely independent learners who need no classroom activities.

The other main problem is that I am getting depressed day by day. My class fits about 80 students, which means that it looks very empty with an attendance below 40, and just miserably empty with just 15 to 20 students. The students in the classroom appear to listen to me, but I see some using the cell phone all the time and attention wavers even among those apparently listening hard. In the last few weeks I have stopped my ranting to ask whether anyone is interested. They have reassured me that they are

indeed but I get this uneasy feeling that, as I told them last week, I'm just having a conversation with myself (this is fine, but I could have it at home, as I'm doing now). Strangely enough, the presence of the ones who are in the classroom weighs less than the absence of the rest because I feel that their absence is a criticism of my methods. Perhaps I bore them, or perhaps they feel assessment is too light and they can manage at home, or perhaps they just don't like Literature. I know very well that Literature teachers are dinosaurs past their sell-by date but it's getting to the point when I am beginning to believe that what I teach does not matter and this is starting to undermine my performance.

Something might be afoot, however, beyond my classroom. I read a couple of days ago an article in *The Guardian* titled "Rise in school absences since Covid driven by anxiety and lack of support, say English councils". Apparently, absences among English schoolchildren were "in the spring term were still 50% higher than before the pandemic". The causes are "increased anxiety and lack of mental health support", and the difficulties felt by families and children to adapt to constant public presence after Covid-19. English parents, it appears, are now more permissive and allow children, who are only mildly sick or not sick at all, to stay home. All this refers to young children, but my suspicion is that something similar is happening among university students who, besides, are not supervised by parents. Another possibility, as one of my regular attendees suggests, is that students who skip class just fail to understand how expensive fees are for their parents and for society as a whole.

So, why do I want students to attend my lectures? After all, I'm paid the same money, what do I care? For many reasons. I like to know the persons whose work I grade, as I dislike anonymity in education. My students are funding (a sixth of) my salary and I feel that I work for them; they are not my clients but the persons whose education justify all the hard work I have done to get tenure. If students reject my teaching, that effort feels superfluous and this is when depression sets in. Another reason is that performance of any type is enhanced by audience response, and although I could work well with a tiny class in a tiny classroom, small attendance in a big classroom means that I don't get enough feedback, or support, to feel confident. I stutter and stammer. Every teacher gets a boost if students listen attentively, and the more students listen attentively the bigger the boost. I'll regret my words when I get again a class of sixty bored students, but students seem to forget that we are not machines. Perhaps when AIs replace us they will miss us.

Every university teacher's dream is walking into a classroom full of totally engaged students eager to participate in class discussion, just like every married person's dream is enjoying one romantic day after the other. I know that an enthusiastic class totally loving English Literature is a chimera (I had that once ten years ago in my Harry Potter course but I will never have it again, not even with Potter), but I would settle for regular attendance of 80% of the class, showing at least some polite interest if only because they are paying to be educated by me and my colleagues.

Or let's begin an open conversation about what causes the absences, with hopefully some empathy for teachers' own anxiety in the face of how education is gradually collapsing to a great extent because studying are losing interest (or not showing it). Time to talk.

## 3 May 2023 / ACQUIRING AN ACADEMIC BIBLIOGRAPHIC CULTURE: SOME TIPS

My second-year students need to write a paper on Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*, in which they must cite a minimum of three secondary sources. I give them a list of 23

topics from which they can choose, with the only restriction that only a maximum of 3 students can choose the same topic. In this way, assessment is personalized, and I don't have to mark 60 identical papers. Students can also propose a topic of their own, though usually nobody takes up this offer.

Once the topic has been selected, students need to submit a proposal consisting of a provisional title, a 100-word abstract, five keywords, a bibliography of three secondary sources, three quotations from the novel and three more from the bibliography. This is worth 10% of the final mark but it helps very much to write the paper, which is 40%. I provide students with a template so that they learn to edit the proposal according to the instructions for authors provided. I also offer a tutorial to teach them how to prepare both the proposal and the paper, and do a bibliographical search. The tutorial's PowerPoint is available from our Moodle classroom on Virtual Campus. They also have two more documents there: a guide called "Writing an Academic Paper" and a guide titled "Working on Abstract". And a sample paper that I have written myself.

What could go wrong, you might ask? Several things. To begin with, there was a teachers' strike on the day I gave the tutorial on the proposal and the paper. I did not join it but the colleagues who teach after me did join it, with the result that only 7 out of my 60 students were in class. They didn't have to be in class at 10:00 and so they decided to skip as well my 8:30 class. I had published the calendar at the beginning of the course, and they could have checked what I would be teaching on that day. I could not teach the tutorial again because my tightly packed programme for the course does not allow it, but I left the PowerPoint in our online classroom. This presentation included slides showing how to use the library catalogue and how to use the MLA database, and a strong warning against doing a basic internet search, though I also gave information on Google Scholar and Google Books, which I use all the time. I stressed that the only valid sources I would admit were academic monographs, chapters in collective academic books, and articles in academic journals. No dissertations. The secondary sources had to be post-1995, though students could use pre-1995 sources if they included the three compulsory post-1995 sources.

I have just marked the proposals and although I believe that the abstracts are better than last year, the bibliographical selection is worse and, indeed, far worse than when I started teaching this exercise in 2009. I am using this post in fact to explain to all my students what is not working. There are two overlapping factors affecting the acquisition of this basic skill: a lack of familiarity with the basics of academic work and difficulties to use the tools that facilitate the search of sources.

So, here are the basics of academic life. Researchers are in constant dialogue with each other about their discoveries, whether they are in the sciences or in the humanities. This dialogue is kept through the publication of academic work, usually in there types of text: monographs, chapters in collective books, and articles in academic journals. A monograph is a single-author volume. A collective book is a volume that gathers together chapters by a variety of authors, coordinated by the editor or editors. An academic journal is a periodical publication that publishes articles and reviews of academic books.

All these texts are published by academic presses, sometimes associated to universities (like Oxford University Press), sometimes part of a larger business concern (like Taylor and Francis). All these academic sources are validated through peer-reviewing, that is to say they need to pass the assessment of at least two other academics who read them, write reports, and ask for modifications if necessary. Once work is ready, it is carefully proofread, so that the language is error-free. You may find online and for free perfectly valid academic publications, which employ a peer-review system and are in terms of language impeccable. However, most quality sources require payment. University libraries have the function of purchasing monographs and collective books

(which you may borrow), and to subscribe to academic journals (which you can read in the library), so that students and teacher/researchers can access a great variety of sources. All this used to be available only on paper, but university libraries pay for online services so that many books (monographic or collective) and journals can be accessed from home.

What I teach with the proposal exercise is how to begin doing research for an academic paper. In text commentaries you don't use secondary sources: you take a passage and comment on it, applying close reading techniques. In papers, however, you enter the dialogue around a particular literary text. At master's level you need to know most of the bibliography published on a text for your MA dissertation but at second-year level, my aim is that you understand the three types of source (monograph, chapter, article) and how to find them. A problem I am aware of is that students only receive training in finding secondary sources in the first year in a random way, depending on the teacher. I believe, however, that all students ought to train themselves by visiting the library and taking courses on how its resources work apart from classes. This is a must.

So, how do you find valid academic sources? Well, take my own research for my article on the lawyer Jaggers in *Great Expectations*. I started with the library catalogue in which I entered the search "*Great Expectations*" AND Jaggers. This is called a Boolean search, as you use the Boolean operators AND, OR, NOT to limit your search. The front page of the library catalogue and the top of the search page contain the words 'Databases'. Catalogues and databases used to be very different, but they are merging a little bit. The library catalogue as it works now includes both sources available at UAB and sources unavailable, in which it is closer to being a database. We can access many books, chapters, and articles online which was not the case a few years ago.

Anyway, once I got a list of sources on Jaggers (just a few), I checked the database list and selected the MLA database, a huge resource which includes other databases such as JSTOR. You may use JSTOR independently or Project Muse, but I prefer MLA, which includes them too. MLA allows you to select bibliographical entries and email them to your account, including the texts if they are available. Once I got all I could about Jaggers, I went then to Google Scholar and Google Books, and in one afternoon I had all the bibliography I have used in my article (35 items). I also downloaded about 10 articles and could check online 10 more monographs and chapters. The rest I found elsewhere, sometimes paying for them.

If you bypass the library catalogue, MLA, JSTOR, Project Muse, Google Scholar and Google Books and go directly onto Google you might end up in the wrong place. I have entered the search "*Great Expectations*" AND Jaggers and this has led me to websites that publish notes for students (*Cliffnotes*, *Sparknotes*, *Gradesaver* and so on…), articles that while very interesting are not academic (in newspapers, magazines, blogs), resources from academic and non-academic sources for students or a general audience (*The Victorian Web*, *Encyclopedia Britannica*, *Wikipedia*). You may NEVER use notes for students in academic work and although non-academic work can be used, this can only be done as an extra. First you complete the academic bibliography and then you add the extras, ideally checking with your teacher/tutor if that is right.

Here comes a major difficulty. Quality academic books, whether monographic or collective, are not difficult to recognize. Check who is the publisher and that is sufficient. If you don't know the publisher, look for their webpage. There are differences in quality but you may also check a variety of lists to learn who are most respected, or this *Wikipedia* entry. Journals are also ranked by quality, and I use all the time the database of the Universitat de Barcelona MIAR to understand how they are ranked. You can see there for instance that the *Dickens's Quarterly* ranks highly.

The problem is that not all scholars in all areas of the world are willing to pass the filters that guarantee academic quality, so in recent years we are seeing a proliferation

of low-quality online journals with no peer-reviewing, no control of language quality, etc. These journals usually have generic titles (they deal with literature and language together, even including culture or translation), they are not sponsored by a university, they do not appear in databases like MIAR. Since they are easy to found online students incorporate them into their bibliographies, but this is a mistake. I am not saying that all the articles published there are rubbish, what I am saying is that if you can access much better sources through the library catalogue, MLA, JSTOR, Project Muse and so on, why would you be happy to quote low-quality sources?

One word about dissertations. I love tutoring BA, MA and PhD dissertations and I am very proud to see that some of those published online get many downloads. However, dissertations are students' exercises, and they are not quoted in academic work. The only exception are PhD (doctoral) dissertations, which are quoted particularly when they cover a topic nobody else deals with. So, why are BA and MA dissertations downloaded? I hope it's not to plagiarise them! I think this is to check the bibliographies and see what can be found there. This is another way of finding bibliography: the bibliography of a monograph, chapter or article usually leads to other sources, and this is how you end up not with three but with 300 sources! Well, let's say 30, the number quoted on average in chapters and articles (100-150 for monographs at least).

I know that students find it very difficult to find three specific quotations that are suitable for their topic, and they give priority to this over checking whether the sources are adequate in quality and in chronological range. Yet, academic research is a game with a set of rules you need to obey, and practice. A difficulty we don't know how to solve in English Studies is that students cannot cope with reading both the literary texts and also secondary sources, so we have little by little diminished the compulsory bibliography until we are left with nothing except passages. Sorry to be such a boomer but in my time we were expected to read both literature and secondary sources, and I'm sorry to say that we lost in one of our absurd reforms a wonderful course called 'English Literature Practice' devoted to reading only secondary sources. It is all indeed a matter of practice.

I'll end by stressing that as teachers-researchers our main job apart from what we do in class is publishing secondary sources. We are all busy writing articles for journals and chapters in books, occasionally editing collective volumes. Writing monographs of 300 pages takes time, which is always difficult to find, but I believe that all Humanities specialists should publish at least one or two along their careers. If you're curious, this is what I have published so far.

I hope this clarifies a few major points and leads to students' finding better secondary sources, not only for the paper on Dickens but for all literature and culture paper and the BA/TFG dissertation. As I say, practice is crucial. So, familiarize yourself with the library catalogue and the databases and enjoy doing bibliographical searches. Many of us professional academics find that fun detective work, and we love it when an unexpected source appears that fits perfectly what you need to say. Just search for them in the right places!

## 15 May 2023 / ACQUIRING A FILM CULTURE: NOT EASY…

I was teaching my introduction to Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and I included in the PowerPoint presentation about the origins and development of the myth of the vampire, a photo of the first film vamp Theda Bara (born plain Theodosia Goodman). She is seen reclining over the skeleton of, we assume, her latest male conquest (you may see the photo and a very good comment on Bara here). The students were not familiar with the word 'vamp', though they knew about the *femme fatale*, so here I am considering again the gradual

loss of our collective film culture. I say 'again' because I published back in 2016, how time flies!, a post called "100 Years, 100 Films: An Education in Cinema History", more or less expressing the same ideas that came to my mind a few days ago. No blog post, however, is exactly the same, so here we go.

When I published my post back on 10 January 2016 Netflix had been around for less than three months. This streaming service was first made available on 20 October 2015 here in Spain. Now there are in total seventeen platforms, many of them grouping several channels; the last one to arrive has been SkyShowtime (28 February this year, 2023). The introduction of the platforms, as we all know, has profoundly altered the audiovisual panorama but their expansion is now reaching a point of saturation as few clients can afford to subscribe diverse services at the same time. Few platforms, if any, are business triumphs. Netflix is now offering a basic subscription with advertising, which makes very little sense as advertising is the reason why so many viewers fled conventional television to enjoy advertising-free streaming. At home we have opted for consecutive subscribing: we have moved this year from Apple TV+ to Disney+ and we are now subscribing SkyShowtime because we have realized that we are exhausting in less than under two months all the novelties that interest us in each platform. We're now planning a return to Amazon after a year away from it.

I'm not digressing. The streaming platforms appeared to be the solution to the problem of how to acquire a film education, but it was perhaps too optimistic to expect that they could function like huge film libraries. If, to mention a classic, I wish to watch *Gone with the Wind* (1939), the website Just Watch tells me that I can watch it as part of the subscription fee on HBO Max and Movistar+, or rent it from Apple+, RakutenTV, GooglePlay, Microsoft, Amazon and Chili for about 3,99 euros in all cases (I mean here in Spain). This is a film I have watched in a cinema as a young girl before multiplexes arrived and did away with re-releases, and on Spanish TVE for free (in 1986 it broke all records, making an astonishing amount of money from advertisers). I can also borrow the film from my university's library or my local public library, since both have it on DVD, but here's the snag, thinking of the students: I doubt all have DVD or Blue Ray players at home and their laptops no longer carry that kind of device. The problem, then, is not just how to select the films to give yourself a good film education (I strongly recommend https://www.filmsite.org/ as a wonderful resource) but how to do that within a reasonable budget and how to access the films. 3,99 euros a film may seem cheap, but no student will invest that money on watching classics when they can watch all they want on their favourite platform for the price of about three film rentals a month.

