

# ◆ 1

## **Literature, Film, and the Place of Academic Culture in the Digital Age**

*Gonzalo Navajas*

### **The New Question of Technology**

Martha Nussbaum's recent book *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* is an unmistakable sign that this time the threat is real. The author advances an overview of liberal education and literary studies that assumes as a factual reality that the role of the humanities has not only diminished at many institutions but that at some universities the humanities' very existence is in jeopardy. In fact, a likely general scenario for liberal studies is that eventually they may be predominantly confined to a few exclusive and elitist institutions out of reach of the great majority of the population. To counter this situation, Nussbaum adopts a proactive approach that emphasizes the immaterial values that the humanities contribute to society. In particular, she attempts to reconnect university education with what she calls the Socratic method of teaching, which emphasizes the development of the critical abilities of the student. In this manner, the humanities should provide the tools to create independently thinking and responsible citizens who will be able to make personal and unique contributions to a more vibrant democratic society.

Martha Nussbaum seems to take for granted that the forces of the market will understand and voluntarily accept her call for a well-balanced view of education that is able to combine the imperative for economic gain with intellectual and artistic goals. However, her book does not present a sufficient explanation of the process to achieve the integration of seemingly incompatible forces. Thus, her proposal, although well articulated and well intentioned, is ultimately weakened by a lack of specificity to effectively address a situation that she clearly characterizes as the onslaught of omnipotent economic forces.

**Hispanic Literatures and the Question of a Liberal Education**  
*Hispanic Issues On Line* 8 (2011)

It is not easy to be even moderately optimistic about liberal arts studies in the midst of the current unprecedented crisis that has decimated programs and departments throughout the country. It is apparent that the humanities are the first component of university curricula to suffer the consequences of frequently massive programmatic cuts, since it is much easier to eliminate or downsize a department of languages, drama, or fine arts than a business or engineering school. Furthermore, the humanities lack the means to find alternative sources of funding, which are more readily available to the sciences and other fields.

Although in more prosperous times it may be a less urgent and immediate reality, the humanities will always be dependent on the good will of administrators and legislators. It is therefore imperative that the humanities fields have a persuasive argument for their importance to offer the questioning public, and essential in particular that they shed the stereotypical public image of marginality and superfluosity that has been imposed on them. It is the responsibility of those who devote themselves to history, literature, or drama to be ready to argue that their activity is fundamental for the advancement of a more humane and harmonious society. It is not only that, as Nussbaum suggests, a liberal arts education creates better citizens: no individual can lead a really meaningful life without knowledge of the collective and cultural referents that provide the signs of identity with which to define him or herself vis-à-vis others.

This is not the first time that the humanities have been in crisis and in direct competition with other disciplines that are considered economically more viable and more in tune with the immediate needs of contemporary society. Yet today the humanities feel strongly challenged and threatened in their core because of the emergence of new powerful cultural modes that have accelerated the process of questioning of liberal arts education. Those modes are linked to the technologies of instantaneous non-written visual communication that have a tenuous connection with the literary medium and tradition. It is urgent, therefore, to delineate a more open and inclusive cultural model that may contribute to reasserting the relevance and significance of literary studies in present-day education. In developing this proposal, I will use primarily a selection of texts that belong to the Spanish cultural archive and in particular that of the twentieth and twentieth-first centuries.

### **The Historical Imperative**

The technological mind is focused on the present both temporally and spatially, and projects itself toward the future; that is, toward the ways in which reality can be transformed through its proposals. The connection with

the past is secondary because the past in science is not directly significant and it is destined to be overcome by new discoveries. The steam locomotive had a decisive role for the advancement of industry and commerce in the nineteenth century. Today it is an archeological object whose importance is circumscribed to remembrance and nostalgia. Literature and the arts have a very different relationship with the past, since for them the past is never dead. On the contrary, it is essential for an understanding of the present. Literary knowledge proceeds not by overcoming past works and authors and labeling them less advanced than more recent texts, but by establishing links between them and defining them as part of the active archive of knowledge about literature.

