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The Literary Classics in Today's Classroom: *Don Quixote* and Road Movies

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One of the most pressing challenges we are currently facing as literature scholars working in the revenue-driven universities of the twenty-first century is the need for self-justification. How do we explain our dedication to commentary on texts written centuries ago, often in foreign languages, even as our students struggle to keep up with the massive amounts of information made available daily by increasingly powerful digital technology networks? How do we convince university administrators, educational boards, and government officials that a seminar on seventeenth-century literature is just as worthy of public investment as any computer science or business course? And just as important, what kind of “real-life” lessons or skills might literature classes offer our students? This chapter is partly an attempt to sketch a theoretical line of response to these questions, and partly an illustration of the pedagogical possibilities of a classroom practice of cultural commentary that places the literary classics side by side with the products of our own media culture. Thus, the first half of this essay provides a speculative overview of “the state of the question” in terms of the central issues of the volume, while the second half rehearses a pedagogical approach to Cervantes’s classic novel, *Don Quixote*, as a road narrative that shares a good number of traits with road films as diverse as *Easy Rider*, *The Motorcycle Diaries*, *Thelma and Louise*, *Into the Wild*, and *Borat*. My goal is to suggest that the literary classics are most effectively (and productively) engaged in the new humanities classroom in practical exercises of strategic re-historicization.

Revisiting the Literary Classics in the New Humanities Classroom

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Scholars working in the tradition of ideological criticism have tied the “invention” of the literary classics to modern projects of national construction. They go back to the 1860s and 1870s, when the term “literature” acquired a restricted meaning as a distinctive form of “national” writing “which has claim to consideration on the ground of beauty of form or emotional effect” (*Oxford English Dictionary*, qtd. in Davies 5). Following in the footsteps of Raymond Williams and Louis Althusser, Tony Davies refers to this nineteenth-century legacy as a “moral-aesthetic ideology of literary consumption” (6) that manufactured “an ideologically constructed canon or corpus of texts operating in specific and determinate ways in and around the apparatus of education” (13).

Williams, Davies, and other cultural materialists—along with more recent proponents of the study of literature as an institution such as Tony Bennett and Peter Bürger—call for a critical reexamination of the notion of the “literary” and a return of the classics to the entire body of human work. As Davies writes in characteristically polemical fashion:

I am not recommending that we all abandon literature. [. . .] I am not suggesting that literary texts consist of nothing but the shadow play of ideologies. [. . .] On the contrary, I believe that they are too valuable and important to be conceded to literary ideology. They must be reclaimed, reappropriated. [. . .] But we shall not accomplish that rescue unless we first refuse the ideological notion of the “literary” along with everything that it implies. [. . .] Herded apart from all the other texts that human beings have always produced, robbed of its human uses, forced into the service of an ideology [. . .], literature as we know it is only a wasted shadow of the thing that, restored to the whole field of work, utterance and imagination, it might one day become. (14)

While it could be argued that educational practices and cultural institutions have changed considerably since the late 1970s, when Davies published his hard-hitting essay, it is also true that the literary classics are still treated in many respects as monumental symbols of national cultures. As I have noted elsewhere, many of the commemorative events organized in 2005 around the 400th anniversary of the publication of *Don Quixote* illustrate this point.¹ Among these celebratory acts, I mentioned the publication of a new anthology of Cervantes’s novel that was meant to take the place of the Bible at the nightstand of each of the bedrooms of Paradores Nacionales de Turismo de España. As the editor of the anthology, prominent literary historian and critic Andrés Amorós, states in his introduction: “sin exagerar mucho podemos decir que nuestra Biblia es el Quijote: un libro con

el que se aprendía a leer [. . .], el mejor resumen de nuestro espíritu y el símbolo de lo español y lo hispánico en el mundo entero (10) (without much exaggeration, we can say that our Bible is the Quijote, a book with which we used to learn to read [. . .], the best compendium of our [national] spirit and a symbol of everything Spanish and Hispanic in the entire world). These notions are echoed in the words of the president of the sponsoring institution, Ana Isabel Mariño Ortega, who compares the author of *Don Quixote* with the national monuments of Paradores insofar as he represents or reflects, as closely as they do, the *national essence*. In her own words, Cervantes and Paradores are above all “embajadores de la esencia cultural y artística de España y los españoles, espejo que ofrece al mundo lo mejor de nosotros mismos” (9) (ambassadors of the cultural and artistic essence of Spain and all the Spaniards, a mirror that offers the world the best of ourselves).