It is important to be aware of the business practices that condition each period in film consumption and of how they condition which films are made. Call them movies or films, these works were originally made for the silver screen, which grew from the smaller silent movie theatres to the gigantic spaces which accommodated audiences in the thousands for the big 1950s epics, when TV was already eroding cinema's popularity. Cinemas lost audiences and became smaller with the arrival of the multiplexes in the 1960s and megaplexes in the 1970s, both usually tied to shopping malls. TV remained the main competitor of cinema until the arrival of the streaming platforms in its traditional, cable and satellite versions, but films were always a staple of TV broadcasting, with series occupying second place if not in popularity at least in prestige. This started changing in the 1990s, with quality series like Fox TV's *The X-Files* (1993-2002, 2016, 2018) and HBO's *The Sopranos* (1999-2007), but the main change has to do, I believe, with the shattering of TV's fixed schedules by the streaming platforms and the enormous expansion of choice.

This might sound counterintuitive but it turns out that a lack of choice may be a formidable tool in film education. Apart from going to the cinema to watch new releases and re-releases once or twice a month, I grew up watching 1970s and 1980s Spanish

TV, which only provided us with two channels. I saw lots of old films on TV, from Chaplin's silent classics to films made the decade I was born in, the 1960s, and also the newer films I missed in cinemas. Most films were shown alone, but I recall watching many series (or cycles as they were called), particularly on what is now La2 and was in the past modestly called UHF (from Ultra High Frequency). These cycles would include everything, from Harold Lloyd silent comedies to the films by François Truffaut, passing through *noir* 1940s cinema or Alfred Hitchcock's hits. Since, I insist, there were no other options but the two national channels, we would watch them. If was also habitual for the cycles to be presented by renowned film critics, such as Alfonso Sánchez Martínez (1911-1981), no doubt the greatest film teacher Spain has ever had. The film cycles were not immediately lost after 1990, when private TV started with Tele 5, Antena 3 and Canal Plus. I remember very fondly Antena 3's *Noche de lobos*, a film series devoted to the fantastic presented most Sundays between 1990 and 1993 by Joan Lluís Goas, a former director of the Sitges Film Festival. When the series returned in 2003 it no longer had a presenter.

The only teachers now left on Spanish TV are the team behind *Días de cine*, started by César Abeytua in 1991 and still on. I watch it every Friday on La 2 at 20:30, but I struggle to find films that interest me enough. This is not the fault of *Días de cine*, though they are a bit overfond of obscure films one can only catch in a handful of cinemas in Spain (or on the streaming platform Filmin). The series have acted as a magnet, attracting both the spectators and the talent that made cinema such an enjoyable experience. Just to give an example, there has been recent talk of a new series based on the *Harry Potter* books, when the original film series (2001-11) can hardly be considered old or old-fashioned. Films are now shrinking in interest and originality, only the superhero franchises are growing, one of the most appallingly boring sub-genres cinema has invented. Platforms give access to these and other kinds of films, of course, but they seem to stop in the 1980s, with few exceptions. Students refer to 1980s films as classics, logically, since older classics have all but disappeared from their horizon.

You might suppose for the sake of argumentation that for the persons now aged 20 the classics stretch back to the 1980s just as for my generation they stretched back to the 1930s. In both cases, the television business conditioned availability: we, 1960s boomers, were raised on a diet of what public Spanish TV provided, whereas 2000s Gen-Z people (or Zoomers) have been raised on a diet of cable TV and streaming platforms. The problem is that nobody should accept that limitation because cinema stretches back to 1895 and if each generation is only willing to watch films 40-years old at most much is missed. Even intergenerational communication is missed. I watched with my parents on TV most films they had seen in cinemas when they were dating; possibly my students also have that experience, but they don't have the experience of watching films their grandparents saw because these films they are nowhere to be seen even though they still deserve being seen. I found much joy, for instance, in watching on Spanish national TV *Bringing Up Baby*, the delicious romantic comedy with Cary Grant and Katherine Hepburn, which was released in 1938, when my father was born. It's now on Amazon's Flix Olé channel but you need to know about it and go for it, whereas in my antediluvian boomer times you would simply come across it on public TV.

When my students did not recognize the word 'vamp' I told them perhaps it's about time we acknowledge the need to teach cinema within English Studies, and not just literature. The question is that I would not know where to begin. I have taught cinema already several times, but I have focused on a specific genre: animated children's cinema, science fiction, documentaries. I would not know how to teach so much film history (Paul Watkins does know, check his Film 101: Introduction to Film Studies). In fact, it is a sign of our strange times that nobody thinks that a basic film education is indispensable, as if cinema still was a leisure activity and not the amazing cultural

achievement it is. The list I made in 2016 still works, I think, but nobody can teach 100 films in a semester or, rather, nobody can watch so many films (Watkins is using plenty of clips). A film education is a lifetime process, or it should be.

The streaming platforms are also generating another problem. I don't know if it's my impression but access to recent cinema is also being restricted by their business model. Think for instance of *CODA* (Sian Heder, 2021), last year's Oscar-award winner for Best Picture. Before the appearance of the streaming platforms, this film would have already been broadcast on a national conventional TV channel, with or without advertising (Spanish national TV does not carry ads). In contrast, today *CODA* can only be seen in Spain on Movistar+ as part of their subscription package; it can also be rented from Ratuken (4'99), Apple (9'99) or Google Play (10'99). This deprives the large segments of the population who cannot afford these services or who don't even have an internet connection from the chance to enjoy the film. Unless, that is, they borrow the DVD from a local library (depending on where you live: even in Barcelona only six libraries have a copy). Video rental outlets like Blockbuster, another major source of film education, are now long gone; only a handful survive all over Spain.

In any case, a film education requires commitment. It's matter of checking the many lists of the best films, select two or three films per decade and then expand that basic canon little by little by watching other films. I don't know when you can consider yourself an educated film buff, but keeping a list of the films you see might be a good idea (you can do that on IMDB, for instance). You also need to read about films. I have never seen a Theda Bara film, but I have read about her enough to understand that the 'vamp' is part of cinema's history, whether we like that figure of not. There is a direct line of descent from her to, for instance, Sharon Stone's Catherine Trammell in *Basic Instinct* (1992) and knowing about these connections always enriches conversation and criticism. And that's the main point, apart from learning to love the dying art of cinema and try to save it.

## 23 May 2023 / ON THE DEATH OF MARTIN AMIS: AN EPOCHAL EVENT (OR JUST PERSONAL MEMORIES)?

I'm inspired to write this post not so much by the death four days ago of acclaimed English novelist Martin Amis, at the age of 73 from oesophagus cancer, as by the obituary published in *El Confidencial* by Alberto Olmos, "Olvido y muerte de Martin Amis, el escritor que lo tuvo todo". Amis (1949-2023), known mainly for his London trilogy *Money* (1984), *London Fields* (1989) and *The Information* (1995), was a novelist I studiously avoided, and Olmos nails it when he says that what complicates his literary legacy is his "overwhelming masculinity" ("apabullante musculinidad"). The obituaries I am reading these days are all indeed by male critics, writers and readers. They are celebratory of the author's achievement, but also nostalgic of a past time: that in which, as Olmos notes, rock-star male writers were treated as literary royalty in ways they no longer are. Olmos concludes that Martin Amis will be less revered in the literary history books than his father and oedipal literary rival, Kingsley Amis (1922-95), but I think he is wrong: both will be forgotten eventually, for the literary world no longer belongs to men.

Amis was involved in a number of literary scandals, but one that seems most significant in gender terms is his being denied a place in the Booker Prize shortlist of 1989 because fellow novelists Maggie Gee and Helen McNeil, both members of the jury, strongly objected to the treatment of the female characters in *London Fields*. According to the prize director then, Martyn Goff, Gee and McNeil were outnumbered two to three but their point of view prevailed against the wishes of the jury's chairman, David Lodge.

"Maggie and Helen", Goff recalls, "felt that Amis treated women appallingly in the book. That is not to say they thought books which treated women badly couldn't be good, they simply felt that the author should make it clear he didn't favour or bless that sort of treatment". I understand their position (unfair as it is) but I should clarify that what has always put me off reading Amis's work are not the female characters but the impression gathered from the reviews that his treatment of the male characters is even worse. His protagonist in *Money* is a man called John Self, do I need to say more? I thank male novelists for being so candid about the worst excesses of men's nature, but their novels are no longer my first reading option and I don't think they are for many readers today.

The only novel I have read by Amis is *Time's Arrow: or The Nature of the Offence* (1991), which caught my attention when I was looking for human monsters for a chapter in my doctoral dissertation. This is a short, compact, astonishing novel which tells backwards the life of one Odilo Unverdorben ('unspoilt'), whom me meet as a retired doctor in the USA. The novel which relentlessly leads towards Unverdorben's birth as an innocent baby is very powerful in that it forces you to consider when exactly a man may take the wrong turn and end up aiding a villain like Dr. Mengele.

My copy of *Time's Arrow* is signed, which I treasure. That's a book I will not give away as I have done with so many others. I attended more than two decades ago a presentation of one of Amis's books, I forget which one, at the British Council in Barcelona, the place where publisher Jorge Herralde would parade his Anagrama 'dream team'. Amis spent the whole presentation insisting that there were no interesting novelists any more and we should read the classics. I was puzzled by why a writer trying to sell his own book would berate his peers in a such a thorough way, and very cheekily I asked him as he signed my copy of *Time's Arrow*, "Mr. Amis, if, as you say, we should only read the classics, why should I buy your books?" Accepting graciously my stupefying impertinence, he replied "you look like a gambler, I'm sure you like taking chances" (or similar words, I'm sure he used the word 'gambler'). Until this day, whenever I select a new book I think back to that moment and tell myself, 'ok, let's gamble', this is what Amis told me I like. I certainly do. With him, I gambled again in two more occasions: I loved his short story collection *Einstein's Monsters* (1987), on the risk of nuclear warfare, and his review collection *The War Against Cliché* (2001), one of the best books of its type I've ever read. Amis had an amazingly lucid mind.

I've mentioned Anagrama and Jorge Herralde (1935-), the man who gave us, Spanish readers, the 'dream team'. In a piece published in *Lateral* (2001), Herralde recalls that he borrowed the nickname of the 1992 US Olympic basketball team (later applied to Johann Cruyff's Barça football team), to apply it to a group of brilliant English novelists: Julian Barnes (1946), Ian McEwan (1948), Martin Amis (1949), Graham Swift (1949), Kazuo Ishiguro (1954) and Hanif Kureishi (1954). He started publishing them in 1980 (Ian McEwan's *First Love/Primer amor*), adding the last name to the team in 1992 (with Swift's *Waterland/El país del agua*). Herralde explains he knew about all these writers through British magazine *Granta*, famous for having launched the idea of the *Granta* generation of writers (the 'dream team' were, Kureishi excepted, part of the 1983 generation). Herralde does mention the Instituto Británico as the place where their presentations would happen. He mentions as the 'younger brothers' of the dream team six other male British authors: Nick Hornby (1958), Michael Faber (1960), Jonathan Coe (1961), Irvine Welsh (1961), John Lanchester (1962) and Lawrence Norfolk (1963). And, yes, I was there to listen to all of them, and have signed copies of some of their books. Amis is the first of the dream team to pass away, and I feel with Alberto Olmos that this is meaningful beyond the author's career.

Herralde invented a concept that shaped the way English fiction was understood in Spain. His instincts were right (Ishiguro won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2017), but I see in retrospect that his author selection is, quoting Olmos again, overwhelmingly male.

And Martin Amis was a central part of that discourse (or approach), being a writer struggling to outdo his highly respected novelist father, Kingsley. When I was an undergrad, we were all taught about Harold Bloom's 'anxiety of influence', developed in his eponymous 1973 volume. According to Bloom, all writers fought to overcome the crippling anxiety felt when they compared themselves to the writers of the past they most admired. Martin Amis seemed to be a total embodiment of this anxiety as a writer trying to escape his father's formidable shadow (and I know I'm not 100% fair, as his vocation was awakened by reading Jane Austen). Somehow, I find it harder to connect the anxiety of influence to women writers. Nor can I think of a female author reacting to her daughter's work as negatively as Kingsley reacted to Martin's.

I believe that this anxiety of influence is gone but I'm not sure this is good. I miss the literary ambition that the 'dream team' symbolized and, excuse me, the very masculine energy that goes with it. Today's literary world is bland, geared towards social media impact, massive sales, awards that no longer mean anything and works that are transient. I'm not saying that writers should become martyrs to the cause of literature (I'm writing this a few days after Salman Rushdie's reappearance after the assault that almost cost him his life), but that Amis and company pushed the envelope individually and as a group as few writers are doing today of any gender description.

Or maybe this is all just personal nostalgia. And a bit of regret. Herralde once told me I could invite any of his writers for a session in my university, but I never did. I was mortally afraid that we would bring these luminaries and nobody would turn up, or even worse, students would find them uninteresting if we inserted them in one of our classes as guests. I did that with Monica Ali (part of Granta's 2003 generation) and it went very well, but I've never had any other guest writer in my class. I wonder now what Amis would have said to our students as, although he was a teacher of Creative Writing (at the Centre for New Writing at the University of Manchester from 2007 until 2011), I don't quite see him interacting with undergrads. There are moments when there seems to be an infinite distance between the living authors and the students, perhaps because we are so used to dealing with dead authors.

Amis has crossed that finish line now and here begins the delicate operation of checking whether his books will endure the test of time. It seems he told Ian McEwan (I think) that he wanted to leave behind a shelf full of his books, and here they are, together with my very personal impression that we still need writers of his kind: less tame, unafraid to take risks, ambitious, outspoken, great critics who know how to read their peers, demanding but also generous. Perhaps just better, if they are men, at building female characters.

Will I finally read now *Money* and face John Self? I don't think so, but I'll keep on gambling. Thank you Martin Amis.

## 29 May 2023 / DRACULA AS AN *X-FILE*: FROM SCIENCE TO PSEUDOSCIENCE (OR WORSE)

I am teaching Stoker's novel *Dracula* as I work on the second edition of my book on *The X-Files* (*Expediente X: en honor a la verdad*) which should be published at some point next Autumn, coinciding with the thirtieth anniversary of the series' launch in 1993. The episodes in *The X-Files* on vampirism ("3" and "Bad Blood") are not really among my favourites, and it is not my aim to discuss Stoker's impact on Carter's series. Rather, I want to explore, if only partially, in which sense *Dracula* works as a proto x-file in its plunge from science into pseudoscience (or worse).

*The X-Files* (1993-2002) was an extremely popular series created by Chris Carter for Fox TV. It was expanded into two films (1998, 2008), a couple of new series (2016, 2018), comic books, novels, videogames and action figures. The series' protagonists are Agent Fox Mulder (played by David Duchovny) and Agent Dana Scully (played by Gillian Anderson). Together, they investigate as part of the FBI but also apart from it the stand-alone cases known as 'the monster of the week' and a string of conspiracies in a long serial known as the mytharc or the mythology. The conspiracies deal with soon-to-happen alien invasion and colonization, though in the newer series the intervention of the aliens has been questioned and what remains is very human patriarchal villainy.