A central function of criticism should be the elicitation of the insertion of the cultural experiences of the past into the present in order to verify the interconnectedness of culture. This view of the past should be analytical and critical and it does not need to be driven by unquestioned admiration. Criticism should show the broader picture of current events making apparent that they are not isolated occurrences, but that they are connected to other previous events as part of a complex paradigm. Thus, the function of the critic—and to a considerable extent that of the writer—should be guided by this motivation for cultural reconnection. The concept and the methodology of deconstruction and postmodernity have taught us that this historical orientation cannot simply pursue the discovery of facts, dates, and events, but should instead be a hermeneutic process that relates past and present in a more creative manner. This is the first fundamental contribution that a liberal arts education can make to the current debate: we are *cultural beings*, conditioned and defined by texts and cultural objects, and our individual freedom is therefore determined but also enriched by a set of contextual circumstances and data that it is necessary to know and interpret. The critical enterprise should fulfill a decisive function in this area.

I will study several texts to show concretely how this view of culture functions in practice. My first illustration comes from the work of Manuel Azaña, the president of the second Spanish Republic and one of the central political and intellectual figures of the first half of the twentieth century. Azaña was a contemporary of another essential figure of the period, José Ortega y Gasset, and shared with him the conviction that the great cultural monuments of the past—books, paintings, buildings—are a unifying factor in the creation of the collective conscience of the nation, which without them would be fragmented and divided. Culture would be akin to a comprehensive superstructure that would protect and prevent an entire nation from being ruined or destroyed by the centrifugal forces that threaten it with rendering it asunder.

Ortega y Gasset did not transcend the philosophical and intellectual realm. When he did, it was only for a brief time, and his experience in the Spanish Parliament ended in disappointment because the Republic did not—

as he'd hoped—raise the country up to be on a par with the rest of Europe, begetting instead chaos and civic disarray. Ortega y Gasset abandoned active politics soon after, and his exit is a confirmation that the intellectual cannot easily accommodate his abstract constructions within the political arena. Though a good number of intellectuals—John dos Passos, George Orwell, André Gide, and Federico García Lorca among them—were drawn to the political realm during the turbulent and conflictive period of the 1930s, the results were largely unsuccessful.

Azaña did have a unique opportunity to implement his cultural program through extended and tangible political action, and he achieved that objective not in a marginal way but as a major player in a regime, the second Republic, which was born of a desire to transform a society sorely in need of radical change after centuries of isolation and backwardness. Before his insertion into the political life of the Republic, Azaña wrote a book, *El jardín de los frailes*, which in the form of an autobiographical *Bildungsroman* offers a perceptive critique of intellectual and sexual repression at a private religious school in the town of San Lorenzo del Escorial, near Madrid.

Other works of the period had attempted a similar critique of the education of the young. James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and Robert Musil's *Young Törless* also present a harsh view of the educational methods prevalent in other European countries at the time. What is distinctive about Azaña's work is that its protagonist, a young pupil in a school run by Augustinian friars, makes of his dismal experience in the school an opportunity to find a path for future political action and at the same time to reconcile himself with the history of his fatherland, which he despises as being intolerant and repressive. In this manner, spiritual exercises in the *colegio* are presented not as an experience of enlightenment but as perverted, masochistic acts that are contrary to reason and personal health. Illustrations of this self-destructive approach are presented graphically and in detail:

Hallaron a un colegial desnudo en su celda, de hinojos en el sitio que bañaba el sol. Se santiguaba las espaldas con un atado de correillas. Del mismo dolor, o bien de vergüenza y susto, se desvaneció. Puesto en la cama, el médico vino a reconocerlo. Estaba hecho una criba.

—¿Por qué se da usted ese trabajo? ¿Quién se lo manda?

—Nadie. Es que me gusta.

—¡Cómo degeneran las razas!—concluyó el médico.

El penitente era nieto de un general isabelino, vencedor en cien batallas. (*El jardín* 111)

(They found a schoolboy naked in his cell, kneeling in a patch of sunlight. He was crossing himself on the back with a bundle of straps. From pain, or perhaps from shame and fright, he fainted. He was placed in his bed and a doctor summoned to check him over. He was torn to shreds.

—Why did you do this to yourself? Who told you to do this?

—Nobody. I like it.

—How the race is degenerating! mused the doctor.

The penitent was the grandson of a general of the Catholic Monarchs, victor in a hundred battles.)