This type of monumental framing is certainly representative of the nineteenth-century legacy of national construction and its familiar “moral-aesthetic ideology of literary consumption” (Davies 6). But we should also note that an increasing number of critics, including many Golden Age scholars and Cervantes specialists, have been calling for, and actively pursuing, radically different approaches to the literary classics. In the case of *Don Quixote*, the recent books by Julio Baena, William Childers, and Bruce Burningham represent three different models of textual commentary that either transcend or actively oppose the monumental tradition exemplified by the Paradores Nacionales anthology.

In his self-consciously iconoclastic *Discordancias cervantinas* (2003), Julio Baena strives to rescue Cervantes’s work from the cultural and political institutions that continue to elevate it (or reduce it) to the status of a national monument, including the Cervantes Institute (Instituto Cervantes), the Center for Cervantes Studies (Centro de Estudios Cervantinos), and the Spanish Ministry of Culture, along with “institutional” editors from Clemencín to Francisco Rico. Based on his recent anthology, we could certainly add Andrés Amorós to this list. Baena contrasts the carelessly edited and error-ridden *Don Quixote* of 1605 with the cleaned-up and heavily annotated classic of the twenty-first century in an attempt to bring the text and its author back from the literary heavens to the continuum of history, that is, to the imperfect and messy body of human work. Baena’s insistence on the need to preserve the traces of human error, failure, and uncertainty in the literary classics seems particularly appropriate for the work of an author who delights in exhibiting the (loose) seams of the storytelling process and in mocking the solemn language of cultural authority. After all, as Fernando Vallejo reminded us during the year of the 400th anniversary: “El Quijote se burla de todo [. . .] las novelas de caballerías y las pastoriles, el lenguaje jurídico y el eclesiástico, la Santa Hermandad y el

Santo Oficio, los escritores italianos y grecolatinos, la mitología y la historia” (“El gran diálogo”) (*Don Quixote* makes fun of it all [. . .], chivalric and pastoral narratives, juridical and ecclesiastical language, the Holy Brotherhood and the Holy Office, Italian and Greco-Roman authors, mythology and history).

William Childers follows a different path of re-historicization of Cervantes and his writing in *Transnational Cervantes* (2006). He employs “a transnationalizing strategy” inspired by the work of postcolonial theorists Aníbal Quijano, Walter Dignolo, Homi Bhabha, and Edward Said in order to resituate Cervantes at the center of a series of politically charged discussions on and around the subject of subaltern identities, transnational cultures, and national practices of internal colonialism. Thus, Childers devotes the last two chapters of his book to “Cervantes and the new Moroccan immigration to Spain,” and to exploring ways of “chicanoizing *Don Quixote*” in the United States. Childers’s transnational Cervantes is by no means a paradigmatic ambassador of “our artistic essence,” and his *Don Quixote* is nothing like a cultural symbol of Spain or a compendium of the national spirit.

Childers’s book may be said to offer a “postcolonial” response to the fundamental questions articulated a few years earlier by the contributors to the multi-authored volume *Cervantes and His Postmodern Constituencies* (1998), edited by Anne Cruz and Carroll Johnson. As George Mariscal put it in his contribution to the collection, fittingly titled “The Crisis of Hispanism as Apocalyptic Myth,” “the basic question in the area of scholarship, but especially in the pedagogical sphere, is: What kind of Cervantes do we want? Or, put another way, what kind of Cervantes do we need? Not only as individual readers but as communities, academic and otherwise” (205).