Mulder and Scully spring from Carter's twin needs to believe in the irrational (Mulder's motto is 'I want to believe') and to apply pure rationality to the fantastic (Scully is a physicist and a forensics expert). Unlike what is habitual, the man, Mulder, is in *The X-Files* a defender of the irrational (or a pseudoscientist as he has been called by Daniel Malloy) whereas the woman, Scully, defends scientific proof above superstition and paranoia. Since the series narrates essentially Mulder's quest for the truth of the conspiracies he chases, Scully is reduced to subordinating her own rational beliefs to his whims, as his loyal sidekick. No wonder scientists as prominent as Carl Sagan or Richard Dawkins protested against this approach, calling instead for a series that would debunk conspiracy and superstition.

Mulder and Scully are descendants of Holmes and Watson as many viewers and scholars have noticed. Arthur Conan Doyle published his first Holmes short story, "A Study in Scarlett" in 1887, in *Beeton'*s magazine *Christmas Annual*. Stoker's *Dracula*, issued ten years later, is usually linked to Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu's novella *Carmilla* (1872), an association confirmed by Stoker himself (not only were both authors Irish but Stoker had worked as a young man for the *Dublin Daily Mail*, co-owned by Le Fanu). Stoker, however, had a closer association with Doyle, of whom he was a fan before they met; the admiration was mutual, as Doyle congratulated Stoker on *Dracula*.

According to *The Arthur Conan Doyle Encyclopedia*, which offers details of their collaborations, Stoker "thought he could use [the Sherlock Holmes stories] as a model in a first version of *Dracula*" apparently featuring "a specialist of psychic research named Singleton, a policeman named Cotford and a Watson-like history teacher named Max Windshoeffel". These names do appear in Stoker's "Notes for *Dracula*", preserved at the Rosenbach Museum (you may download the text, available online in a facsimile version). And if you're really, really curious about Stoker and Doyle, you may read the former's 1907 interview of the latter here.

I have come across diverse comments online about how wonderful it would be to have a Holmes / Van Helsing crossover. Yet, I have only come across one academic study about their connection, published by a Ukrainian scholar in a Croatian journal: "Sherlock Holmes, Van Helsing, James Bond i Jack Trbosjek: žanrovske strategije suvremene ukrajinske povijesne kriminalističke proze" by Sofija Filonenko, *Književna smotra*, 2022, 53 (202(4)), p.125. Apparently the essay deals with the use of "mystery formulas" in 21st century Ukrainian popular fiction. I'll take this as proof that nobody else in the academic world has noticed how Holmes and Watson become Van Helsing and Seward in Stoker's *Dracula*. I'll add that Van Helsing and Seward are also close to Mulder and Scully, though there is also much of Mina Murray in Scully. Both are intelligent women personally affected by contact with the monsters and both participate actively in chasing them.

The film adaptations have done the secondary characters in *Dracula* much disservice. I won't go down the labyrinth of tracing Van Helsing's presence in popular fiction (remember that terrible 2004 film with Hugh Jackman?), nor into the causes why only Coppola's *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992) has a remarkable Dr. Seward (played by

Richard E. Grant). What interests me is the construction of the novel's plot as a proto x-file.

We have in *Dracula* a very long teaser, the initial chapters with Jonathan Harker being abused in Transylvania, followed by the section during which the Count attacks Lucy and nobody quite understands what ails her. What follows is a prolonged clash between science and superstition in which the main voice is that of an accomplished scientist (like Scully) willing to believe that some problems require going beyond science (like Mulder). This is not the territory of the fantastic (like *The Lord of the Rings*), nor that of Holmes's reality in which the supernatural is debunked (as in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*). In *Dracula* absolute rational modernity needs to fight not so much the primitive (the Count himself adapts well to life in London) as the unnatural, which is not quite the same as the supernatural. In the process science is lost (and loses).

Dr. Seward, a psychiatrist, invites Dutch Dr. Van Helsing, his "old friend and master", to treat his ailing beloved Lucy because he "knows as much about obscure diseases as any one in the world" (besides, Seward had saved Van Helsing's life by curing him from gangrene). Van Helsing, Seward writes in his letter to Lucy's fiancée Arthur, "is a philosopher and a metaphysician, and one of the most advanced scientists of his day; and he has, I believe, an absolutely open mind". Van Helsing also possesses "an iron nerve, a temper of the ice-brook, an indomitable resolution, self-command, and toleration exalted from virtues to blessings, and the kindliest and truest heart that beats". Van Helsing's letter accepting Seward's invitation carries the initials "M.D., D.Ph., D.Lit., etc., etc." after his name, presenting him as a polymath familiar with both sciences and the humanities.

There is always a point in an x-file in which rational normal life is tipped over and Scully needs to readjust her worldview to accept the strange theories Mulder defends. This is done in *Dracula* in three scenes, one from Chapter XIII and two more from Chapter XV (actually the second scene from this chapter has a different focus as I will show).

In Chapter XIII Dr. Seward narrates how, after Lucy's death by exsanguination, Prof. Van Helsing asks for "a set of post-mortem knives" which, Seward assumes, must be for an autopsy. Van Helsing abandons his scientific façade callously declaring that "I want to operate, but not as you think. (…) I want to cut off her head and take out her heart". The dialogue continues with Van Helsing upbraiding Seward for his unprofessional reaction ("Ah! you a surgeon, and so shocked!") though he attributes this to Seward's love of Lucy. The younger man protests: "if there is no necessity for a post-mortem and nothing to gain by it—no good to her, to us, to science, to human knowledge—why do it? Without such it is monstrous". Van Helsing, however, gives no scientific reason; instead, he demands total trust from Seward. This is how pseudoscience defeats science.

In Chapter XV, Van Helsing takes a step back into science and shows Seward 'evidence' of Lucy's undead condition one week after her demise: her intact body and the even sharper white teeth, with which she has been biting children. Van Helsing, Seward observes, "did not seem to notice my silence; at any rate, he showed neither chagrin nor triumph". Van Helsing launches then into a tirade about how Lucy's soul has a chance of salvation because she was bitten while sleep-walking, forcing the still doubting Seward to face the fact that the girl is now a vampire ("oh, you start; you do not know that, friend John, but you shall know it all later"). Seward's blood "turns cold" when his friend declares "There is no malign there, see, and so it make hard that I must kill her in her sleep" because "it began to dawn upon me that I was accepting Van Helsing's theories". Realising the change, Van Helsing says "almost joyously:—'Ah, you believe now'?" And as Scully has often told Mulder, Seward replies: "Do not press me too hard all at once. I am willing to accept".

Taking advantage of Seward's new pliancy Van Helsing repeats his plan of attack: "I shall cut off her head and fill her mouth with garlic, and I shall drive a stake through her body". The next step is the other key scene, which consists of bringing Quincy Morris and Arthur Holmwood round to the necessity of performing this atrocity. Arthur reacts "in a storm of passion", stressing that "Not for the wide world will I consent to any mutilation of [Lucy's] dead body" but he is soon persuaded that Van Helsing has no dark motive to suggest the misdeed. Arthur ends up staking Lucy with astonishing violence in Chapter XVI, never wavering and using the hammer "like a figure of Thor as his untrembling arm rose and fell, driving deeper and deeper the mercy-bearing stake".

There is a funny, horrific moment at the beginning of *The X-Files*'s episode "Bad Blood" when Mulder stakes a pizza boy be believes to be a vampire through the heart only for Scully to discover that his sharp fangs are fake. However, neither Van Helsing nor Mulder can be wrong and once the Rubicon is crossed into the territory of pseudoscience the rest of the x-file can only be a wild ride.

In *Dracula*, once Lucy's body has been destroyed the last obstacle is Mina Harker (née Murray), the dead/undead girl's best friend. In Chapter XVII she is given the whole grisly tale (Dr. Seward has her listen to his phonographic diary for her to transcribe it into typewritten text). Far from fainting as Seward expects, she finds hope among "all the multitude of horrors" in "the holy ray of light that my dear, dear Lucy was at last at peace". Mina believes in vampirism because she has read her husband's Transylvanian diary. Thus she quickly recovers from the shock and makes her offer to become the official recorder in the chase of the Count: "Let me write this all out now". Once she believes, and is later herself bitten by Dracula, the novel becomes a thriller focused on the monster's chase, like any other x-file. Interestingly, a note by her husband Jonathan closes the case. Seeing how worried he is that they only have a mass of documents but no hard evidence of the events, Van Helsing closes the novel: "We want no proofs; we ask none to believe us!", words which complete his fall from scientist into pseudoscientist. He will write no papers on the vanquished fiend for any of the learned societies to which he belongs, no one else will learn from him.

As Sagan and Dawkins protested, any x-file is a missed opportunity to teach the truth of rational scientific evidence. Talk of disease becomes talk about saving souls by magical means in *Dracula*, for which no scientist was really needed. A journalist or a policeman would have sufficed (or a proto-FBI agent…). Gothic horror prevails above science fiction. Mina and Jonathan, Arthur and Seward are restored back to mundane life with no PTSD, under Van Helsing's avuncular care, but although the private drama ends well, the rest of the world gets no useful insight into vampirism. If another vampire attacked after Van Helsing passed away, Britain would be defenceless. In Holmes's empirical hands Count Dracula would have been explained away as a poor thing dominated by a blood disease. Britain would have been protected from viral infection by others like him, possibly with a vaccine. Sagan and Dawkins would have approved, though the x-philes (as the series' fans are called) would have complained. Being an x-phile myself, I understand the problem: we love mystery too much, and science suffers for it.

## 19 June 2023 / ABOUT A RETIREMENT: HOMAGE TO FELICITY HAND

[Just a brief note to say that I have been missing in action for three weeks totally snowed under an avalanche of exercises and papers. I could have written once more about the pains of marking, but I find it gives me no relief from the frustration of realizing that the students who fail are the students who don't follow instructions, that's all I need to say.]

In Spain the official retirement age is now 65 but it will be 67 in 2027, gradually increasing year by year. Life expectancy for 2023 is 81.8 years for men and 87 for women, the second highest in the world after Japan (though we might beat them by 2040). For university teachers the official retirement age is the same, though we may retire at 70 (an age rumoured to be extended to 72 in 2027) and stay on for 2 years as an honorary professor or 4 as an emeritus if you have a sufficiently impressive CV (and your Department agrees). Allow me to clarify that an honorary teachers is paid nothing and an emeritus just a symbolic stipend. My good friend and colleague Felicity Hand hit 70 last February and will be officially retiring at the end of August. She will stay on for 2 more years as honorary professor. The diverse events around her retirement are giving me much to consider beyond her specific case, so this post today is partly an homage to her and a reflection on what retirement means for university teachers.

My Department is relatively young and not too big, so it has gone through a rather small number of retirements. As far as I recall 10 colleagues have retired in varied circumstances: one in her mid-fifties crippled by depression, one in her early sixties when numbers added up sufficiently for her pension, the others between 65 and 70, one of them staying on for 4 years as emeritus. Of the ones who retired at 65, one unfortunately passed away not too long after his retirement. We have lost two other colleagues, one to cancer near the age of retirement, the other to a stroke when she was only in her mid-40s, which was certainly an awful tragedy.

This brief summary shows that there is no specific lesson to learn from the experience of the colleagues who retire. A possible lesson is 'retire as soon as you can for life is short', whereas the other contradictory lesson is 'retire as late as you can if you still enjoy what you're doing'. I started thinking about retirement around the age of 55, not because I want to retire but because whether I retire at 67 (10 more years), 70 (13 more years) or 72 (15 more years), my career has now a limit, and that supposing everything goes well healthwise, knock on wood. I was indeed thinking of retiring at 67 but seeing how full of energy my friend Felicity looks these days (nothing to do with any of our other retirees!), I'm wondering whether I could wait a little bit more. What worries me is that whereas she has been a teacher for 35 years, I will have been a teacher for 42 years by the time I'm 67. Having been now a teacher for almost 32 I feel awfully tired, and I wonder what it will be like to carry on for longer than another decade. We'll see.

The first homage Felicity received was on our annual Departament pedagogy workshop, TELLC (Teaching English Language, Literature and Culture) which I myself organized. I wanted TELLC to have a fixed section, consisting of an interview, whenever a colleague retired but to my surprise two of my colleagues rejected my invitation. The section has now started with Felicity Hand's interview by our friend Esther Pujolràs, a teacher at the Universitat de Lleida and her main disciple. Esther started her interview by declaring that 'Prof. Hand is not retiring, she's being retired', and this sentence has certainly stuck in my mind. Recently, our school, the Facultat de Filosofia i Lletres, asked Felicity to choose an interviewer for a short commemorative piece. She did me the honour of choosing me (you can see the whole video here) and I made a point of asking Felicity whether she felt she was being retired. She replied very politely that one needs to know when to leave, as we need to make room for the younger generations. Still, this is the first time I have wondered whether mandatory retirement is totally fair. So far, I have seen colleagues eager to retire, or who should have retired long before, but this is the first time I believe we're squandering energies that could be still employed.

Apart from the two interviews for TELLC and the Facultat's YouTube channel, Felicity turned her final lecture into a public event and participated in the homage paid by the school to this year's retirees, which was a very beautiful event. To my surprise, out of 8 retirees, 4 declined the honour of participating in this act; the Dean hinted that

some were unhappy with how the school has treated them and I understood that one had retired in a huff, as if their area of expertise should retire with them. I should think that if you bear a grudge against the Facultat the retirement celebration is a good moment to vent it, but of course I might be totally wrong.

About Felicity's public lecture, I must note for those of you who don't know about it, that there is a tradition of opening up the last class to whoever wants to attend. There were not many of us (colleagues, students) in the classroom, but those who were not there missed what I can only describe as the perfect literature class. Felicity's lesson (on Anglophone Indian crime fiction) was full of relevant information and insights, and she managed to have most of her fourth-year students present participate. I've never heard so many intelligent remarks in one class, believe me. Felicity had resisted the idea of making this final lecture public, but it was a moving, very beautiful last lecture. Since she is going to stay on for two more years, it might well be that was not her very last class, but I need to clarify that unlike emeritus teachers, honorary professors cannot teach regular subjects. She can be a guest in a colleague's subject, and tutor dissertations (BA and MA, I think), or continue research, but not offer regular teaching.