The narrator abhors the conduct of his schoolmate and sees it as the consequence of the unnatural principles that regulate life in the institution, and of the ideology of repression that is instilled in all of the pupils. The notion of the degradation of the Spanish “race” is one that was dear to Manuel Azaña: in his view, the core of the Spanish character had been degraded over time and must be traced back and rediscovered in medieval times, when it was still pure and creative. The arrival of the Hapsburg monarchs, and of Philip II in particular, had provoked the progressive degeneration of the original Spanish character. Both as an intellectual and as a politician, Azaña wished to recover this pristine origin and install it once more at the center of Spanish life. His fictionalized classmate at the retreat is presented as the victim of a long history of moral corruption, which Azaña imputes to the regressive regime of the monarchy in collusion with the educational and moral practices of the Church. The initial motivation for Azaña’s attempts as a parliamentarian in the Republic to limit the powers of the Church lies precisely in events such as the one described in the *colegio* of San Lorenzo. In this case, the transfer from the literary medium to political action took place rapidly and effectively. The politician was able to implement a series of laws aimed at preventing acts such as the ones that he had to witness and experience as a young student.

There are other instances in *El jardín de los frailes* in which this repressive environment is strongly criticized as a negation of the body and the senses. For Azaña, the experience in the *colegio* would continue to be the ethical and ideological backdrop against which he positioned his political program. Furthermore, the location of the school in the town of San Lorenzo del Escorial magnifies the sense of oppression. The monastery is seen as the “grandiose error” (42) of a fateful monarch, Philip II, who for Azaña is the epitome of a mistaken national history. El Escorial is the most visible expression of the destructive projects of a king obsessed with realizing an obtuse personal agenda as the supreme head of an unmanageable empire, rather than procuring the advancement of his nation and its integration into modernity.

In addition to the instruction he received at the Augustinian school, Azaña had to confront the legacy of a political regime, the monarchy, that did away with the traditions of democracy and social pragmatism that, in Azaña's view, had predominated in the cities of Castile in the Middle Ages and during the kingdom of Ferdinand and Isabella. In his political speeches, Azaña made frequent reference to this primordial time in Spanish history that supposedly embodied the lost virtues of the Spanish soul. However, he provided no verification for the objective existence of this ideal and near-perfect period; his assertion, then, should be seen fundamentally as a conceptual construction, a utopian figuration that can nevertheless be highly motivational and inspirational. In fact, if the history of the country had progressed following this original political and social model, Spain would have probably avoided the path toward backwardness and self-destruction that it followed for several centuries.

In *El jardín de los frailes*, Azaña is implacable toward those entities he considers the culprits for the shortcomings of Spanish history. Both the Catholic Church and the monarchy are severely judged and condemned as the institutions that have traditionally conditioned the lives of all Spaniards. In his political speeches, Azaña would also include the armed forces among the accused, but in *El jardín de los frailes* he makes only sporadic references to the military as the instrument of Philip II and his successors, who took upon themselves the task of defending the Catholic faith against its enemies and in the process caused Spain's economic ruin and cultural isolation.

Yet *El jardín de los frailes* ultimately attempts a final ironic resolution of the dilemmas of Spanish national history through the reconstitution of the ideological orientation the book so forcefully argues. Paradoxically, it is in the aesthetic achievements of the Golden Age period that Azaña finds the possibility of national redemption that is absent in the political history of the period. The great works of classical art and literature are an unquestionable source of personal pride for the narrator. Whereas the supposedly glorious military actions of the Spanish armies mask empty, self-destructive policies and thus cannot be a reason for satisfaction, the works of great writers (from Cervantes to Lope and Calderón) and artists (Velázquez and El Greco in particular) are indeed a legitimate source of pride. Although these works are linked to the institutions (the monarchy, the Church, and the military) that Azaña rejects, and often praise and exalt those institutions, Azaña decides to disregard those connotations and focus instead on the place the works occupy in the paradigm of world culture and art. In a parallel vein, the pupil at the Augustinian *colegio* is able to overcome his scorn for the monastery of El Escorial as an emblem of repression and intolerance, and to see in it a brilliant work of architecture that enhances the stature of the nation in which it was built.

The representative figures and practices of the Catholic Church as well as the lives of the prominent characters of the royal court can inspire great

works of art, and through that art Azaña can find compensation for the frustrations of national history. Even the rituals of daily religious practices at the school, such as the mass and collective prayers, can produce unexpected joy and satisfaction in him: “Retuve las señales de regocijo: el oro del altar, el incienso nacarado, los himnos, las palmas; las apariciones benignas, rebasado ya el Calvario, cuando Jesús reposa de sus trabajos cumplidos, ilumina la tierra que pisa y la ilumina. ¡Qué delicia!” (*El jardín* 120). (I kept the signs of joy: all the gold in the altar, the incense, the hymns, the palm branches; the gratifying moments when, Jesus, after the Calvary, rests after all the work he has accomplished, and he illuminates the earth where he walks and he pacifies it. What a pleasure!). Although Azaña does not believe in a literal reading of the gospels and considers them to be mere literary texts devoid of sacred qualities, he is capable of sharing in the spiritual experience contained in the life of Jesus Christ and his church. Some aspects of Catholicism can provoke feelings of elation and even ecstasy that for Azaña are not religious in nature, but which he can superimpose on the dry, cold environment of El Escorial, transfiguring it in a positive manner.