Questions about our use of the classics are also integral to feminist and psychoanalytical approaches to Cervantes going back to the volume *Quixotic Desire: Psychoanalytic Perspectives on Cervantes* (1993), edited by Ruth El Saffar and Diana de Armas Wilson. We should note that gender-inflected and theoretically oriented readings of the Spanish classics have been more common among scholars working in American universities than among those working in Spain, where these approaches have often met with skepticism. Thus, in his extensive review of current approaches to *Don Quixote*, José Montero Reguera calls feminist and psychoanalytic readings—he specifically mentions the work of Ruth El Saffar and Carroll Johnson—“debatable” or “discutibles” for their incorporation of issues of our time that allegedly have little to do with Cervantes’s true concerns, and for their “excessive distance” from the text (177).²

Bruce Burningham’s recent book *Tilting Cervantes: Baroque Reflections on Postmodern Culture* (2008) seems particularly interesting in light of this discussion. Burningham stages a series of Borgesian

conversations between the cultural production of the Spanish Golden Age and a selection of postmodern narratives and films. The book offers comparative analyses of the works of Lope de Vega and John Ford, and Cervantes and Salman Rushdie. It also includes sections on *Don Quixote* and *Toy Story*, and *Don Quixote* and *The Matrix*. The following quote provides a window into Burningham's view of our relationship with the literary classics:

I explore the hermeneutic ramifications of the fact that for contemporary readers [. . .] the various texts I analyze in this book are ultimately coetaneous, regardless of the centuries that separate their actual moments of production. Taking seriously Borges's notion that literary works create their own precursors [. . .] I suggest that the collection of disparate texts I examine in this book can be read—in a very Borgesian fashion—as precursors of each other. (2)

While Burningham's "presentist" approach to the Golden Age might draw skepticism in some historicist and philological circles, his methodology is consistent with the premises and expectations of an emerging current within Hispanism that no longer believes in the primacy of the written word. Gonzalo Navajas describes this transformation of our reading practices in his contribution to the volume *El Hispanismo en los Estados Unidos: Discursos críticos/prácticas textuales* (1999): "En lugar de una perspectiva única, preeminente y estrictamente definida, ese método propone la integración de todas las lenguas, la intercomunicación no jerárquica entre sistemas diversos de signos, la no-primacia del lenguaje escrito sobre otras formas de comunicación" (155) (Instead of a single, preeminent, and strictly defined perspective, this method proposes the integration of all languages, the non-hierarchical inter-communication between diverse sign systems, the non-primacy of the written language over other forms of communication).

Navajas offers the provisional term "co-relational textuality" (textualidad correlacional) to refer to this new reading practice that would have resulted from the postmodern dissolution of boundaries. To make the best of this mode of textual engagement, Navajas urges us to envision ways to articulate the diverse currents that flow within the selected texts to ensure that our comparative reading is "integrador pero no universalizante; transhistórico pero preservador de la diferencia circunstancial; anticanónico pero capaz de asumir significativamente el texto clásico" (155) (integrative but not universalizing; trans-historical but able to preserve their circumstantial difference; anti-canonical but capable of meaningful integration of the classical text).

As we can see, Navajas calls for a trans-historical method of textual commentary that ought to be capable of integrating disparate media and sign systems while preserving their circumstantial specificity. Admittedly, the challenge would be to assume or accept the postmodern dissolution of boundaries between past and present and among different systems of communication, and, at the same time, to avoid the leveling effect of undifferentiating commentary. In the case of Burningham's programmatic pairing of the Golden Age classics with the products of our own media culture, we could ask whether the traps of anachronism are truly avoided or avoidable in this type of approach. While this is certainly a valid question that goes to the heart of the alleged postmodern erasure of the past and its proclamation of the end of history, I would propose turning the question on its head in reexamining the matter of analytical historicity apropos the work of Cervantes.

Most Golden Age scholars, including critics whose approaches are as disparate as those of Montero Reguera, Ruth El Saffar and Bruce Burningham, would agree that Cervantes's texts—from *Don Quixote* and *El Coloquio de los perros* to *Galatea* and *Persiles* to *Pedro de Urdemalas* and *El retablo de las maravillas*, among others—invite reflection on issues of literary theory and cultural history. Many of these critics would also agree that the Cervantine dialogue with the cultural practices of his day, including the mass-oriented Comedia Nueva of Lope de Vega and his followers, calls for a critical examination of prevalent literary, theatrical, and social conventions. From this perspective, it would seem obvious that “historical readings” of the work of Cervantes ought to take special care to examine as closely as possible its cultural and social context. The remaining question would be whether we must take into account the circumstances structuring our own reading practices. Of course, we could note that our present reading contexts are relevant insofar as our horizon of expectations conditions, or even pollutes, our view of the past. Yet, Burningham seems to go after a more radical Borgesian revelation with regard to the interpenetration of past and present. Otherwise, the subtitle of his book might as well read “Postmodern Reflections on Baroque Culture,” rather than “Baroque Reflections on Postmodern Culture.”