There is, as you can see, a difference between the university teachers who think of retirement day as the end of the professional road and those who decide to stay on for a while to walk further down that road. The main motivation tends to be research rather than teaching, as, let's be frank, teaching is not right now a source of professional satisfaction. Much less for Literature teachers. Another retiree, Prof. Rossend Arqués spoke on behalf of the 4 teachers receiving the Facultat's homage and he devoted most of his speech to bemoaning that students don't read. I know this opinion has been voiced since print exists but this is our reality, as I have been chronicling here since 2010. In fact, I have come across an interesting phenomenon. ChatGPT detector Zerogpt.com has been giving false positives highlighting just some sentences in a number of essays in my second-year class. I realized the essays corresponded to students who clearly had not read the novels they were writing about but pretended they had. Their shallow comments sounded indeed as if written by ChatGPT, hence the confusion. I found glaring errors about basic plots in other essays because, you see?, students don't even read CliffNotes, GradeSaver or similar online student aids. Good time to retire.

Teachers stay on, I was saying, for research. I asked my university whether retired teachers have access to all our library resources and, oddly, they cannot use the digital resources from home. I was told this is expensive and, so, they need to travel to our campus to use those resources. I'm mystified. I would think that if a retired teacher goes on publishing research using our university affiliation, this benefits UAB. Research, particularly of the kind done in Literature, is cheap and does not impinge on younger researchers' work (I have no idea what happens in the sciences, but I can imagine). I fail to understand then why any restrictions are applied at all. I have heard, in any case, of other universities depriving teachers of their library card and email addresses the day they retire. That is cruel.

I'll finish the post with a comment on something else I have seen Felicity Hand do: dismantle her office library. Teachers who retire need to empty their offices, and this is never easy for literature teachers who, logically, accumulate many books. We have a small corner in the corridor for bookcrossing and Felicity has been leaving there a few books every week. We've been commenting on the difficulties of dismantling a personal library. You cannot give away the books that are underlined or scruffy in any other way. Our library is not accepting donations because they have run out of room. I took some of her books to my class, but students tired of picking them up after three tries. Felicity has decided, in fact, to transform part of her collection (on Postcolonial Studies) into a small library housed in our Department, for our MA and PhD students, which seems to me a

very good idea, provided we can get a succession of volunteer librarians among our post-grads.

This is not, then, a professional goodbye (friends remain friends after retirement!) but a 'see you later', for 2 more years. Actually, in the next 3 years we'll have 3 more retirements, and, a little bit later, it'll be the turn of the only two other colleagues who are older than me. Or in plain English, I'm sixth in line, a sobering thought. I'll make certainly a good note about all these persons' experiences. If anything bothers me, however, is not that so many of us are approaching the age of retirement but that so few young people are being hired. Felicity Hand's tenured position will be soon replaced with a full-time, four-year contract position (a Lector or Ayudante Doctor) but the doctors now applying for that type of position are closer to 40 than to 30. That anyone could be hired at 25, as I was, or even earlier, seems incredible.

Happy retirement, Felicity!! See you around!

## 25 June 2023 / AMERICAN MASCULINITIES IN CONTEMPORARY DOCUMENTARY FILM: UP CLOSE BEHIND THE MASK

This post has the same title as the last book I have published, my second monograph in English. It came out a few weeks ago (see here) and will be followed this Autumn by my own translation into Spanish, *Detrás de la mascara: masculinidades americanas en el documental contemporáneo* (U València). Curiously, Anglophone publishers prefer the less alluring subtitle to come first, keeping the eye-catching bit that I consider my main title for the secondary position. I'm told this is because they follow the preferences of university libraries. You may also see that whereas in Spanish you need not say 'película documental' in English there is much hesitation between 'documentary film' and 'documentary', an adjective that can be perfectly used as a noun as we do in Spanish.

I have always been interested in documentary films on any subject but nature. Like all Spaniards my age (born 1960s) I was mesmerized by Félix Rodríguez de la Fuente's document series *El hombre y la Tierra* (1974-81), but I eventually lost my appetite for the classic scene of the predator eating their prey, a reminder that nature is 'red in tooth and claw', as Lord Alfred Tennyson once lamented. No Richard Attenborough for me either, though I'm aware that I am missing much.

I cannot pretend to be a keen spectator of documentary films, to be honest, but I do like them to the point that I wanted to be a documentary director (I was the scriptwriter for a documentary on the 50 anniversary of my secondary education school, and I loved the experience). I was told there was no university-level training for that (there is now) and I chose Filología Inglesa. With my new book, then, I'm closing a circle: I may not be a documentary film director, but I have written a book on a selection of about 40 English-language, 21st century documentaries, all of them outstanding.

The idea for the book springs from two sources. On the one hand, I fell in love with Manuel Huerga's documentary *Son and Moon* (2009) on Spanish-born astronaut Miguel López-Alegría. I wrote a very extensive article, published in 2014, "Rewriting the American Astronaut from a Cross-cultural Perspective: Michael Lopez-Alegria in Manuel Huerga's Documentary Film *Son and Moon* (2009)", which I translated later into Spanish, as I try to do with everything I publish: "Rescribiendo el astronauta americano desde una perspectiva intercultural: Michael Lopez-Alegria en el documental de Manuel Huerga *Son& Moon: Diario de un Astronauta* (2009)". In the article I had a section on how nobody had explored masculinity in this film genre, and I included a list of Oscar-award winning films focused on men. I had at the time the impression that this could result in a monograph, but found myself unauthorized to write this type of book, not being an expert

in the field. Then I read, in 2018, Jeffrey Geiger's *American Documentary Film: Projecting the Nation* (2011), and I decided to focus my next Cultural Studies elective (2019-20) on how the USA is represented in documentary films of the 21st century, the period less represented in Geiger's book. The result was the e-book publishing my students' analysis of 90 films, *Focus on the USA: Representing the Nation in Early 21st Century Documentary Film* (2020), now past 2500 downloads (many more, no doubt, than copies I will sell of my book!).

I had myself selected the films my students worked on after a very intensive bout of watching all I could get my eyes on, following the Oscar awards and nominations but also many other lists of the best 21st century documentaries. I went back to their e-book, then, to select those films more closely focused on masculinity and added others. I did not want to work on a pre-selected list of masculinities, so that all the categories would be covered regardless of the quality of the films dealing with them. I proceeded the other way round: first I got a list of about 60 truly notable films in which men and masculinity played a prominent part (the films I kept stumbling upon in all lists) and then I studied what kind of men they portrayed, until I pared down the list to 40 films. The result were sixteen chapters subdivided into four sections. Each chapter deals with two documentaries (exceptionally three, four or five at the most), and I offer here the list not only to publicize my own work but as an enticement for the reader to enjoy the films (if you don't know where to begin, go straight into *Free Solo*):

PART I – VALUES

Chapter 1. The Good Man: Kurt Kuenne's *Dear Zachary: A Letter to a Son about His Father* (2008), *Undefeated* (2011) by Daniel Lindsay and T.J. Martin

Chapter 2. The Activist: Davis Guggenheim's *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006), *An Inconvenient Sequel: Truth to Power* (2017) by Bonni Cohen and Jon Schenck, David France's *How to Survive a Plague* (2012), Jim Hubbard's *United in Anger* (2012).

Chapter 3. The Politician: Errol Morris's *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara* (2003), Marshall Curry's *Street Fight* (2005)

Chapter 4. The Whistleblower: Judith Ehrlich and Rick Goldsmith's *The Most Dangerous Man in America: Daniel Ellsberg and the Pentagon Papers* (2009), Laura Poitras's *Citizenfour* (2014)

PART II – DAMAGE

Chapter 5. The Criminal: Michael Moore's *Bowling for Columbine* (2002), Joe Berlinger's docuseries *Conversations with a Killer: The Ted Bundy Tapes* (2019)

Chapter 6. The Abuser: Amy Berg's *Deliver Us from Evil* (2006), Erin Lee Carr's *At the Heart of Gold: Inside the USA Gymnastics Scandal* (2019), Bonni Cohen and Jon Shenk's *Athlete A* (2020)

Chapter 7. The Wrongly Accused: *The Central Park Five* (2012) by Ken Burns, Sarah Burns, and David McMahon; Joe Berlinger and Bruce Sinofsky's trilogy *Paradise Lost: The Child Murders at Robin Hood Hills* (1996), *Paradise Lost: Revelations* (2000) and *Paradise Lost: Purgatory* (2011); Amy Berg's *West of Memphis* (2012)

Chapter 8. The Dependent Man: Roger Ross Williams's *Life, Animated* (2016), Clay Tweel's *Gleason* (2016)

PART III – ACTION

Chapter 9. The Soldier: Alex Gibney's *Taxi to the Dark Side* (2007), *Father Soldier Son* (2020) by Catrin Einhorn and Leslye Davis.

Chapter 10. The Capitalist: *Inside Job* (2010), by Charles Ferguson, *Abacus: Small Enough to Jail* (2016) by Steve James

Chapter 11. The Adventurer: David Sington's *In the Shadow of the Moon* (2016), Werner Herzog's *Grizzly Man* (2016)
Chapter 12. The Sportsman: Jimmy Chin and Elizabeth Chai Vasarhelyi's *Free Solo* (2018), Bing Liu's *Minding the Gap* (2018)

PART IV – ART
Chapter 13. The Architect: Nathaniel Kahn's *My Architect: A Son's Journey* (2003), Sydney Pollack's *Sketches of Frank Gehry* (2005)
Chapter 14. The Musician: Lauren Lazin's *Tupac: Resurrection* (2003), Brett Morgen's *Cobain: Montage of Heck* (2015)
Chapter 15. The Photographer: Christian Frei's *War Photographer* (2001), Richard Press's *Bill Cunningham New York* (2010), Mark Bozek's *The Times of Bill Cunningham* (2018)
Chapter 16. The Writer: Alex Gibney's *Gonzo: The Life and Work of Dr. Hunter S. Thompson* (2008), Raoul Peck's *I Am not Your Negro* (2016)

I kept for the Introduction Jennifer Newsom's film *The Mask You Live In* (2015), which is not only the inspiration for my own title but an excellent documentary on the restrictions that patriarchy sets on American boys and men. All the other films mirror those restrictions. Newsom complemented the theoretical framework, based on work by scholars in Critical Studies of Men and Masculinities, with the direct testimonial of a variety of men about how hard it is to bear the mask behind which they need to hide all the time their true feelings and emotions. I did expect to find this mask in many films but I was surprised by how absolutely consistent the discourse on masculinity is in all of them, whether the men are white or black, gay or straight, poor or rich. All the films I analyzed deal what I can only call intra-patriarchal struggles, either presenting men who fight to get rid of the mask or men who use the mask to abuse. I had the pleasure of discovering many absolutely interesting men but also felt an intense disgust at dealing with some of the worst. The section on Ted Bundy was particularly hard to write.

Apart from that, this book has been my most pleasurable experience as an author so far. I felt throughout it impostor's syndrome because I am not a specialist in documentary film but I convinced myself eventually that I was authorized to write the volume because of my extensive work on Masculinities Studies and on Film Studies. In a way, the book itself is a documentary, in print rather than on film, about what documentary films say about men in the USA, which is plenty. There was nothing, believe me, on this subject, except for some articles (not written from a Gender Studies perspective) and a few books touching partly on my subject. Christopher Pullen's *Documenting Gay Men: Identity and Performance in Reality Television and Documentary Film* (2007) did so most directly, but Zachary Ingle and David M. Sutera's edited *volume Gender and Genre in Sports Documentaries: Critical Essays* (2013) considers masculinity and femininity together, within the domain of this particular sub-genre.

I must clarify that the volume is feminist but, above all, anti-patriarchal. I have read the films through these lenses, pointing out where solid role models could be found and criticising the shortcomings of films that either did not go far enough in their own anti-patriarchal critique (the majority) or were even complicit with patriarchy (just a few). In general, I would say that most films I dealt with criticize patriarchy, even when that is not necessarily their target. Yet, I always feel a certain frustration that male filmmakers (and writers in general) are not better aware of the mask behind which men function in patriarchal societies (which are all of them and no doubt the USA). This is easy to see in the immense ideological distance between the mini-series on Ted Bundy, which basically endorses rape culture, and the films by women filmmakers on Larry Nassar, the doctor who abused so many girl gymnasts. Whereas the victims' are absent from the Bundy

mini-series they are the core of the Nassar films. I am highlighting abuse, but please don't believe for a second that my focus lies on how patriarchy victimizes women; there is much more on how patriarchy destroys men.

In short, I hope to have opened a new area of research both within documentary Film Studies and Critical Studies of Men and Masculinities. And I hope to call attention to a long list of films and directors that are absurdly undervalued. I have been saying for years that documentaries are much, much better right now than fiction films both as works of art and as a vehicle for potent storytelling. Enjoy them, (and enjoy my book!).

## 5 July 2023 / SONGS OF SURVIVAL: MEN IN 21ST CENTURY POPULAR MUSIC

Today I am celebrating the publication of the eleventh book I have edited gathering together work by my BA and MA students. I refer to *Songs of Survival: Men in 21st Century Popular Music*, written by the MA students enrolled in this year's elective subject 'Gender Studies'. Two years ago I decided to plan companion subjects for the BA and the MA in English Studies, the first dealing with women in popular music and the second with men. I published accordingly in 2022 *Songs of Empowerment: Women in 21st century Popular Music*, which has now gone past 4500 downloads. In the post I wrote then about that volume, I wondered what the volume about the men might be called, fearing it would be *Songs of Entitlement*. There are a few songs of that kind, but in the 60 songs we have explored together in class and through the book's essays men are mainly expressing angst and a generalized inability to face life with confidence, though it is also true that there songs of resistance and of reassurance in our wonderful corpus (enjoy the Spotify list here).

I have been publishing work by students since 2014, when I taught the course on *Harry Potter*, as I have narrated here so often. Each of the eleven books has gone through a similar process, except for the first two which were not really planned. As soon as I can, I communicate to students that the purpose of the course is to generate an e-book (published in .pdf and, more recently, also as Epub) on the topic of the course. I usually pre-select a corpus but leave some margin for students to choose either among the texts I have selected or propose their own choices, though on some occasions I have simply allocated the texts at random (I think that personal choice works best). After a few introductory lectures, I turn classes into a shared event in which students' presentations dominate, followed by debate. I provide a sample for the presentation, which I perform in class.

Based on their presentations, students draft then their essays for the book, in a number that has varied from 2 to 6, depending on the subject. The essay also follows a sample I provide (this is one of the articles I contribute to the book). I usually return 75% of the essays for a revision, and the revised text is what appears in the book, sometimes with further editorial intervention from me, sometimes with no intervention whatsoever. What really surprises me is how coherent the volumes end up being, given the variety of styles and the diverse command of English of the students, yet it usually works. I have discarded very, very few essays in the eleven volumes so far published; I'd rather ask for a new revision, though this has been rarely needed. When I describe my method, most colleagues look very interested but so far I have not convinced anybody to develop their own projects. Yes, it's a lot of work, but since students take over most of the teaching, under my guidance, I invest my teaching hours into shaping their texts up for publication. In this way they have something already to include in their CVs.

