

FORMATS 3

In praise of fiction

Speeches at the opening of the academic year 2000-2001, audiovisual communication studies

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Speech by Mr Benet i Jornet



As they say, for thousands of years and until four days ago, on the long winter nights humanity, to pass the time, in other words to cheat hunger and hide their anxiety about whether or not the food they had stored would run out before they could stock up again, to channel their fear of the monsters that might be lurking in the darkness the rival beasts which, outside the family circle, could pounce and devour us for their own survival , to cling to the hope that one day things would improve and eternal spring would come along, with no more deadly winters, so that the children and the old people would understand and not forget what life was like; with those priorities and who

knows how many more, on the long winter nights the old folks would start to tell stories by the fireside.

I imagine that fiction began with those simple tales. Later, as life became more sophisticated, fear of hunger, enemies, the dark, death, gradually disappeared and hope in the spring, in plenty, sexual fulfilment, immortality, rose. As that happened the tales, the fictions, took on more complex forms and more complicated stories emerged. They appeared over the years, hundreds of years, bit by bit, long ethical narratives, theatre performances, songs of love and glory, novels that were like the fabric of life, films, television serials and everything that already was as well as forms of fiction that are still to be invented and which will appear and move us, though now we cannot even imagine them, over so many more thousands of years as long as we, humanity, still exist.

What I have just said, I have heard said, and the truth is I do not know if it is true or a fiction invented to exalt the origins of fiction.

There is one small problem: that praise, as we have seen, is justified if it is based on the usefulness of fiction. Fiction, making it up or making use of it, can be considered a praiseworthy activity because, although initially it may seem so, it is not a way of wasting time, since, as its harsh, romantic origins suggest, it is not a gratuitous activity. It has a purpose, a justification. According to that praise, in spite of its frivolous, useless appearance, fiction conceals a practical, almost medicinal, analgesic mission, a mission that, insofar as it is useful, justifies and saves it.

It is not only the enemies of fiction, in any of their manifestations, who say that fiction is of no interest in itself because if they are in the one corner, in another corner, the opposite one, are the people who, precisely because they are supposed to love fiction more than anyone else, lay the same claim as its detractors, though not as a grievance, but as the highest possible praise.

For them fiction is an activity that begins and ends in itself and which needs no other meaning than the gratuitous pleasure it gives us.

Is that right?

In fact, I do not know. Perhaps if fiction were really so unnecessary it would never have appeared. Nor do I believe that stuff about fiction as enjoyment in its pure state, enough in itself, regarded with absolute sufficiency. Fiction may not be exactly the cosy winter fireside and the darkness, etc.) In any case it seems to me that nothing in the world is enough in itself. Everything depends on everything else and if the appearance of fiction did not depend on the problems of our forefathers in the cave, it depended on something else. It was born in an attempt to solve what was a real, specific problem.

And so although the term fiction refers to something fictitious or imagined, it may be fallacious or mistaken. There is no activity, even though it is pretended or imagined, which is not doomed to take reality into account. Whoever makes up a fiction cannot do so from nothing; they have to do so from their knowledge or experience, whether they like it or not. Fiction always has one form of reality or another as a reference and, whether they do it well or badly, the people who make it up are always commenting on reality.

I will go further and say that the fiction that interests us is the fiction that excites us, stimulates us, provokes us. Then, once we have finished, as with a satisfactory coitus, fiction consoles us. And I believe that that is another way of praising fiction.

Having made that generalisation I shall be expected to praise theatrical fiction in particular. I shall try but that praise should not mean that I believe in the superiority of the theatre over any other form of fiction .

Nor shall I accept a tacit cliché that places dramatic literature at the top of the ladder of literary creation. In the field of fiction there are no higher or lower, more or less pure genres; there are only specific works and fictions of whatever kind they may be, well done or badly done. For example, among the narrative satirical poems of Guerau de Liost, a great *Noucentista*, and a postmodern fictional television series, I only acknowledge one objective difference in category, not the genre in which they were written, but the talent of the person who wrote them. Turning to the theatre, I shall restrict myself to pointing out not any special merit that raises it above other genres of fiction but something that unites it and distinguishes it from the others.

Fiction began with the stories told around the fire and, in any case, one thing is sure, it was an oral activity, the spoken word, and that is what it has been for almost the whole history of humanity. It was like that with Homer and the first epic, it was like that with the first lyric and continued to be basically an oral activity at least until the mid 19th century, when most people, at least in Western countries, were no longer illiterate. But until then it was an oral activity. Novels were read aloud and people paid to listen. That was also the case with poetry.

The theatre is oral despite also being literature (insofar as there is a book that can be read and many works by Shakespeare which I have never seen, but I have still had the pleasure of knowing them by reading them). Theatrical fiction is still consumed in public and orally, just like other literary genres for centuries and centuries. It is only five minutes, counting in historical terms, since that forking path ceased to exist, and there is a type of fiction which has become a private exercise and then a small plot, the theatre, which has conserved its oral nature. Just as nobody has seen tomorrow, it could perfectly well happen that fictions return to being generally oral and not practised in the privacy of reading. It is obvious, at least to me, that fiction will never disappear. Reading, who knows, but fiction, no. Literature, words spoken with the will to charm the people who are disposed to receive them, will last as long as the existence of man.

We had better resign ourselves to accepting that we all love fiction one way or another and admit that, one way or another, fiction will always be with us.

Curiously, though, with the theatre everyone is prepared to have a try, I mean that intelligent people, people with training, enormous quality in other fields of literature, one fine day they say today I'm going to write a play and they start to write a dialogue, one thing on top of another, ignoring the fact that the theatre has a series of laws that you can break, but you have to know them first. They are what make this genre different from any of the others.