My own take on the subject is indebted to the Benjaminian insight that a historical reading must address “the state of emergency” in which we live. As Walter Benjamin writes in his defense of “materialistic historiography” over traditional historicism in “Theses on the Philosophy of History”:

A historical materialist approaches a historical subject only when he encounters it in a monad. [. . .] He takes cognizance of it in order to blast a specific era out of the homogeneous course of history—blasting a specific work out of the lifework. As a result of this method the lifework

is preserved in this work and at the same time [sublated/aufheben]; in the lifework the era, and in the era, the entire course of history. [. . .] A historian who takes this as his point of departure stops telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary. Instead, he grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one. (262–63)

With regard to the subject of our discussion, I would submit that if we think of Cervantes as an author-critic deeply concerned with the mass media of his time and its effect on readers and spectators, we must brush his writings against the grain of our own mass culture in order to do him “historical” justice; that is to say, in order to assess his full “historical” impact. The alternative would risk confining Cervantes’s work to the past in a way that would dissolve our sense of its “emergency status,” draining the historical lifeblood from it. I would also argue that we should not be blind to current manifestations of Islamophobia in our reading of those passages of *Don Quixote* and *Persiles* that allude to the plight of the Spanish *moriscos* who were discriminated against all throughout the sixteenth century and eventually expelled from Spain between 1609 and 1614. Similarly, in reading Marcela’s explanation of the reasons behind her self-imposed exile from traditional forms of social exchange, we should not be afraid to recognize echoes, for example, from the 1991 film *Thelma and Louise*. From a pedagogical perspective, these “recognitions” of trans-historical bridges or “constellations”—to use Benjamin’s metaphor—have obvious advantages as students feel that the authors we study “speak their language” in dealing with issues that are relevant to their own life experiences, concerns, aspirations, fears, and hopes.

***Don Quixote* and Road Movies**

Three years after the release of his most famous film to date, *The Motorcycle Diaries*, director Walter Salles published in *The New York Times Magazine* “Notes for a Theory of the Road Movie,” in which he traced the origins of the road film to the exploration of the unknown and the adventure of the journey, going back to Homer’s *Odyssey*.³ Salles notes that early road movies were often about national identities in construction (as in John Ford’s *The Searchers*), or in transformation (as in Edgar Ulmer’s *Detour*). In terms of more recent developments of the genre, Salles identifies Dennis Hopper’s *Easy Rider* as the cultural landmark that “defined road movies for today’s audiences” by capturing “the implosion of the American dream during the Vietnam years” (68). *Easy Rider* is indeed a paradigmatic example of the countercultural drive of modern road movies “in which the

identity crisis of the protagonist mirrors the identity crisis of the culture itself' (68). Against the culture of the spectacle and the aesthetics of the simulacrum best exemplified by reality TV, today's road movies continue to vindicate the transformative experience of the journey. As Salles aptly writes:

Reality shows offer the audience the illusion that they can live through certain experiences, but only vicariously. What is sold is the impression that all has been lived and that nothing is left to be experienced anew. Road movies directly challenge this culture of conformity. They are about experiencing, above all. They are about the journey. They are about what can be learned from the other, from those who are different. In a world that increasingly challenges these ideals, the importance of road movies as a form of resistance can't be dismissed. (70)

When we look at *Don Quixote* side by side with films as different as *Easy Rider*, *The Motorcycle Diaries*, and *Thelma and Louise*, we can see that Cervantes's novel shares in the operative principles of what has come to be known as the road movie genre. *Don Quixote* is indeed a story about a personal identity crisis that arguably mirrors—to use Salles words—"the identity crisis of the culture," and also a story about "what can be learned from those who are different." Hence, we can identify a host of Cervantine characters that represent alternative and/or deviant (socially unsanctioned) lifestyles, from Don Quixote and Cardenio, to Marcela and Mari Tornes, to Roque Guinart and Ginés de Pasamonte. And of course the Cervantine story is shaped, first and foremost, by the experience of the journey. We can say that the protagonists of Cervantes's novel are the literal embodiments of a "mad" desire to experience; or, to put it differently, they are the direct result of an act of affirmation of experience over the vicarious consumption of illusions.