This year fifteen students have participated in the book, thirteen of them with four essays each, one with two and another with one. These two students were auditors, the

rest were formally registered in the course. I myself have contributed five essays: my sample essay (on Depeche Mode's 'Wrong') and four essays which I added to fill in gaps when the book was ready. My nieces pointed out I should have an essay on The Weeknd ('Save Your Tears'), on Post Malone ('Rockstar') and on a trans singer (Cavetown's 'Boys Will Be Bugs') since the volume did include a variety of cisgender performers, from heterosexual to queer. I added an article on my admired Foo Fighters ('The Pretender').

You'll have to download the book (please do!!) to check the rest of the songs, which are organized in chronological order, from Eminem's 'Without Me' (2003) to Jimin's 'Like Crazy' (2023). Whereas on the volume dealing with the women singer's I provided a basic list of 25 indispensable names, to which we added other 35 artists, in this case I decided to let students choose freely, both solo artists and bands in any popular genre. We have ended up with a mix of very well-known names (Ed Sheeran, Shawn Mendes, Maroon 5, Coldplay….) and alternative performers (Xavier Rudd, Chicano Batman, Noah Kahan) which works beautifully. Inevitably, some names are missing (Justin Bieber anyone…?) but, then, the world of music is very vast and men's presence immense in it.

The research question this year was 'what do men sing about in their songs?' provided these songs had lyrics in English and had been released in the 21st century. Students did not always choose songs focused on masculinity, though most of them were, and, anyway, I decided that if a man sings about a woman this is also part of the expression of their masculinity – perhaps most clearly so in Robin Thicke's notorious 'Blurred Lines', Bruno Mars's vastly different celebration of sex 'Locked Out of Heaven', or Frank Ocean's 'Lost'. The love songs that appear are not particularly celebratory and usually tend to show the man's regret for having failed to meet standards (Coldplay's 'The Scientist'), perplexity or even a candid acknowledgment of shortcomings still accompanied by a certain sense of entitlement (The Weeknd's 'Save Your Tears'). I had to smile at Wallows's straightforward 'I Don't Want to Talk'.

There are expressions of self-assurance in some of the songs selected, and one might even say of magnificently egocentric masculinity: Arctic Monkeys's 'Brianstorm', Marilyn Manson's 'Heart-shaped Glasses', or Lil Nas X's daring 'Montero'. Other are more modest, such as Henry in 'Just Be Me' or Harry Styles's 'Lights Up', perhaps even Omar Apollo's 'Invincible', while some are just great fun (Owl City's 'Fireflies'). Yet my impression is that the reader will be overwhelmed by how many songs deal with pain, suffering, addiction and even suicide. Sam Fender's 'Dead Boys' addressed this topic head-on, while Linkin Park's 'Numb' calls attention about how spiritual numbness is the first step in the path to destruction. Other songs express the despair of being unable to help others (The Fray's 'How to Save a Life') or help oneself (Mac Miller's 'Self Care').

I realize going through the table of contents how varied our approaches have been, including a bit of satire (Lindemann's 'Cowboy', The Killers' 'The Man'). Perhaps a touch of humour is missing in the songs about the problems of enjoying success (Labrinth's 'Mount Everest', Drake's 'God's Plan', Anderson .Paak's 'The Season/Carry Me' and others), or perhaps a more critical approach is needed regarding the contradiction implied in wanting to be a musical star and then being unable to put up with celebrity and fame, without anxiety and depression (Panic! at the Disco's 'This Is Gospel'). There is also a deep contradiction in the expression of a desire which cannot be controlled and forces men to try to liberate themselves from a gender discourse barely understood (Muse's 'Hysteria').

I cannot go through the complete list of songs and comment on all of them (this is what the book is for), but we have found pockets of resistance to the established discourses on men and masculinities in songs as diverse as As It Is's 'The Stigma (Boys Don't Cry)', Macklemore & Ryan Lewis's 'Same Love' or Mika's 'Good Guys', which calls for more LGTBQI+ persons to take the mantle left by the passing of big idols like Freddie Mercury. Others songs are more reflexive, such as Lukas Graham's '7 Years' and it's

amazing to see how many young men are concerned by the passage of youth; The Neighbourhood's 'R.I.P. 2 My Youth' or Passenger's 'When We Were Young' are examples of this trend.

I don't have an absolute favourite among these 60 songs, but if there is a song of survival, which is also a song of reassurance this is Finneas's 'What They Will Say about Us'. I believe that patriarchy is repressing many men by forcing them to wear a mask which some enjoy (Post Malone's 'Rockstar') and others resent (Foo Fighter's 'The Pretender'). In this context I find Finneas's serene and well-balanced masculinity absolutely refreshing. His song is an offer to care for whoever needs care, without pretending he is himself invulnerable, and I believe this is the way to go, for men of any description and indeed for women. The difference is that whereas the obligation to care has been imposed on us, women, and deprived us of our freedom in many ways by subordinating us to husbands and children, men can find in caring a source of pride and a way to build a solid masculinity which does not obey selfish patriarchal rules. The man who offers care does not mind that the patriarchal men think he is feminized, and this exactly what is needed: men who care for the wellbeing of the others and who do not care for the oppressive opinions of patriarchal men. This is the way not only to survive but for men to live good lives, and for anyone else.

## 12 July 2023 / NOW THAT I HAVE READ *THE SHARDS*: FEAR, LOATHING, AND *AMERICAN PSYCHO*

I feel provoked to write today by an MA dissertation arguing that in *American Psycho* (1991) Bret Easton Ellis manipulates readers so that they share with its protagonist, Patrick Bateman, the pleasure he feels when he tortures, mutilates and kills his victims. I will award the student in question an A because she has researched and written her dissertation flawlessly, yet I also need to express my total disagreement with her thesis. This happens: as teachers we need to distinguish between the academic skills and the content in students' exercises, provided of course that said content is not totally far-fetched. I always tell my Victorian Literature students that if they try to convince me that *Great Expectations* is a story about alien abduction they will not go very far; quite another matter is disagreeing on a controversial point within the limits of what is relevant in the text.

My brother, a fan of *American Psycho* like myself, gave me Ellis's most recent novel, *The Shards*, as a present last Sant Jordi's book day. I disappeared from hours on end into the protagonist's increasingly deranged account of his teen days. That the young man is called Bret Easton Ellis is the author's post-postmodern way to play with his readers, a joke some reviewers have found to be in very poor taste, but that I loved. There was a hint, somewhere, that the fictional Bret Ellis may have been closely connected to his literary sibling Patrick Bateman. I am not saying that they are the same man (I don't think they are), but whereas *American Psycho* narrates the exploits of a terribly broken male mind, *The Shards* narrates how the mind of a young man starts breaking.

Many reviewers and readers decried this is not the right time to tell a grim story about white privileged Californian teens and their Reaganite ultra-capitalist 1980s background, but I was young and unprivileged in the same era, many kilometres away, and I am fascinated by how the same music, the same films, the same TV shows could fill teen lives so differently in the same generation. The rich teens in *The Shards* are not so different from teens I could see in Barcelona's wealthier neighbourhoods, and what Ellis is doing here at the risk of ruining his own personal reputation is to remind us that

privilege is rotten at the core, particularly in the case of the insecure young men who do not know how to deal with their sexuality and masculinity.

Oddly, I have not written about *American Psycho*, except for some passages in my doctoral dissertation, and an unpublished conference paper, "Teaching Politically Incorrect Contemporary Gothic Fictions: Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho* (1991) and Stephen King's *Misery* (1987)", of 1999, in which I explained why some horror texts are next to impossible to teach in class given their very graphic content. Twenty-four years later, I still haven't changed my mind: I would never teach Ellis's controversial novel because I believe it is a text best consumed in private and discussed through academic publications (or other types).

The main problem, as the dissertation I have read proves, is that it is difficult for less experienced readers to understand that a first-person narrative is not always designed for readers to sympathize or empathize with the protagonist. The author of the dissertation argues that this is how the novel operates: Ellis shows he is a master novelist by totally erasing the distance between his psychopathic male protagonist and the readers in order to make them feel what Bateman feels, namely, pleasure. I happen to totally disagree with this view.

I believe that Ellis actually designed *American Psycho* with a double purpose. On the one hand, he describes down to the last ghastly detail how thoroughly vicious a man who is deeply mentally ill can be; Patrick Bateman is monstrous and Ellis dares us to get as close as possible to him in order to grasp what a sick mind is like. On the other hand, Ellis is subtly mocking the readers who get too close by hinting that they might be psychopaths themselves in their lack of empathy for the unfortunate victims (if, that is, Bateman does kill anyone and is not simply fantasizing the whole time).

And, yes, I am committing the academic crime of taking for granted that an author's intentions can be understood but, then, *American Psycho* is that kind of novel against which many other academic crimes are still being perpetrated. To begin with, Ellis's use of the first-person narrative voice has been misunderstood, which often happens. I've been teaching this semester *King Solomon's Mines* and it's amazing to see how often the opinions of the main character, Allan Quatermain, are assumed to be those of the author, H. Rider Haggard. Nobody believes that Charles Dickens and Pip in *Great Expectations* are the same person, though.

There are, then, no grounds to claim that Bateman's horrific acts of violence, his classism and misogyny are a direct expression of Ellis's own stance, though this is what many readers, above all women, assumed. As a feminist woman, I read *American Psycho* as the portrayal of a deep malaise at the heart of Wall Street's capitalistic patriarchal villainy, though at the same time I understand that Bateman belongs in a different nightmarish world from Gordon Gekko's empire of greed in Oliver Stone's film *Wall Street*. Bateman, this is important, is too enmeshed in his own psychopathology to be minimally functional, which is what makes his narrative veer between the chilling and the ludicrous. Readers are not supposed to be on his side; we need to look at the Sadeian and sadistic spectacle of his madness in the same way we 'enjoy' other monsters such as Freddy Krueger or Norman Bates.

What makes Bateman particularly dangerous is Ellis's powerful prose and that *American Psycho* was marketed as mainstream literature (by Vintage after Simon & Schuster tried to destroy it) and not as horror fiction. Having made a point that other defenders of this novel have made, I'd like to note that this novel was published only two years after the execution on the electric chair of notorious rapist and serial killer Ted Bundy. I have written recently about Bundy in my new volume *American Masculinities in Contemporary Documentary Film: Up Close Behind the Mask*, in which I analysed the Netflix mini-series *Conversations with a Killer: The Ted Bundy Tapes*. In these tapes, recorded for a book by two journalists, Bundy (who had a degree in Psychology) offers

a diagnosis of his own case in the third person. Bundy argues that 'he' was dominated by misogynistic sexual fantasies which could have been repressed if it weren't because 'he' found in pulp porn (stories, not images) an inspiration, or blueprint, to commit his crimes. One of the journalists that interviewed him angrily snarls that 'if all men who consume pornography were affected in that way the world would be full of Ted Bundys' and, of course, he is right: you need to be mentally ill, unable to distinguish between fantasy and reality, for your consumption of porn to become the basis of any actual violent action.

The point I am making is that Ellis followed a similar path for Bateman (both he and Bundy are apparently well-adapted, well-liked men) and asked himself whether an upper-class man could also be a serial killer, since, so far, only working-class and low middle-class men had been characterized as such. To build Bateman's narrative voice Ellis appears to have mixed Bundy's more banal declarations about his own psychopathology with Jim Thompson's absolutely terrifying first-person narrative voice in *The Killer Inside Me* (1952). In that novel, marketed as crime fiction, Lou Ford is a sheriff with a double life, a model that goes all the way back to R.L. Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), with the difference that while Mr. Hyde never narrates what he does, Ford and Bateman do, in all its unsettling detail. This pornographic violence was common in the pulp porn that Bundy consumed, and in the noir fiction to which Thompson's novel belongs, but it became appallingly offensive when it crossed into the mainstream, as I have noted.

When I was reading *American Psycho* for the first time, at the height of its notoriety right after publication, a friend told me that what most baffled her was thinking of Ellis writing and rewriting the torture scenes until he got the effect he was after. I always think of her observation. J.K. Rowling confessed that she had cried and cried when she wrote the scene in which a very dear character in the *Harry Potter* series is murdered; when her husband asked her why she had put herself through so much pain she replied it was necessary for the plot. Now imagine Ellis waking up each morning for months, or perhaps years, to become Patrick Bateman's ventriloquist and spew that appalling trash through his keyboard. As far as we know, Ellis is not a serial killer, which means that his impersonation of his main character's voice must have been challenging to say the least. Thomas Harris chose the third person narrative voice to approach Hannibal Lecter, siding first with experienced FBI Agent Will Graham and later with rookie FBI Agent Clarice Starling to get close to the monster. In Bateman's case, there is no filter between author and character, no buffer zone between protagonist and reader. This, of course, can be confusing.

I am convinced that *American Psycho* needs to be read as a satire of those yuppie males exalted by the capitalist system as winners, but looking back, now that we live in a world dominated by hegemonic men like Mark Zuckerberg, Jeff Bezos or Elon Musk, it appears to be, too, a portrait of the general psychopathology of the American capitalist system. The three men I have mentioned are entrepreneurs and, thus, have a certain merit as creators of new ideas, whether we like them or not. Bateman, actually, is an investment banker and, as such, he is closer to the villainous cadre that caused the world to collapse in 2008.

I recommend that you see Charles Ferguson's excellent documentary *Inside Job*, and read the companion volume he wrote to understand the type. The fat cats of the capitalist past, the ageing, paunchy men looking down on others cigar in hand, have been replaced from the 1980s onwards by sleeker players, like Bateman, now presenting themselves as action men leading *Playboy*-style lives, even when they are family men. Ferguson described how the financial masters of the universe (to use Tom Wolfe's label) acted motivated by greed; totally unregulated by the law they create a huge pyramidal scam that destroyed many lives while they still enjoyed their yearly bonuses and their

banks were rescued with public money. I find that more obscene than Bateman's murders, but perhaps Ellis didn't know enough about finance to expose his protagonist as a first-class scammer and not just a serial killer. In terms of the Wall Street circle, it surprises me that Bateman is such small fry; Gordon Gekko would probably despise him.

To conclude, I'll repeat my main thesis: *American Psycho* is not designed for readers to connect, empathize or sympathise with his protagonist, a man who suffers from a profound psychopathology, but to make us see how dysfunctional the men in privileged positions can be. Whether his crimes are real or a fantasy, Bateman struggles to establish his credentials as a hegemonic male in a highly competitive Wall Street world, in which he really is a nobody. He lashes out against those weaker than himself seeking to re-empower his insecure, faltering masculinity, but he gains no recognition and his crimes, supposing they are real, are ignored.