The prevailing meaning of the text, then, is not in the end a critical analysis of and recrimination for the Church, but peace and reconciliation with it. The young student leaves the school with the idea of never returning to what for him is a hateful place: “Me despedí, sabiendo unos y otros, sin decirlo nadie, que yo no volvería” (*El jardín* 161). (I left with some people knowing without me ever saying it, that I would never return.) And yet this is not the final textual move. There is indeed a return that, by analogy with the Scriptures, retraces the archetype of the prodigal son, who after a long parenthesis of waywardness and dissipation finds the lost home anew. After several years, Azaña comes back to the school in El Escorial and in his encounter with Father Mariano achieves the closure that he needs to continue productively with his life: “Nos reímos. El padre Mariano me devuelve la confianza y deja correr su antiguo afecto: le han interesado desde lejos mis azares, el rumbo de mi espíritu. ¡Me quería tanto!” (*El jardín* 171) (We laughed. Father Mariano trusts me again and he displays his old affection toward me: from the distance he was interested in my adventures, the path of my spirit. He loved me so much!).

The two divergent ideological forces are able to find a common ground that overcomes their differences. Moral and ideological principles can be viewed as contingent when confronted with other human values like friendship and tolerance. In the reconfigured context of the Augustinians' school, Father Mariano and Manuel Azaña are able to respect each other's individuality, putting aside their differing views. The contemplative and quasi-mystical communion with an environment that has been hateful in the past leads in the present to peace with oneself and the world via nostalgic reconstruction: “Solo estoy en la punta del jardín, ya frío. Vagan tres frailes en el huerto prioral. Las delgadas siluetas negras, sin gravidez, accionan

levemente; algo se dicen, miran al suelo. Una cima se encumbra lejos, encapuchada de nieve y rosa. Es el ocaso.” (*El jardín* 174) (I am alone in one corner of the garden. It is already cold. Three friars stroll in the orchard. The slender black silhouettes, weightless, move slightly; they say something among themselves, they look at the ground. The top of a mountain towers in the distance covered with snow. The sunset is upon us.) This primordial return provides the fusion of the previously despised religion with the writer’s personal conscience to attain a new state of inner serenity. It may be possible to accept El Escorial and transcend its painful connotations. And yet, in his return to his school and the monastery, Azaña does not bend to the principles and rules of the Church nor does he renounce his ideas. As he indicates to Father Mariano, he continues to abide by his political and moral program, which to a considerable extent was driven by the impulse to distance himself from Catholicism. At the same time, however, he is able to achieve a compromise with the institution that he charges with the deformation of his mind and the destruction of his youth.

Despite the promising development that took place with his journey back to El Escorial, once Azaña reached power, the effects of the subliminal return had ended. The spirit of reconciliation between the divergent and conflictive ideological and cultural currents of Spanish history disappeared when Azaña had the opportunity to directly transform the country through political action. Although his aims were noble and disinterested and were directed toward the necessary renovation of society, the political environment during the Republic became so confrontational and hostile that it swept away any possibility for understanding or accord. In the last years of the Republic, the predominant orientation of the beleaguered politician was toward the preservation and defense of a political system that was in grave danger. The aesthetic aura had dissipated, and peace and accord with the ideological other for the sake of national understanding became all but an absurd chimera. Azaña’s passionate political speeches replaced reflection, and the collective turmoil that engulfed Spain in the last years of the Republic and the civil war was more powerful than the aesthetic conjunction of history, art, and spirituality displayed in *El jardín de los frailes*. The confrontation between opposite ideological visions prevailed, and Azaña, as a politician and an ideological icon, was transformed into the most significant and representative victim of the perpetual hostility in the country.