This is a recurrent topic in Cervantes's novel well beyond the initial episodes that narrate the circumstances of the conversion of "reader" Don Alonso into "actor" Don Quixote. The theme of active experience vis-à-vis passive spectatorship is perhaps most effectively (if ironically) explored in II, 26, when Don Quixote charges against the puppets of Maese Pedro's show. As we reread the episode from this perspective we realize that the knight's intervention is hardly motivated by his inability to distinguish between fiction and reality, as it has often been said, but rather by his irrepressible desire to participate in the scene in order to rewrite the story in accordance with his (and possibly our own) expectations, including those expectations that are commonly associated with poetic justice. Let us recall that Don Quixote tries to steer the story in form and content (that is, to become co-author of the text) before he takes up the paradigmatically quixotesque role of the epic hero.

Another key principle of the road movie genre mentioned by Salles is “continual motion” (70). Salles applies this principle to the central characters as well as the storyline. Thus, he underscores the need to allow room for improvisation in screenplays that ought to anticipate thematic wanderings: “In doing different road movies, I also came to realize that a good screenplay grants you more freedom to improvise. [. . .] It’s like jazz: the better the melody, the easier it is to wander away from it, because it will also be easier to return to it later” (69–70). These reflections provide important insights into the debates surrounding the Cervantine wanderings that led to the inclusion of loosely integrated stories and different types of narrative material in the two *Don Quixote* volumes. My impression is that the second novel is much closer to the melodic principle of jazz alluded to by Salles. The profoundly metanarrative currents that run through *Don Quixote II* make it easier to incorporate different types of stories and narrative forms while maintaining the central storyline in view.

But the most important principle that the Cervantine novel shares with the films mentioned by Salles is of course the prominent presence of the road, which can no longer be thought of as a circumstantial element of the landscape. Remarkably, the road has not yet received the kind of critical attention one would expect among Cervantes specialists. To be sure, there are plenty of studies of *Don Quixote* that focus on the Spanish region of La Mancha and even on the individual places that Don Quixote and Sancho encounter along the path, but the road itself as a structuring principle of the novel is often neglected. This critical forgetting may be part of a general neglect of the road, even in the field of landscape studies, that it is only now beginning to be corrected. As John B. Jackson writes: “Disqualified by its own genealogy, outclassed by the prestige of private space, the road has long suffered from neglect by historians and students of the landscape [. . .] whereas the house [. . .] has become the symbol of arcadian simplicity and innocence” (190). According to Jackson, the social prestige of the house vis-à-vis the road comes down to a choice between “a sense of place or a sense of freedom” (190), since the house is commonly associated with the blessings of stability while the road is often thought of as “a disturber of the peace, an instigator of radical change” (190).

Jackson’s notions may shed some new light on the political implications of the lifestyle choices made by the protagonists of many road narratives. Thus, the central characters of road movies such as *Easy Rider*, *Thelma and Louise*, *The Motorcycle Diaries*, and *Into the Wild* choose the freedom that comes with movement and change over the social promises of home, family, and even country, which are explicitly associated with the ideological trappings of an exploitative and dehumanizing establishment. In *Easy Rider*, for example, the endless horizons associated with the road are frequently contrasted with moving shots of houses and tombs, towns and cemeteries. I

can think of only two anthropological places that are shown in a positive light in *Easy Rider*: 1) a western family farm, which stands out as an invitation for us to recall the foundational freedom dreams of America allegedly abandoned in the name of narrow-minded notions of citizenship and patriotism; and 2) the progressive utopia of a 1960s-style agricultural commune that represents socialist ideals.⁴ The film *Thelma and Louise* shows a similarly dark picture of our most familiar anthropological places: the home and the city. If Wyatt, Billy, and George, the representatives of inconformity in *Easy Rider*, are ultimately murdered, the female protagonists of *Thelma and Louise* choose to commit suicide rather than returning to the masculine prison-world from which they had fled by taking to the road.