No reader who is mentally balanced and gifted with a normal capacity for empathy can side with Bateman, and if you do, then you must know that you are the target of Ellis's dark satire, for he is telling us that the world is full of men secretly fantasizing about rape, torture, and murder. Bateman, it must be stressed, is not normative: he is the abnormal Other, the Jekyll and Hyde wacky psycho. As such, he is not Ellis's mouthpiece but a scarecrow he uses to warn us that there is something deeply rotten at the core of American capitalistic society, in the 1980s and now. Yuppies were envied and admired then but through Bateman Ellis tells us that this is not what we should feel for them; borrowing from the title of Hunter S. Thompson's masterpiece, a writer who would have enjoyed Ellis's satire, Bateman should elicit, always, fear and loathing, nothing else.

## 23 July 2023 / STUDENTS' RATINGS OF FACULTY: HOW IT WORKS AND SOME IDEAS TO IMPROVE IT

This post is extremely difficult to write without sounding whiny and defensive, but I do need to write it, particularly considering that I don't seem to have dealt with the matter of students' ratings of faculty in almost thirteen years of blogging. So here we go.

I have access to the students' assessment of my task as a teacher for the last ten years, but as far as I recall, my university has been assessing teachers for many more years, though I don't recall ever rating my teachers (I graduated in 1991). In my university students' ratings are mainly used as indicators of problems to be tackled, but they don't have a negative impact on our salaries. Last time I applied for a five-year teacher assessment exercise (to get a small pay rise), the problem was that not enough students had rated me (I passed thanks to other indicators). My Department has the highest percentage of student participation in teacher rating of the School, and that is only 35%. We have been told that students should use 15 minutes of classroom time to rate us, as we did in the past when surveys were done on paper instead of digitally online, but I have not seen this semester more than 35% of my group in class, so that instruction might not really change anything.

The questionnaires that my university uses consist of two sets of questions, one which refers to the subject more generally and another which refers to the teacher's performance. You can easily see how problematic this set of questions is, leaving aside the matter of not being tied at all to student's attendance (yes, you might get rated by someone who has never attended your lectures as long as they are registered in your subject). Here are the problems I see in the questions about the course:

1) has the syllabus been followed?: if you get less than 4 (the maximum mark) you still don't know what the students think is missing.

2) is the course material is well prepared and useful?: which course material? Does this refer to the set books, the handbook, or the other documents?

3) is the assessment system clearly described in the Teaching Guide (or Syllabus)?: again, if you get less than 4 points you still don't know what students miss in the guide and how to improve it.

4) are the assessment items suitable?: same problem, the points are no indication of any specific problems; some items might work fine, while others don't work at all.

5) is the student's workload reasonable?: according to which type of student? I believe it is practically impossible to get 4 points here unless the student's workload is so light that even the less committed students are happy. If you get a very low mark, then you clearly need to revise the workload but, again, which part?

6) has the student learnt 'things' (really!) valuable for their education?: 'things', not competences or contents, but 'things'. Supposing students reply that they have learned plenty, as teachers we still don't know in what sense. They may be happy with the skills and not with the content or vice-versa.

Regarding the questions about the teacher here are the problems:

1) does the teacher explain matters with clarity? This leads to my own flipped question for students: are you every day in class to judge this? Have you done the homework required to follow the teacher's explanations? Are you alert and concentrated in class?

2) does the teacher maintain a good communication with students? This is very subjective, teachers click with some students, and not others. If this refers to whole groups, then, as we know, with some there is a very good understanding from the beginning, with others communication is poor also from the beginning.

3) does the teacher tutor students suitably in person or online? We don't have a tutorial system, so I don't know what this means; we have rules to be available during our office hours and on email, but no formal tutoring as such.

4) does the teacher make useful comments based on the assessment activities (i.e. gives good feedback)? Again, this requires a flipped question: do students read the feedback notes we include in exercises and check the corrections? Do they always pick up exercises once they have been marked?

5) Is the teacher globally a good teacher? This is an absurd question because the questionnaire should be designed to answer that question without the student essentially expressing a direct opinion. Here the student is basically asked 'do you like this teacher?'

6) 'I have learned with this teacher': here the student is invited to say yes or no, but, surely, whether you learn with a teacher also depends on how hard you study, doesn't it? Not even the best teacher can teach a student who doesn't want to learn.

I believe that students' ratings of faculty can only work if at least 80% of the class participates in it. There is little incentive for students who pass the subject to answer the surveys, and it is quite possible that the 30% students who fill in the questionnaires are those mostly dissatisfied. The surveys, by the way, are carried out before the academic year is over. I assume this is to avoid the final mark to condition teacher assessment, but this is like rating a product on Amazon before it gets home and you see it (I'm not sure the analogy is valid but I hope you get my point).

I have no problem to admit that I am writing this post because this year I have scored below 3 points, a very humbling 2'58. I have just checked that two years ago, in the middle of the Covid-19 pandemic I scored 3'54, but I am at a loss about how to interpret these figures. My methodology has not changed, though something that has indeed changed is the number of students in class: two years ago I assessed 45, this year I had 60 in my hands, which means less personal attention, worse collective communication and in general more distance between the class and myself (it's the first time I don't learn all their names). I knew half-way through the semester that although the

final figures for student assessment would not be a problem (15% have not passed, which is habitual), communication was not working. There was a blog post that did not help, and my insistence that class attendance was essential only resulted in even lower attendance.

Now, what worries me is that teacher's assessment is not discussed, either in my Department or in the School. It might well be that, for example, there are common trends we are missing. I don't know if my case is punctual, or more general for instance among my age group. I grant that the questionnaires have depressed me, but what depresses even more is that I have been offered no instrument to improve my performance. I cannot ask any of my now former students what went wrong, as this is never done and might embarrass them. I feel a little bit like a girlfriend who has been abandoned and only discovers at the end of the relationship that it was not going well, when she thought it was mostly fine.

I don't know, in short, what to change and improve the next academic year. Perhaps I need not do anything, and this is just a matter of bad chemistry with a set of students, or perhaps it is time to reconsider in depth what I have been doing in recent years. Just for you to understand how difficult the situation is, I copied from a very successful American university teacher the idea of writing a set of rules for the students and myself that would act as a contract, but that went down very poorly, giving me a reputation for being prissy and bossy from day one. I also tried to be more friendly by introducing myself via a short bio and inviting students to do the same, following this prestige teacher's suggestion. Only about 12 out of 60 replied to my message.

I believe I can do mainly two things next year to improve my performance, based on the students' feedback: 1) write a specific questionnaire that all students need to fill in (after assessment is over), 2) establish a system for students to send me feedback anonymously at any point of the course. I was in communication with the class delegate this year, but the feedback I got was not specific enough, and I never got any positive feedback about what worked well. I don't care whether I get a 4 or a 2, this is not about being popular or well-liked, but about getting rid of the impression that I have no way to discuss what we do in class while the subject is being taught and not afterwards. I will insist that for me this is the main point.

I would like to stress that as a teacher I don't rate student's performance. That is to say, the final mark is based on my rating of their exercises, not of whether they are good or bad students – that is totally unrelated because I don't know how much they do at home independently from me. Teachers, in contrast, are assessed on the basis of subjective impressions, much as we all assess services as customers. As such, I am always dissatisfied with numbers, which is why I read reviews apart from just checking a product or a service's rating. Students can also add comments to their questionnaires, but they are very few and often very cryptic (what does 'The teacher is very proud' mean, or 'The class could be more dynamic'?). Numbers, in short, mean very little, and I extend this to student assessment, which is nothing without feedback comments from the teacher. I need those feedback comments more than the figure, and I think we teachers need student assessment to stop being absolutely anonymous. We don't rate students anonymously, a practice that in my view does not guarantee objectivity at all. So, why is all our rating anonymous?

Anyway, message received and I'll try to do better next year though, as I have said, I don't really know what parts of my performance I need to improve. I am not saying that I need to improve nothing, as I am more than willing to change whatever needs to be changed provided high standards can still be kept. The problem is that the feedback I have got is totally useless. I just know that students did not like me this year very much but my aim is not to be popular, but to be effective. If I can be popular and effective, that's

great, but my job is to make sure that students pass my subjects, hopefully with As and Bs rather than Cs, and if I need to be more strict and less likeable for that, then so be it.

As I said, this was a difficult post to write without sounding whiny or defensive. With apologies, I don't think I have managed.

## 29 July 2023 / KEN LEARNS ABOUT THE PATRIARCHY: KENOUGH MIGHT NOT BE KENOUGH

[WARNING: This post discusses the movie *Barbie* with spoilers]

It's been a week since Greta Gerwig's movie *Barbie* was released and the internet is abuzz with comments of all sizes and types. Surely, mine is not needed but, as happens, the more I think about the movie, the more restless I get. I was delighted by Gerwig's clever script (co-written with her husband Noah Baumbach) but I am now quite worried about the main narrative arcs, those of Barbie and Ken, which are not exactly fulfilling.

I have read lots about how empowering this movie is for women but, to be honest, I don't quite see it. Barbie, who spends the whole film rejecting Ken's clumsy advances is rewarded… with a full set of genitalia, presumably of the female kind, which is what apparently makes her human. Her 'owner' Gloria's narrative arc does not empower her at all, either. I expected humble, hard-working Gloria to be named Mattel's new CEO instead of the obnoxious, cocky guy Will Ferrell plays, since she restores the lost balance in Barbieland. Yet, in her last scene she is just driving Barbie to her first appointment with the gynaecologist. How is that scene empowering for either of them? And how come the all-male Mattel board is left untouched? Shouldn't Barbie's creator, Ruth Handler (played by the great Rhea Pearlman), have something to say about the company she co-founded? (the real CEO, by the way, is a man but the real Board Of Directors currently consists of six men and five women).

What worries me most profoundly, hence this post, are the many comments online praising Ryan Gosling for stealing the show with his performance as Ken. On the other hand, I hear voices wondering whether Ken has too much protagonism for a movie called *Barbie*, and I agree: Barbie's personal crisis, unleashed when she senses Gloria's intimations of mortality (and despair at cellulitis) is subordinated to the collective crisis the Barbies face when Ken returns from the visit to the real world with a plan to establish patriarchy.

As Gerwig and Baumbach have it, Ken's main problem is that he is too dependent on attracting Barbie's interest and she is not that interested in him, a male doll created mainly to be her accessory. Barbieland is a matriarchy and the men appear to be just a sort of adornment, with no housing of their own (where do they sleep?) and no function, except being around. Ken himself says that his job is 'beach', when he is asked in the real world, not even 'beach bum', just 'beach'. His uselessness, lack of an identity of his own, and dependence on Barbie is what prompts him to hide in her car as a redundant stowaway when she decides to seek her 'owner' in the real world. What is most puzzling in the Barbie and Ken relationship is that Barbie's tepid attitude clearly signals it is not romantic, while he appears to consider himself her boyfriend. Given their lack of genitalia (for these are dolls, let's recall), it is hard to say what exactly Ken craves from Barbie though, as his arc advances, it appears to be recognition as a man.

I have referred here several times to Lorenzo Mediano's intriguing novel *El secreto de la Diosa* (2003, *The secret of the Goddess*) which still remains for me the most plausible account of what could have happened in Prehistory. I was reminded very much of this novel as I watched *Barbie*. In Mediano's novel, his tribal Homo Sapiens live in a

matriarchal society built around the cult of the Goddess, which reflects women's ability to engender new life. Since sex and birth are separated by nine long months, the men fail to understand their own role in procreation until a clever young man puts two and two together and concludes the men are being duped. What follows is the violent overthrow of the Goddess cult and the submission of the women by means of what we now call patriarchy. In *Barbie* Ken makes no crucial discovery about how sex and birth are connected because Barbieland is sexless (though there is a pregnant doll, Midge, married to Allan, Ken's best friend, which Mattel once produced but quickly withdraw from the market for fear she might be misread as a single mother). Ken simply travels to our own world and discovers, together with Barbie, that it is a patriarchy. This is where the movie becomes truly scary.

Ken's ideas about the patriarchy are quite muddled (he believes that horses play a major role, presumably after he learns what a cowboy is) but what is frightening is how quickly he manages to upend Barbieland's matriarchy by having all the Kens brainwash all the Barbies into grateful submission. Gerwig and Baumbach may make fun of all the stereotypes attached to patriarchal masculinity, but Ken is a man with a mission and his mission is very ugly. Gloria (played by America Ferrera) is given the counter-mission of returning the brainwashed women to matriarchal sanity by reciting all the ways in which men in the real world undermine women's bodies and minds. This, of course, is what feminism is supposed to do: open women's eyes to patriarchal reality, renew their awareness of who we truly are. Yet, although this process of consciousness raising may work for the women, who eventually manage to restore their power and their matriarchal institutions, it does nothing for the men (they seem, anyway, more interested in fighting each other).

I watched the film on July 22, the day before the general elections in Spain, when there was still a chance that the right-wing, ultra-patriarchal party Vox might enter the Government and, believe me, Ken's coup d'état seemed to me just a horrifying allegory. Still, I was left wondering why the Barbies found no way to integrate the Kens in their democracy. The image of the all-pink, all-female Parliament voting itself back into action was empowering, yes, but also worrying because it was the counterpart of the Mattel's all-male board in the movie's 'real-life' world. As I noted, there is no room in that board for Gloria, but there is no room either for the Kens in the Barbies' seat of power.

Margot Robbie, who plays wonderfully the constantly amazed Barbie, is also one of the four film producers (the other three are men) and she did have a say in how the film should develop. She has been apparently gently mocked by her friends for deciding not to turn Barbie and Ken's story into a romance, thus missing the chance to kiss attractive Ryan Gosling. Robbie was adamant that Barbie's narrative arc should not conclude with love so, as noted, it concludes with the doll's transformation into a flesh and blood woman. What is Ken given instead? Well, he is given a tie-dye hoodie with the legend 'I Am Kenough' printed on it; the hoodie, by the way, is going to be shortly sold by Mattel who did not think in advance it might interest anybody.

If Ken is finally 'Kenough', this means that he was not enough before; he is still not enough for Barbie, but he becomes enough for himself to be in short, his own man. I find this a very positive message (patriarchal misogyny will end the day men stop feeling resentful because they need women), but in the end we are still building a post-postmodern doctrine of the 'separate spheres' in which love is out of the equation, even the possibility that men and women share power and feel pleasure in each other's company. Ken ends where he started, on the beach, just less inclined to chase Barbie around now that he is his own man. He is not just Barbie's accessory but the possessor of his own identity, which spells out through the word Kenough that he is now 'man enough'. Fair enough…

Mattel has already announced their intention of releasing as many sequels as they can to *Barbie*, which is, of course, a serious mistake. Gerwig's film is adorable as a parody, and it should not be read as a two-hour long advertising for Barbie merchandising products. Inevitably, this is what it will become, as its amazing box-office performance has turned into the windfall Mattel sorely needed to get out of the red numbers zone. The improvised decision to sell a whole line of Kenough merchandising gives a clue about how little Mattel understood Gerwig's film but also of how quickly they are catching up. Gerwig has declared she has no more to give to Barbie, but Mattel and Warner Bros. will no doubt find alternatives, both to direct and to script the sequels. The first sequel faces, in any case, the challenge of what to do with a fully human Barbie in our patriarchal world, and the challenge of whether Ken should follow the same path. It doesn't look good.