Azaña’s biographical trajectory ended with his political defeat and early death in exile, but his profile and standing as an intellectual, political thinker, and writer, have only increased with time. Despite the miscalculations in his political strategy, which were partially induced by the complex and treacherous circumstances of the period, Azaña today is highly respected as a man of principle and as a political thinker who perceptively analyzed the causes of Spain’s chronic cultural, social, and political problems. In fact, we can assert that Azaña, despite his defeats as politician,

has become an emblematic figure in twentieth-century Spanish history. His political failures are overshadowed by his dedication to a model for the nation that was based on the principles of the defense of democracy and ideological difference, which that in the end have proven the most viable option for post-Franco Spain. Thus, although he was not able to realize his program of national renewal during his lifetime, that program has to a considerable extent been implemented, years after his death. His legacy remains active even today.

One recent text, Javier Cercas's *Soldados de Salamina*, provides a different historical view on the devastating period that destroyed Azaña's life and that of many other Spaniards. Cercas's narrative centers on the life of Rafael Sánchez Mazas, a writer and intellectual who was one of founders of the fascist Spanish party, the Falange. Sánchez Mazas's evolution was just the opposite of Azaña's. He was a victor both ideologically and politically during the civil war and achieved a prominent political and literary status in the first few years after the war. Yet the novel emphasizes not Sánchez Mazas's successes, but the failures and decline that he suffered precisely because he had been a winner in the ideological war in which he and Azaña had both participated, if from a different political position. As the narrator notes, "Sánchez Mazas ganó la guerra y perdió la historia de la literatura" (*Soldados* 140) (Sánchez Mazas won the war and lost literary history) because his dedication to promoting a political agenda for which he was not sufficiently motivated or prepared to win was ultimately an obstacle for establishing a truly successful literary career. Sánchez Mazas is thus presented as the victim of a political regime that he helped to beget and promote, but which devoured him because as an artist and intellectual he lacked sufficient determination to prevail in the ideological struggle that arose in Spain after the war. Politically, his efforts to ensure the predominance of the Falange became increasingly irrelevant, and his renown as a writer did not survive the insular and artificial cultural environment of Franco's Spain.

Although the novel does not ignore Sánchez Mazas's fascist involvement, he appears primarily as a victim of a time of violence. Furthermore, as Azaña asserts in his political testament, the war in *Soldados de Salamina* is viewed as a loss for the entire country, including for victors like Sánchez Mazas. The book reaffirms the premises that sustain Azaña's *El jardín de los frailes*: that the drive for ideological compromise and reconciliation should motivate the Spanish nation in its search for a more viable and harmonious society. From radically different positions and personal experiences, both Azaña and Sánchez Mazas exemplify this historical and social norm, which is valid not only for Spain but also for other nations torn between opposing and seemingly incompatible ideological and cultural forces. The two texts provide enlightening materials and analyses for the verification of this historical reality.

## The Nation and the World

The reopening of central segments of the historical past and the reconsideration of their projection into the present is one significant contribution that literary texts can make to the current cultural debate. Another has to do with texts' analysis of shifting perspectives on the nation and its position in a newly globalized world. In the case of Spain, a key issue to be considered is the cultural and political isolationism that has been the prevailing trend throughout Spanish modernity. As his political career and literary work make evident, Azaña's paramount motivation was to integrate the country fully into the rest of the world. And for a brief period of time, the Republic that Azaña envisioned provided an actualization of that project. The current national reality is quite different, since Spain is an integral part of the international community and has achieved a remarkable transformation at the cultural and political levels. The country's pressing reality today is not isolationism but the reorientation of the new multicultural and multilingual Spanish society vis-à-vis a global world in which national borders have lost much of their relevance. What Gilles Lipovetsky in *Les temps hypermodernes* characterizes as the "malleable nation" is in the process of replacing earlier ontologically powerful concepts of the national entity, and once again literary and visual texts furnish support for and verification of these new developments.

Arturo Pérez-Reverte's immensely popular Captain Alatriste series provides an illustration of the instability of the concept of the nation in the last decades of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first. In this collection of sequential novels, the nation is defined and identified not by the present, which is considered to be lacking in moral and human greatness and infused with mediocre figures, but by a segment of the imperial past of the country, specifically the period of the reign of Philip IV and his prime minister, the Count-Duke of Olivares.