Our familiar anthropological places do not fare much better in Cervantes's novel. We alluded earlier to Marcela's self-imposed exile from traditional forms of social exchange. Others have discussed the speech in which the beautiful maiden defends her right to live in the wilderness, away from any form of masculine subjection. They have noted that Marcela chooses to keep company with nature and other women as an alternative to the bonds of home and marriage.⁵ Marcela's well-known defense of her unconventional lifestyle choice in *Don Quixote* I, 14 amounts to nothing less than a justification of a form of socio-symbolic suicide in seventeenth-century Spain. Yet her words can also be offered as an explanation of the "real" suicide of *Thelma and Louise* at the conclusion of the controversial 1991 film: "Tengo libre condición y no gusto de sujetarme. [. . .] Tienen mis deseos por término estas montañas, y si de aquí salen es para contemplar la hermosura del cielo" (I, 14) (I have a taste for freedom and no wish for subjection. [. . .] My desires are bounded by these mountains; and if they extend beyond them, it is to contemplate the beauty of the sky).⁶

While the eloquent Marcela has deservedly become a magnet for critical commentary due to the feminist echoes of her words, she is but one of the many unconventional characters that represent alternative lifestyles in *Don Quixote* I and II. This list includes self-reliant deviants like Mari Tornes, and even notorious fugitives such as the self-described *pícaro-comediante* Ginés de Pasamonte and the famous bandit Roque Guinart. But Don Quixote himself is arguably at the top of the list of characters who reject the comforts of familiar spaces and mainstream social conventions. His existence is inextricably connected to, or conjoined with, the open road. At home he can only be Don Alonso, an hidalgo verging on fifty with virtually nothing to do.

From this perspective, the famous opening of the novel may be seen as an apt description of a thoroughly unremarkable existence. Thus, the portrait of Don Alonso Quijada or Quesada, or perhaps Quejana, as a man trapped in meaningless home routines in the first chapter is reminiscent of the unnamed middle-aged man who dozes off in solitude in the opening scene of *The Motorcycle Diaries*, in which Ernesto "Che" Guevara and his companion,

Alberto Granado, plan their trip across the Americas. Salles's camera pauses briefly on an anonymous man dozing in the background, and the image is accompanied by a warning against the paralyzing effects of life routines: "You don't want your life to end up like that." The film sets up an explicit contrast between this "background" humanity trapped in the circularity of meaningless routines and the protagonists' rebellious craving for new experiences, and their uncompromising love for the road ("la pasión por la ruta," as the narrative voice puts it). Significantly, this scene takes place just before Alberto Granado, in anticipation of the journey before him, draws a playful comparison between his Norton 500, the motorcycle that he has renamed The Mighty One (La Poderosa) and Don Quixote's horse, Rocinante.

While it is fair to say that the experiences of the journey will transform the two friends in profound ways, Alberto Granado will end up returning to his former life. For his part, Ernesto Guevara will reject the path that had been pre-figured for him in his hometown in order to follow a different road, on his way to becoming the homeless and stateless revolutionary leader known as "Che." One could draw similarities between the literary character of Don Quixote as a self-proclaimed knight-errant determined to become the champion of the weak and powerless, and the legendary figure of the uncompromising guerilla fighter, especially if we accept the popular "romantic" reading of Cervantes's novel. On the other hand, those who favor the "anti-romantic" interpretation of *Don Quixote* as a "funny book" will no doubt be less inclined to entertain connections between the pathetic figure of a ridiculous madman who believes himself a heroic knight destined for glory and the fictionalized reconstruction of the life of a young idealist who is genuinely concerned with the plight of the poor, the sick, and the mistreated in *The Motorcycle Diaries*.