Enjoy *Barbie*, but don't buy Barbies; love the parody, but don't accept Ken's gleeful enjoyment of patriarchy; celebrate women's power but find ways to communicate with men. At least the ones who are Kenough. And don't ever vote for the other kind, do not let yourself be brainwashed by them, whether you are a woman, a man or non-binary (by the way, Mattel's 'gender-neutral' Creatable World dolls, launched in 2019, were discontinued in 2021; none appears in *Barbie*).

## 30 July 2023 / OF FAIRIES AND WITCHES: AN ACCIDENT OF HISTORY

My doctoral student Laura Luque is now giving the finishing touches to her excellent PhD dissertation on the positive representation of the witch as a figure of empowerment in contemporary YA fantasy literature. She has focused on Terry Pratchett, J.K. Rowling, Rin Chupeco and Kelley Armstrong, which is certainly enough, although as the lists in Goodreads show, the witch is present in the work of many more authors in these genres (see for instance this list).

A matter that puzzles me after reading Laura's work is whether a witch who uses her powers for good is actually a fairy. Laura tells me that whereas fairies are not seen as threatening figures by patriarchy and, hence, no woman has been burnt at the stake accused of being a fairy, witches oppose patriarchy with their powers. The women who were tortured and executed under suspicion of being witches died in horrific ways precisely because they were feared as a source of anti-patriarchal power. The witches that Second-Wave feminism rescued and YA fantasy authors celebrate in the 21st century are, thus, a vindication of the many real-life women who lost their lives to rampant patriarchal misogyny. Fair enough, but I still have doubts.

Frank L. Baum's novel *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900) and its popular film adaptation (1939, Victor Fleming) must be credited with the turn by which the good witch almost replaced the fairy. The Wicked Witch of the West, a character popularized by Margaret Hamilton's performance in the film, in which she is famously characterized as a horrific, green-skinned hag, has been vindicated by Gregory Maguire's novel *Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West* (1995) and its musical stage adaptation *Wicked* (2003), and other texts. Yet, few have paid equal attention to Glinda, whom Baum created as the Good Witch of the South but who was transformed into the composite character the Good Witch of the North in the film. Apparently in later novels Glinda was labelled a sorceress, rather than a witch, but the point is that Baum did not call her a fairy. In contrast, Billie Burke, the actor who played Glinda in the film, called her a "good fairy" rather than a "good witch" (in her 1959 memoir *With Powder on My Nose*).

In her marvellous article for *The Atlantic*, "*The Wizard of Oz* Invented the 'Good Witch'" Pam Grossman, who identifies as a witch, explains that Baum's mother-in-law, American suffragist Matilda Joslyn Gage, may have inspired him with her feminist essay

*Woman, Church, and State* (1893). Grossman clarifies that although Baum defines Glinda as "the most powerful of all the Witches", she is a far more marginal character than in the film, in which she mainly sends Dorothy to find Oz after providing her with the magical ruby slippers. Interestingly, Glinda "doesn't let the young heroine take the easy way out. At the end of the film, she explains that she chose not to tell Dorothy that the girl had the power to heel-click herself home from the get-go, so that Dorothy could 'learn it for herself'".

I see actually very little difference between Glinda and the traditional fairy godmother, though we should ask the diverse contributors to the film script and the costume designer (Adrian Adolph Greenburg simply known as Adrian) of which figure they thinking when they characterized Glinda. Grossman insists, at any rate, that Glinda was the main inspiration for the turn that the witch took in popular American fiction; the new witch "must negotiate her relationship to the power she has—and whether her magic is seen as an asset or a threat is often a reflection of the sexual politics of her time". Grossman concludes that in *Harry Potter* and TV series *Sabrina*, "21st-century witches get to keep their powers *and* use them to save the world" (original italics), though she forgets that Rowling pitted her good witch Hermione against the bad witch Bellatrix, a cruel torturer and murderer.

Please note that King Arthur's wicked sister is known as Morgan le Fay, that is, 'the fairy'. It seems that "In old French romance, fee was a 'woman skilled in magic'", as Laura Kready informs in her 1916 volume *A Study of Fairy Tales*, and this is what Morgan is. Our conception of the fairy is essentially a legacy of the 19th century, but fairies had appeared thousands of years earlier in many folkloric traditions all over the world as magical beings of diverse sizes and varied personal dispositions, from the trickster to the caregiver. The Puritans, who were among the keenest persecutors of witches in the 17th century, appear to have demonized fairies as well, which makes perfect sense since the root of the persecution of witches is, as I have noted, misogyny and fairies were believed to be mostly female.

I believe we need to blame fairy tales, precisely, for the softening of the female fairy into that bland figure who appears to welcome royal princesses whenever one is born. These fairies have little to do with the fairies of medieval romance, with Spencer's *Fairie Queene* (1590) or with Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. It must not be forgotten besides that eleven years after Baum created Glinda, J.M. Barrie placed Tinker Bell, an example of the tiny fairy of English folklore, in Neverland, with his novel *Peter and Wendy* (1911), based on his famous play (1904).

On the other hand, it is important to recall that whereas Glinda is a good witch, the figure of the evil fairy Maleficent, popularized by the Disney adaptation of "Sleeping Beauty" released in 1959, sinks her roots in Charles Perrault's version of the fairy tale (1697), later also written down by the Brothers Grimm's as "Little Briar Rose". The origins of the tale are apparently to be found in the French-language anonymous prose chivalric romance *Perceforest* or *Le Roman de Perceforest* (c. 1340), though surely the idea that a magically endowed woman might turn evil has been around for centuries. The goddess Diana, for instance, used her divine might to turn peeping-Tom hunter Acteon into a stag to be eaten by his own dogs simply because he spied her bathing naked. I would insist that Morgan le Fay, a character perhaps of Welsh origin, first mentioned by Geoffrey of Monmouth in *Vita Merlini* (c. 1150) as a skilled healer, stands at the intersection between the fairy, the witch, the sorceress and the enchantress.

As I have mentioned, I have my suspicions that what makes the fairy less attractive than the witch in its current feminist incarnation is the presentation of the former as a godmother. Apparently, Madame d'Alnoy and her circle of *précieuses* (or blue-stocking aristocratic ladies), and Perrault are responsible for presenting fairies as protectors and mentors in tales such as "Cinderella" and "Sleeping Beauty", instead of individuals with

their own cares. Jane Yolen claims in *Touch Magic: Fantasy, Faerie, and Folklore in the Literature of Childhood* (1981) that although the story of the 'Ash-girl' had circulated for centuries between Asia and Europe, Perrault added the fairy godmother (p. 24), perhaps thinking of real-life French godmothers. In his and the Grimm Brothers' versions the fairy godmothers appear in groups, but we are used to seeing two or three at the most welcoming princess Aurora and just one helping Cinderella, just as Glinda helps Dorothy. The problem with the godmother, whether fairy or witch, is precisely that she is a sort of parent, and both for the First and Second-Wave feminists that got interested in the witch, this must have seemed uncool, too close to the traditional feminine role of the selfless caregiver present in the Victorian doctrine of the separate spheres.

In fact fairies and witches were basically similar types of misogynistic fantasies associated with the fear of powerful women capable of using magic until the publication of monstrosities such as the work by the German Dominican monks Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger, *Malleus Maleficarum* (1487) gave inquisitors a formidable tool to focus on the witch. It must be noted that the Inquisition had been originally founded in 1184, in Languedoc, to fight the Albigensian heresy and only in 1484 did Pope Innocent VIII officially decree that the Catholic Church believed in the existence of witches (in the papal bull *Summis desiderantes affectibus*). Joan of Arc, let's recall, had been burnt at the stake decades before, in 1431, as a heretic, not as a witch. In short, the method used to fight heresy was applied to fighting witches, the difference being that while heretics did exist, no woman ever had the magical powers attributed to witches. Interestingly, the first question Kramer and Spengler ask in their volume is "Whether the Belief that there are such Beings as Witches is so Essential a Part of the Catholic Faith that Obstinacy to maintain the Opposite Opinion manifestly savours of Heresy".

I'll end with an article which I have come across as I was about to close this post: "The Mingling of Fairy and Witch Beliefs in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century Scotland" by Canon J. A. MacCulloch (*Folklore* 32.4, 31 December 1921, 227-244). MacCulloch explains that "Widely separate in origin and personality as fairies and witches may be, nevertheless the beliefs regarding both are often altogether or nearly the same (…)" (228). In Scotland, where there had been no witch trials before the Reformation introduced them, women accused of witchcraft were said to draw their powers from the fairies, for "the theological view (…) was quite clear and straightforward, and both fairies and the mediaeval and post-Reformation witches were regarded as of Satan's train" (231). Please, note that Macbeth Weird Sisters, ultimately derived from the Greek Moira or Fates (from which Latin 'fatum', the root for 'fairy' comes), act as sinister fairy godmothers, not so different from Maleficent. MacCulloch argues that before the Enlightenment both the accused and the accuser were trapped by their serious difficulties to move beyond superstition into the realm of rationality, which explains why so many women died believing they were indeed witches. As for the fairies, if no woman was accused of being one, this is because like Satan they were believed to be spirits, not flesh-and-bones persons, though that could be a sort of historical accident. Instead of *Malleus Maleficarum* (*Hammer of the Witches*) the two Dominican sadists could have perhaps written *Malleus Fatorum* (*Hammer of the Fairies* in my macaronic Latin version); I'm sorry to say that the vocabulary would have been different but the result quite the same.

Here ends my vindication of the fairy as a powerful female figure, akin to the witch, supposing they are not exactly the same. Food for further thought…

## 8 August 2023 / THAT BAD WITCH: BELLATRIX BLACK LESTRANGE

Continuing with the topic of my previous post, and because I have been preparing a talk about her, I'd like to focus here on a truly bad witch: Bellatrix Black Lestrange. Bellatrix has been the object of a few scholarly publications, none devoted to her alone (all to be found on Google Scholar; the MLA database carries nothing on her). She appears discussed together with other bad witches (journalist Rita Skeeter, teacher and bureaucrat Dolores Umbridge) or with her nemesis, good witch Molly Weasley. Paradoxically, Gráinne O'Brien's "Witches or Bitches? An Examination of Two 'Bitch' Female Characters in the *Harry Potter* Series" (*The Evil Body*, April Anson (ed.), 2011, 121–131) analyses both Bellatrix and Molly as bitches, on the grounds that motherly Molly also has a mean streak, which is ultimately why she kills Bellatrix. Possibly.

I have enjoyed reading in particular S. Everton *et al*.'s "Strong Ties and Where to Find Them: or, Why Neville and Bellatrix Might Be More Important than Harry and Tom" (*Social Network Analysis and Mining* 12, 112 (2022)). This rather fun article considers Dumbledore's Army and the Death Eaters as social organizations to argue that whereas the former is built on the basis of strong mutual trust "to withstand stress and uncertainty", the Death Eaters are not a resilient network because the members are linked through their common fear of Voldemort. In this context, Bellatrix's role is central. The data Everton *et al*. assemble "presents the top-ranked Death Eaters in terms of degree, closeness, betweenness, and eigenvector centrality. [Bellatrix] ranks first on all four measures, and only Lucius Malfoy comes close to rivalling her. Thus, it is no accident that she is one of the few who does not abandon Voldemort in the final battle, and it is fitting that she is the last to die before Voldemort meets his end". However, they note, unfortunately "readers may see Bellatrix's prominence as more a function of her psychopathology than [of] her centrality" as a characters with a key narrative function.

Bellatrix's narrative arc led originally to her death as the villain Voldemort's most devoted servant, but, regrettably, Rowling gave her a sort of afterlife in that unmitigated disaster which is the play *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child* (2016). Written by Jack Thorne, based on an original story written by J. K. Rowling, John Tiffany, and Thorne himself, the play supposes that in the course of the last novel, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (2007), Bellatrix manages to carry out an adulterous affair with Voldemort (she is married to fellow Death Eater Rodolphus Lestrange), without anyone noticing her pregnancy or the birth of their daughter Delphini. As 18-year-old Delphini reports in the play, the baby was born in Malfoy Mannor before the battle of Hogwarts. There are precedents of main female character's silenced pregnancies. Cathy, for instance, is pregnant throughout the segment of *Wuthering Heights* when Heathcliff returns, but Brontë does not mention her condition. Rowling concealed that Dumbledore is gay, but that seems rather easy in comparison to having a heavily pregnant woman hovering around Voldemort during the main crisis. Hermione, usually so observing, fails to make any comment; Narcissa, Bellatrix's sister and presumed midwife, also keeps silent. Beyond the cringey melodramatic plot twist, what is lamentable in the Bellamort ship is how it distorts Bellatrix's motivations to support Voldemort, degrading her from his most trusted lieutenant to just his besotted lover.

A matter that puzzles me about Rowling's wizarding world is that it is hard to see the good applications of magic but very easy to see the bad ones. At the same time, Voldemort's narrative arc, with his fascistic attempts at capturing power in 1970 and again in 1997, has nothing in itself which is intrinsically magic. Voldemort himself and the Death Eaters are highly skilled at the dark arts, but the violence they use to fight their way into power is part of the same methods that all real-life dictators have used. If we consider Bellatrix, whom Harry calls a witch "with prodigious skill and no conscience"

(*Deathly Hallows*, ch. 23), she is a sadistic torturer and murderer of the kind many dictatorships have employed.

Bellatrix's lack of conscience, that is to say, of empathy, is the basis of the psychopathology which Everton *et al*. mention. Since Harry, in contrast, does possess a conscience, he cannot use the Crucio curse to torture Bellatrix right after she kills Sirius, her own cousin and Harry's godfather. She mocks the boy's love for Sirius and taunts him: "'Never used an Unforgivable Curse before, have you, boy?' she yelled. She had abandoned her baby voice now. 'You need to mean them, Potter! You need to really want to cause pain–to enjoy it–righteous anger won't hurt me for long–I'll show you how it is done, shall I? I'll give you a lesson–'" (*Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, ch. 36). Bellatrix reveals thus that her own curses work because she is a sadist. As a witch, then, Bellatrix may oppose the stereotypical old, ugly hag, but she is clearly descended from the classic henchman that fawns upon a master always impossible to please. The type has been often seen, with perhaps the only novelty in this case that Bellatrix is a woman.

Born in 1950 to the illustrious Black family, Bellatrix is the eldest of three sisters. Narcissa eventually marries Lucius Malfoy, but Andromeda marries Muggle-born Ted Tonks being immediately disowned by her family. Bellatrix is educated at Hogwarts between 1962 and 1967, more or less, and there she meets among other Slytherin students, her future husband, Rodolphus Lestrange. She marries him, possibly aged around 20, Sirius tells Harry sneeringly, because this is the type of "lovely, respectable pure-blood marriages" that the Blacks respect.