Although it is populated by real historical figures and events, Pérez-Reverte's past is not historically objective. It responds instead to the narrator's objective of inserting into it the virtues of heroism, self-sacrifice, and solidarity that he finds wanting in the present. The central figure, Captain Alatriste, is not a real captain, but a soldier that has fought many battles on land and at sea at the service of his country and the king. Alatriste does not have any standing in the army, but he is more dedicated to advancing the cause of the nation than are his military superiors. He is an existential hero who fights to the end in numerous battles against much larger and better-equipped armies, acting with bravery and dedication even

though he and his companions know that their king and the royal court remain indifferent to their precarious situation.

This anonymous and humble man is paradoxically the subliminal agent of the new concept of nation that the narrator favors because he is entirely devoted to the cause of advancing the national community to which he belongs. That supra-individual cause gives Alatraste purpose and dignity and contributes to promote a sense of shared identity. Alatraste intuitively believes in a collective imaginary that is shared by all the members of the national community, regardless of their differences. For him, the welfare of the nation supersedes all individual goals, and he abides unconditionally by this principle even though he is aware of the deficiencies and vices of Spanish society under Philip IV and the Count-Duke of Olivares. His unconditional belief in fundamental principles like friendship, loyalty, and incorruptibility gives Alatraste a reason for living; without those principles, existence would lose its worth: “Eso era lo desconcertante del capitán: podía mostrar respeto hacia un Dios que le era indiferente, batirse por una causa en la que no creía, emborracharse con un enemigo, o morir por un maestro de campo o un rey a los que despreciaba” (*Limpieza de sangre* 62) (That’s what it was disconcerting about the captain: he could show respect to a God to whom he felt indifference, fight for a cause in which he did not believe, get drunk with an enemy or die for a field master or a king both of whom he despised.)

Pérez-Reverte’s nostalgic portrayal of a configuration of a nation that in fact never existed is an obvious superimposition over the objective historical data with the purpose of changing the present-day configuration of the country, which for Pérez-Reverte has lost the sense of generosity and greatness that it had in the past. Yet that imperial past cannot be a true model for twenty-first century Spain, which is characterized by multi-nationalism and a wide diversity of goals beyond the unified view of the nation that Alatraste defended. Although the captain’s qualities are ethically admirable and indeed inspirational in a society and culture focused on material and ephemeral ends, his view of a unified society beyond differences is incompatible with a world and a nation whose hallmarks are diversity and a multiplicity of languages and cultures. In theory, Pérez-Reverte’s proposal may have some virtues, but when contrasted with present-day reality, it is unworkable in practical terms.

In a different manner, Pedro Almodóvar’s films offer an alternative view of the nation. His profile of Spain engages with the full cultural, moral, and sexual diversity of the country, as opposed to the traditionalist make-up of the nation. In films like *¡Átame!*, *La mala educación*, and *Volver*, he asserts women’s independence and sexuality and the rights of homosexuals and transsexuals against the abuses of a patriarchal social order, and gives a powerful voice to the underdog and those on the periphery of society who have been customarily disenfranchised because of behavior unjustly deemed

to be aberrant or perverse. In these works, the identification of the central characters with the values and principles of traditionalist Spain is nonexistent. On the contrary, these nonconformist and unconventional men and women defend their right to be and act in an unpredictable, “deviant” manner that questions and rejects traditional principles. From this perspective, it can be argued that Almodóvar signifies the ultimate delegitimization of traditional Spanish society and the immersion of Spain in the modes of modern and global culture. In fact, especially in the area of women and homosexuals’ rights, his films are at the forefront of the contemporary social agenda. With Almodóvar, Spain overcomes the final barriers on sexuality and human relations that have hindered the full incorporation of the country into modernity. Far from a being repressive society, in Almodóvar Spain becomes an ideal medium for those who had been proscribed or marginalized in the traditional social hierarchy.

And yet, despite his receptiveness to open cultural assimilation and the promotion of diversity and alternative behavior, Almodóvar’s world is at the same time profoundly local and national. It can be even characterized as *castizo* and dependent on the more conventional icons and cultural emblems of traditional Spain. That would be tantamount to the re-adoption and reinforcement of the stereotypes about the country (associated with flamenco songs and dance, bullfights, and gypsy culture); that is, Spain as the ultimate realization of exoticism and exceptionalism that the romantic other imposed upon the country, from Mallarmé and Bizet to Verdi. Thus, in Almodóvar the two images of the country that had been at odds with each other seem not only to be compatible but even to support one another. The global and plural cohabit with the local and territorially minute. *Barrio* culture can be an integral part of the global discourse and insert itself within it in a meaningful way. This soft fluidity between the two cultural modes—the global and the local—is of course artificial, and it does not reflect the friction that difference can bring to culturally homogeneous societies, as the current debate on minorities in European countries—France, Sweden, and Spain among others—makes apparent. Yet Almodóvar’s proposal does not operate only at the aesthetic and fictional level. It also has persuasive power, the power to transfer itself to the social, political, and cultural reality. The effective combination of the extremely open and differentiated with the ancestral and primordial is a suggestive experiment that can be considered a model of social and cultural integration and change for the global and digital age.