One of the advantages of this type of comparative approach is precisely the fact that we do not have to choose between the different critical or historiographic versions of Don Quixote, the character, and/or *Don Quixote*, the novel. We may instead encourage students to familiarize themselves with the terms of ongoing critical debates over the meaning and significance of the Cervantine work and to be on the lookout for textual evidence that could potentially fit different, or even contradictory, interpretations of this seventeenth-century classic, as they read it alongside twentieth- and twenty-first-century road movies. To be sure, we are likely to "discover" different dimensions of *Don Quixote* when we examine it side by side with *Easy Rider*, as opposed to *Thelma and Louise* or *The Motorcycle Diaries*. While a viewing of *Easy Rider* might encourage reflection on issues of national culture and imperialism, a comparative analysis of *Don Quixote* and *Thelma and Louise* is—as we have explained—more likely to lead toward gender-inflected readings. On the other hand, an exploration of potentially common themes in Cervantes's novel and Salles's filmic reworking of the published

diaries of “Che” Guevara would likely invite reflection on issues of social (in)justice. I would claim that these are all potentially “productive” explorations of the Cervantine classic insofar as they direct our attention to different, but equally significant, dimensions of the novel.

We could extend this pedagogical project to incorporate such road films as *Into the Wild* and *Borat*. One of the most interesting aspects of *Borat*, the mock-documentary directed by Larry Charles, is the way it forces spectators to think about their own positioning vis-à-vis the views expressed by those individuals and groups who are caught with their guard down, so to speak. Thus, the radical eccentricity of the “road character” played by comedian, writer, and producer Sacha Cohen reveals aspects of our social “normality” that would otherwise remain under the (political) radar. I would venture that a close examination of the episodes of *Don Quixote* II that take place in the country house of the duke and duchess in light of the scene in which Borat dines with the social elites of a Southern U.S. town, for example, could help us focus the discussion on the critical engagement of social issues in Cervantes’s novel. Similarly, I would argue that the film’s compulsive repetition of anti-Semitic and racist jokes places the spectator in an uncomfortable position, which is, in some ways, analogous to the self-reflective place that Cervantes constructs for his own readers in those passages of the novel that allude to the *morisco* question, and the political debates that surround it, in seventeenth-century Spain. More generally, I would maintain that a viewing of this 2006 mock-documentary alongside *Don Quixote* could illuminate the reasons behind the Cervantine investment in the unmasking potential of the figure of the radical eccentric (etymologically *off-the-center*).⁷ Thus, a comparative analysis of the tonal structuring of both texts around the eccentricity of their protagonists would provide interesting ways to reflect on issues of reader positioning in connection with the mechanics of humor and laughter in classic works of literature, as well as in the products of our own popular culture.

In *Into the Wild*, we are offered a fictionalized recounting of the true journey of Christopher McCandless, a top Emory University student, from his suburban home in Annandale, Virginia, to the deep Alaskan wilderness. The film is a dramatic and often lyrical version of McCandless’s road trip as a journey of self-discovery. As in the case of Don Alonso, the journey of Chris McCandless is inspired by his favorite books, but it is also a response to a profound sense of dissatisfaction with the circumstances of his life. In the end, it is the people he meets along the way, and the meaningful (if transitory) relationships he forms with them, that enable his extraordinary emotional and intellectual growth. The revelation at which McCandless arrives at the conclusion of his “mad” journey is perhaps best summarized by the simple words of another college student turned road character in Borges’s “El etnógrafo”: “El secreto, por lo demás, no vale lo que valen los caminos que me condujeron a él. Esos caminos hay que andarlos” (368)

(The secret, in any case, is not as valuable as the roads that led me to it. Those paths must be walked).

Significantly, the Alaskan wilderness, the place of destination that McCandless had associated with the promise of absolute freedom and self-reliance, turns into a confining prison, and ultimately a tomb. Isolated from the rest of the world, McCandless spends his final hours devising means of communication in the hope that his messages will somehow make it through after his death. For his part, the protagonist of Cervantes's novel meets his end at home, in the company of family and friends. Sancho, his road companion, is the only character who seems to understand that the renunciation of the road is a death sentence for Don Alonso. This is why he desperately tries to persuade him to imagine some other literary character (some other road persona) that he could inhabit. On the road Don Alonso could be anything he wanted. As he says in I, 5: "Yo sé quién soy [. . .] y sé que puedo ser no sólo los que he dicho, sino todos los doce Pares de Francia, y aún todos los nueve de la Fama, pues a todas las hazañas que ellos todos juntos y cada uno por sí hicieron, se aventajarán las mías" (126) (I know who I am [. . .] and I know, too, that I am capable of being not only the characters I have named, but all the Twelve Peers of France and all the Nine Worthies as well, for my exploits will be far greater than all their individual and collective deeds).⁸ By contrast, away from the road, inside the walls of home, Don Alonso is but a prisoner of the meaningless routine that governs his life.