By 1970, when Tom Riddle gives his first coup as Lord Voldemort, Bellatrix, her husband, his brother Rastaban and other keen, young Death Eaters aid him. In 1981, after Voldemort fails to kill Harry and is left disembodied, his regime falls and Bellatrix and her closest circle are sent to Azkaban, specifically for the crime of torturing into a permanent coma Neville's parents. Harry recalls having seen Bellatrix in Dumbledore's Pensieve, "a tall dark woman with heavy-lidded eyes, who had stood at her trial and proclaimed her continuing allegiance to Lord Voldemort, her pride that she had tried to find him after his downfall and her conviction that she would one day be rewarded for her loyalty". With her habitual cruelty against the boy's godfather, Rowling has Harry reflect that "Like Sirius, [Bellatrix] retained vestiges of great good looks, but something–perhaps Azkaban–had taken most of her beauty". In the 15 years Bellatrix spends in the horrendous prison, between the ages of 30 and 45, before her escape in 1996, her supremacism and psychopathology are intensified. Her mad cackling is indeed a sign of an unbalanced mind on the brink of collapse.

Rowling does not describe the Lestrange marriage, but Bellatrix's husband never seems to be jealous of Voldemort. He survives the battle of Hogwarts to be sent to Azkaban for another long sentence. As Delphini claims in the play, Rodolphus is the person who discloses to her who her parents are. This should be a source of bitterness for him since he and Bellatrix have no children and Delphini's birth indicates that Rodolphus must be sterile. Yet, the issue is never raised. On the basis of pure speculation, then, either Rodolphus sees his wife's worship of Voldemort as a political stance which he also shares, or he simply does not care whether Bellatrix has sex with Voldemort or not.

Rowling always presents the relationship between Bellatrix and Voldemort who, let's recall, is 25 years older, as a matter of loyalty on her side and trust on his. However, although Voldemort rescues Bellatrix from the Ministry of Magic after Harry's failed attempt to torture her, this appears to be his only kindness towards her. Voldemort later mocks Bellatrix with the news that her half-blood niece Nymphadora Tonks has married werewolf Remus Lupin. Nonetheless, there is a strange moment in *Deathly Hallows* which suggests there might be indeed a sexual liaison between master and lieutenant. In chapter 36, Harry allows himself to be apparently killed and as he plays dead he hears

Bellatrix frantically trying to attract Voldemort's attention to pay homage to him. "It was Bellatrix's voice", Rowling reports through Harry, "and she spoke as if to a lover". Tired, Voldemort stops her with a curt "That will do". It is quite possible to read his reaction as that of a lover beginning to tire of his mistress. Later, when she is killed by Molly in the duel that Voldemort watches, he screams and unleashes a fury so deep that Harry, still in hiding, reveals his presence to stop him. The scream of rage could be likewise read as a sign of despair from a lover, though I would still maintain that Voldemort registers with it his pain at the loss of her most faithful lieutenant, the only one who truly loves him as a powerful master.

Delphini's birth also contradicts one of the fundamental traits that characterize Bellatrix: that she is not a mother. In Rowling's universe, mothers occupy a central position: Harry's mother Lilly is constantly honoured for her sacrifice to save her baby; Molly Weasley is idealized as a bossy but devoted mother. Apart from torturing Neville's parents, Hermione, and the goblin Griphook, Bellatrix kills Sirius, the house-elf Dobby, and attempts to kill Ginny Weasley at the battle of Hogwarts. Molly, who has already lost one of her twins sons, Fred, will not sacrifice her daughter, hence her screaming at Bellatrix "Not my daughter, you bitch!" Their duel appears to be heavily lopsided in Bellatrix's favour, but just as Sirius underestimates Bellatrix's skills, she underestimates Molly's, who hits her with an Avada Kedrava curse as she hit her cousin: with all her might, born of all her hatred. The bad witch dies, then, when the good witch decides to cease being good in order to protect her children; hers is a kind of justified violence which Rowling endorses. If Bellatrix were a mother, she would have understood Molly's rage and even perhaps her sister Narcissa's decision to betray Voldemort for the sake of her son Draco. This is why the play's plot twist is so absurd.

Calling Bellatrix mad or evil is just lazy. She is a bad witch because she has been raised in a supremacist family, as part of a supremacist culture. Her natural sadism and lack of empathy make her an ideal Death Eater, to which her sincere worship of Voldemort also contributes. Bellatrix does not seek her own empowerment, as the wives of other dictators have done (think of Imelda Marcos), but she is not a passive admirer as Eva Braun was of Hitler. Bellatrix is, perhaps, closer to Magda Goebbels, the loyal wife and mother who killed her own children and herself right before Hitler's fall. Bellatrix's main reward is being seen as Voldemort's most trusted servant, which is why only Snape, who knows this is her main weakness, has the ability to undermine her self-esteem. In this sense her lowest point happens when the Death Eaters fail to retrieve the prophecy from the Ministry, a failure for which Voldemort blames her and which makes her beg for forgiveness at his feet, thoroughly humiliated.

In short, without Voldemort, Bellatrix would have been just a bad person; with him, she unleashes all her potential to be the worst witch ever, subordinating in any case her astonishing powers to his lust for power.

## 16 August 2023 / BETWEEN FICTION AND NON-FICTION: TOM CLANCY'S *THE HUNT FOR RED OCTOBER*

My student Pascal Lemaire is working on a PhD dissertation on the genre of the technothriller and I have asked him for a list of recommended novels, since I am far more familiar with the movies. Technothrillers, as Pascal is discovering, are a conundrum as a genre because although they have millions of readers worldwide, they have not generated a specialised fandom as practically all other popular genres. Although they are technically science fiction, since their plots hinge on the impact of advanced technology, not even the fandom in SF circles acknowledges technothrillers as a relevant

(sub-)genre. I assume they have a bad reputation tied to their military background and to the macho image of the heroes, but, then, the genre of the romance used to be frowned upon too and is now fully integrated into academic study. We'll see whether Pascal's dissertation can accomplish a similar feat. One thing I know is that if someone can do it, that's Pascal, who has read an insane amount of technothrillers, despite not agreeing at all with the genre's mostly right-wing leanings.

Leaving Michael Crichton aside, a writer on whom I was planning to write a volume until I came across some truly unbearable misogynistic stuff in *Prey*, I am not a reader of technothrillers. Being, however, a great fan of John McTiernan's adaptation of Tom Clancy's *The Hunt for Red October*, I decided to begin with this novel. Clancy (1947-2013), a BA graduate in English Studies from Loyola College, in Maryland, tried to enlist in the US Navy but his poor eyesight caused him to follow instead a career in insurance; this was successful enough for him to use his spare time to write his first novel, *The Hunt for Red October*, published in 1984, the start of an amazing publishing empire. Clancy's hero Jack Ryan, present in a variety of novels, films, and now a new Amazon series, deserves indeed a study of his own as a major male US character. A matter that has made Pascal suspect there is something politically dubious in the success of *The Hunt for Red October* is that it was published by the Naval Institute Press, which had never published fiction before in its 86 years of existence, and famously endorsed by President Ronald Reagan as "my kind of yarn". This is a novel that may have been born as pure propaganda in the context of a still raging Cold War even though Clancy knew how to extend his success into the post-Cold War 21st century and beyond the grave.

As it happens, I had already started reading *Red October* when I came across Boris Gindin and David Hagberg's *Mutiny: The True Events That Inspired the Hunt for Red October* (Forge Books, 2008). Gindin was the Chief Engineer and a Senior Lieutenant on board the Soviet anti-submarine frigate *Storozhevoy* when in 1975 her political commissar and Third-Rank Captain Valery Sablin, decided to mutiny in order to expose the rampant corruption of Leonid Brezhnev's Politburo. As Gindin and Hagberg narrate, the idealistic Sablin candidly believed that the *Storozhevoy* could be a new *Potemkin* and start a true workers' revolution in the spirit of true communism. Sablin never intended to defect but his attempts to engage his own crew and other ships in revolution failed miserably. Brezhnev ordered the Navy and the Army to sink the ship, but when, instead, the frigate was halted by the attacks, all the crew were arrested. Only Sablin and his second-in-command, Alexander Shein, were tried and convicted. Sablin was executed in 1976, Shein served eight years in prison. Appalled because the whole crew were treated as mutineers and dishonourably discharged from the Soviet Navy, Gindin eventually moved to the USA.

In 1982 Gregory D. Young, a naval historian, obtained an MS in National Security Affairs from Naval Postgraduate School with a thesis titled *Mutiny on Storozhevoy: A Case Study of Dissent in the Soviet Navy*, which was read by Tom Clancy in the Nimitz Library of the United States Naval Academy. Clancy took inspiration from it to write *Red October*, transforming the frigate into a cutting-edge nuclear submarine and Sablin into Captain Marko Aleksandrovich Ramius, a man who decides to defect and hand the submarine over to the USA disgusted by the medical corruption that caused his wife's untimely death. Clancy also introduced Jack Ryan, a naval historian and CIA analyst, who here becomes the link between the US Government and Ramius at a crucial time. In 2005 Young, together with fellow naval historian Nate Braden, published *The Last Sentry: The True Story that Inspired The Hunt For Red October* (also with the Naval Institute Press), a volume which came out three years before Gindin and Hagberg's first-hand account of the same facts. We have, thus, a set of true events (Sablin's mutiny) examined from different angles, in scholarly work, in fiction, and in a memoir, with Young's MA dissertation as the original transposition of the real-life crisis into a written narrative.

I have not read Young's dissertation or book and I cannot say whether he is a good writer, but I can say that Clancy did plenty of research to write *Red October*, to an obsessive extent. I am used to reading science fiction in which plenty of new technology is introduced, but even so I was overwhelmed by the constant barrage of acronyms corresponding to weapons, naval technology, diverse Government agencies, positions within them and so on. Having read with great pleasure Patrick O'Brian's *Master and Commander* series, set in the British Navy during the Napoleonic Wars, I am no stranger either to the use of abstruse naval terminology. The problem with *Red October* is that Clancy gets lost in it, turning a wonderfully exciting yarn turn into a rather boring account about how the inevitable happens. Perhaps this is the problem beyond the paper-thin characterization of the whole cast of characters: that in comparison to McTiernan's film, where the action needs not stop to describe a weapon because we see it, Clancy's *Red October* is not that thrilling, putting the stress instead on the 'techno' part of technothriller. In both cases, novel and movie, the outcome is predictable, but McTiernan emphasizes a sense of true danger that gets diluted in Clancy's overlong novel.

The irony is that, despite Clancy's efforts to be as informative as he can about the Soviet Navy, Gindin's testimonial is far more interesting, even though his memoir needs a detailed final section that explains what happened to Sablin and his crew. A famous quote attributed to Clancy claims that the difference between fiction and reality is that "Fiction has to make sense". However, plausibility is not the only crucial factor since in this case Sablin's mutiny, foolish as it was, makes perfect sense. Leaving aside the fact that Gindin's and Hagberg's narrative is based on true facts and Clancy's story about Ramius is false, what interests me is how his efforts to incorporate into his novel a non-fictional veneer fail. Of course, this is a relative failure since *Red October* has interested millions of readers and Gindin's memoirs only a handful. What I mean is that, as Gindin's text indirectly highlights, *Red October* lacks depth both in its human and its narrative element, leaving the technology and the nomenclature to take up too much room. These are accurate (there was a point when I was reading *Red October* and thought I was still reading Gindin) but whereas Gindin's memoirs offer an insight into what it was like to a be a victim of the dictatorial Soviet regime, Ramius is never as convincing in this role.

At the same time, as I read *Red October*, I understood that there is no room for a more nuanced characterization in a technothriller. I don't recall the details of any of the Jack Ryan films I have seen, but I was nicely surprised by his being presented by Clancy as a caring family man who very much admires his wife's job as an eye surgeon (also the occupation of Clancy's own wife). The problem is that in the middle of a crisis that demands plenty of action, there is no room for Clancy to have his all-male cast of characters find time for personal interaction or psychological introspection. In fact, I even hesitate to call Ryan the hero of the novel, as I lost count of how many male characters intervene. I ended up accepting as absolutely realistic, then, that in a situation of crisis this is how men behave: they may meet and converse but this is only in order to make decisions on which to base their actions. I don't think that a mixed cast of characters or an all-women cast should act differently, though, of course, there has been so far no political or military crisis with women leading at least one side (Amazons excluded and, most likely, some SF). The problem, I insist, which makes Clancy's fiction less rewarding than the non-fiction about similar events is how he overdoes the technological jargon. At the same time, I had to smile several times at the sense of wonder inspired by new 1980s digital technology which is now totally obsolete. SF has the advantage that speed of light spaceships and laser sabres are so absurd nobody needs to question their appeal. Possibly, a proficient reader of technothrillers like my student Pascal might tell me that *Red October* was just Clancy's first novel and he did manage to publish better work, or that there are better authors in the genre.

The function of the technothriller, let me emphasize this, is not just to entertain but to warn about how a given military-political situation could quickly degenerate into, citing one of Clancy's titles, clear and present danger. In the novels that danger tends to be thwarted (though not always), but the whole point of the technothriller is to get readers prepared for an eventuality of a large geopolitical scope. This is the kind of genre that dwarves the personal crises of which mainstream fiction consists into trivia – who cares about the fate of a romance between two young persons or the musings of a middle-aged person facing their mortality in comparison to all-out nuclear war or a planet-changing event, like the return of the dinosaurs thanks to genetic engineering? In fact, I challenge the living Nobel prize winners to tell a story of that kind and give it human depth.

I do not intend this post, in any case, to be yet another piece decrying the lack of talent of Mr. Clancy as a writer. By no means. His immense sales show that he did have a great talent for the kind of novel he chose to write and that so many readers appreciate. My complaint is different: I find *Red October* less fulfilling as a thriller than I expected, and I have been very much surprised to find Gindin's memoirs more thrilling. This is a matter of narrative technique, and not just an impression due to the awareness that Gindin's tale is true (it does sound true but he might be lying). As a reader who loves learning from books, I have learned plenty from Gindin and from Clancy, but the problem is that in Clancy's case the truly relevant information was almost buried by a mass of irrelevant detail that can certainly please naval historians and military afficionados but not so much readers interested in the dangers involved in challenging the Soviet regime. Non-fiction trumps fiction in this particular case and for this particular reader.

Now I would like to know how Clancy managed to convince the Naval Institute Press to publish *Red October* and whether, as Pascal suspects, this was, after all, a blatant piece of anti-Soviet, pro-USA propaganda beyond what any reader can see, designed by the top US institutions with Clancy's help.

## CREATIVE COMMONS LICENCE/LICENCIA