### **An Integrative Proposal for the Humanities**

It is apparent that the current plight of liberal studies is dire; in fact, in some institutions in the United States and Europe, the humanities are in a danger of becoming nominal or even of being extinguished altogether. One reason for this predicament is internal to academia: the liberal arts cannot sustain themselves financially, an especially disadvantageous fact at a time of severe economic restrictions around the world. The other reason is more general. The liberal arts have traditionally been linked to the written literary word, and this medium must now compete with other media—audiovisual, digital—that have emerged forcefully with the revolution in informatics. At the same time, the new technologies have facilitated the overwhelming ubiquity and impact of popular discourses of artistic expression that challenge and even threaten to reverse the prevailing cultural hierarchies. It is increasingly more difficult to persuade the young of the canonical values of Western cultures, which many of them equate with a view of culture that does not correspond to their *Lebensstil*, their most immediate and pressing needs and interests.

Yet despite these challenges, the liberal arts, if understood as a receptive and assimilative medium, are still the best tool for articulating and structuring the principles and values of an integrated community. Against the forces of narrow nationalism and the exclusionary ideologies that continue to hold sway in a good number of twenty-first-century societies and cultures—in some cases even more strongly than in the past—the message of tolerance and contrast of views that the liberal arts proclaim is an inducement to attitudes of receptivity and change against zealotry and provincialism. This is valid for all countries, but especially for American society, which, precisely because of its power has traditionally exhibited boundless self-confidence and self-assertion at the risk of forgetting the interrelatedness of human affairs in the global age. The Iraq war under the presidency of George W. Bush is the latest and most glaring example of the consequences of blindness toward the cultural other. Regardless of one's views on whether the war was justified, it is apparent that an overwhelming military victory was rendered useless in the post-war phase because of the lack of a strategy attuned to the cultural paradigms of the foreign other.

The exposure to other modes of cultural realization is an effective approach to eliminating or at least moderating the self-delusions created by unlimited power. Literature and the arts—both national and international; in English, Spanish, and other languages—can provide the tools for the achievement of a more tolerant society. To study Azaña, Pérez-Reverte, or Almodóvar will certainly not transform the world with the speed and intensity that a momentous political conference or a dramatic development in the financial markets can provoke. The effects of the cultural enterprise are far more gradual and diffused. They operate in the background of individual consciences and their work is silent. However, their immateriality and intangibility do not make them less necessary and significant today than

in the past. The adjustment of the humanities to new technologies and global realities is imperative if we want to assure their survival and relevance in a rapidly evolving world. The challenge is huge, but the consequences of not responding adequately and urgently to it are simply untenable.

### Works Cited

- ¡Átame!* Dir. Pedro Almodóvar. 1990. Film.  
 Azaña, Manuel. *El jardín de los frailes*. Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1987. Print.  
 Cercas, Javier. *Soldados de Salamina*. Barcelona: Tusquets, 2001. Print.  
 Joyce, James. *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. New York: Barnes and Noble, 2004. Print.  
*La mala educación*. Dir. Pedro Almodóvar. 2004. Film.  
 Lipovetsky, Gilles. *Les temps hypermodernes*. Paris: Bernard Grasset, 2004. Print.  
 Musil, Robert. *Young Törless*. New York: Pantheon, 1964. Print.  
 Nussbaum, Martha. *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010. Print.  
 Pérez-Reverte, Arturo. *Limpieza de sangre*. Madrid: Alfaguara, 1997. Print.  
*Volver*. Dir. Pedro Almodóvar. 2006. Film.

---

Navajas, Gonzalo. "Literature, Film, and the Place of Academic Culture in the Digital Age." *Hispanic Literatures and the Question of a Liberal Education*. Ed. Luis Martín-Estudillo and Nicholas Spadaccini. *Hispanic Issues On Line* 8 (Fall 2011): 12–25. Web.

---