To better appreciate the far-reaching implications of this view of the house—or more precisely of Don Alonso's house—it would certainly help to know about the social-historical circumstances of seventeenth-century Spain, about the massive pressures besetting the bottom ranks of the nobility in the midst of a deep social crisis and an economy in freefall.⁹ Likewise, it would be essential to familiarize ourselves with the cultural context of reference in order to "get" Cervantes's jokes about chivalric and pastoral romances, picaresque narratives, and Lopean theater. But I would also note—and this is the gist of my argument here—that in taking into account our own circumstances of reception of the Cervantine classic, we may actually enhance the "historicity" of our reading, not only by recognizing that our horizon of expectations necessarily colors our interpretation of the work, but also, and perhaps more importantly, by preserving in that interpretation, and therefore in the work itself, a sense of historical urgency.

Speaking of historical urgency, as I write these concluding paragraphs, one of our sister institutions, SUNY Albany, has announced that it is closing three foreign language programs (French, Italian, and Russian) and two other core humanities disciplines (Classics and Theater) as part of an emergency action designed to absorb the massive budget cuts that the New York state government has handed down to the entire state university

system. In response to this institutional action, my UB colleague Rosemary Feal, Executive Director of the Modern Language Association, has issued a statement that reads in part: “The plans of the State University of New York at Albany to deny students access to higher learning in three modern and two classical languages are a distressing reverse to the university’s recent efforts to promote global competencies. The advanced study of languages, literatures, and cultures of the French-, Italian-, and Russian-speaking world are essential components of a liberal arts education in a university setting” (Jaschik).

In our digital age, as the speed and volume of worldwide communications continue to increase at an unprecedented rate, it seems crucial to be able to pause and think about the mechanics of mass culture and about the codes we use to conceptualize and represent the world around us. The very survival of our democratic societies depends on (admittedly idealistic) notions of individual responsibility and free-thinking citizenship. With this in mind, I would suggest that the humanities, and more specifically the literary disciplines, including those currently housed in departments of foreign languages, can play important roles as “public spaces” devoted to the critical examination of the cultural codes and social practices that structure our perception of the world and, consequently, our social identities.

Notes

1. See my article “Que trata de la velocidad de Rocinante y otros asuntos de importancia” in the collection edited by Carroll B. Johnson, *Don Quixote Across Four Centuries: 1605–2005*.
2. For an insightful discussion of the different currents within Hispanism in the United States, see *El Hispanismo en los Estados Unidos. Discursos críticos/prácticas textuales* (1999), edited by José Manuel del Pino and Francisco La Rubia Prado. On the subject of feminist approaches, see Elizabeth Scarlett’s contribution to the volume.
3. I would like to acknowledge my colleague Kari Winter for directing my attention to Salles’s article in the *New York Times Magazine* and also for sharing her thoughts on road movies with me. I suspect that my views on films such as *Thelma and Louise* are directly influenced by our conversations.
4. I use the notion of anthropological place in the sense in which Marc Augé conceptualizes it in *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*.
5. See Ruth El Saffar’s discussion of this episode in her essay “In Marcela’s Case,” included in *Quixotic Desire: Psychoanalytic Perspectives on Cervantes*.
6. My quotes in translation of *Don Quixote* I and II come from the J. M. Cohen translation in the Penguin edition, unless explicitly noted.

7. Incidentally, Salles quotes Godard speaking of the intersection between fiction films and documentaries: "All great films drift toward documentaries, as all great documentaries drift toward fiction (qtd. in Salles 70).
8. My translation.
9. For a recent discussion of the writings of Cervantes in light of the pressing economic issues of his time, see Carroll Johnson's *Cervantes and the Material World* (2000). José Antonio Maravall's introduction to his volume *La picaresca desde la historia social* offers a compelling overview of Spain's social and economic crisis in Cervantes's time.

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