What really happens is that the theatre is a shit genre to people who do literature, even university professors. In general theatre is a second rate genre and most of all it is a genre nobody knows anything about. That is, professors who do literature have a serious problem which comes from the word theatre itself, which covers two quite different things: one is dramatic literature and the other is a theatrical show. The professors do not understand that, as professors of literature, they have to devote themselves to dramatic literature and that they are under an obligation to understand it. If they do not understand it, they are bad professors, but, on the other hand, they are under absolutely no obligation to understand a theatrical show because it is another thing that contains many other things, and one of those is dramatic literature. Obviously, what is not possible is for a professor of literature to understand lighting technique. No-one is asking him to, nor to go to see shows, just as we cannot ask a professor of literature to go to concerts or art exhibitions.

Theatrical fiction is neither better nor worse than any other, but it has its own complex laws, like poetry, laws that have to do, for example, with rhythm, a rhythm that has nothing to do with poetic rhythm. To obey those laws, obviously, you have to know them.

My praise has ended, as it had to, with the theatre.

Speech by Mr Pere Gimferrer



I have no particular intention of speaking as a poet or even as a writer.

I would like to talk about my experience as co-author, on the one hand, and as spectator, on the other; mainly films. The fact of being a film reader and spectator, I am not talking about being a spectator of the plastic arts, has been decisive in my writing and that of all my generation.

Although since adolescence I have written poetry and have been very interested in poetry, it is the genre I have read least and I read least. The poetry I have read has perhaps been very extensive, and as receiver I always had an obscure feeling, not rationally documented, that proper literature was not verse but narrative, fiction, in other words the narrative poem or the novel and, insofar as they can be regarded as narrative, the great creations of dramatic literature.

I do not want to repeat things I have said in a book which is on the faculty bibliography, but one thing is clear: film narrative has had two decisive moments. The first was in 1914, when Pastrone appeared, and Griffith's main works. Film narrative was established according to the model of literary narrative, which had, to a certain degree, reached its prime the 19th century. From that first moment, to a certain extent, we have still not emerged, that is to say, even now highbrow or lowbrow, mass forms of film narrative, on whatever support, including television narrative, still follow that pattern: the pattern of Dickens, the pattern of Pastrone and Griffith, who were contemporaries.

There is a second decisive moment which is not so much to do with the evolution of the art of film narrative as with the evolution of reception by audiences and critics. That moment occurred after the Second World War, from the 50s on. That was the moment when a group, first of critics and then of directors, first in France and then in

other countries such as Italy, Germany and then the United States, made another reading of the cinematography they had been given. That began with *Cahiers du Cinéma*., with André Bazin and his disciples Godard, Truffaut, etc) But it spread and reached Italy with Bertolucci, the United States with Bogdanovich.

Although there was a good deal of argument at the time, along broad lines we can say that the canon changed and became the reigning taste in cinema. So, slowly and gradually it came to substantially change the way of seeing film narrative. Indirectly it has also made us take another look at what there was before.

That phenomenon occurred in two apparently opposing, but basically complementary, aspects: first, it is directly related to the appearance of neo-Realist narrative in Italy, and second with the emergence of a different criterion from the classical narrative of American cinema, the classical cinema of Hollywood. It seems contradictory, but it is not. From 1914, the time of Griffith and Pastrone, to the Second World War cinematography had to be accepted as an adult art, not as just a show, in the sense of a theatrical show, but something more, as an expressed form, solely in images in the silent period and later with sound, of dramatic literature. The evolution of the main directors, such as Chaplin and Eisenstein, began in the silent era. They all moved from conquering the territory of narrative to specifically conquering some variant of narrative literature. The fact that afterwards narrative evolved towards large units with a predominance of dialogue and a tendency towards the long shot only confirms that what we are offered is not, in spite of appearances, similar to a theatre show; it is something else and here we find a curious situation. Clearly neo-Realist cinema destroyed the type of dramaturgy that had been created before the war, both the silent and the talking eras. It moved towards another kind of dramaturgy: the silent era kind had ended with the silent era, had reached its zenith with Artaud and some films by Chaplin and Von Sternberg. The style of the talkies, which began in the 30s, had been completely consolidated by the mid 40s, when neo-Realism appeared, based on a break with classical film narrative. Bazin's first studies of Rossellini, for example, make a comparison of the narrative form with certain stories by Faulkner. That obviously goes against the Dickensian type of narrative that had imposed itself and was still dominant. As well as that there were extreme cases, such as Rossellini in Italy, treading ground that was quite close to the private diary or even poetry, a kind of voluntary renunciation of fiction in favour of lyrical sketches. That is contemporary with a more conventional approach to the cinema, that of Hollywood. It caused a scandal and was widely misunderstood.

All that has to do with the loss of innocence by the audience and the critics. Conventional cinema, of which George Cukor is a master, is based on establishing rules of the game as rigid as the ones, for example, that ruled Spanish comedy in the 16th and 17th centuries, with a well established code, perfectly restricted to what seems realistic and what does not, laws that have to govern and which it is assumed the audience accept. Obviously the spectator that began to emerge in the 50s, first in film academies and then in other groups, had learned to see the cinema from Rossellini's

point of view and from Rossellini seen by Bazin and Jacques Rivette, and had a tendency to see Hollywood cinema only accepting the fiction as a kind of documentary on the making of that fiction. He would see, to a certain extent, for example, a comedy by George Cukor, *Philadelphia Story* perhaps, through the same eyes as Rossellini's *Viaggio in Italia*, and with some extraordinary overlaps, not only in the reception of the works by the critics but even with the directors' later work.

A view of film as a documentary of its own making: only from that standpoint can we understand that whole generations, two at least, appreciate Douglas Sirk's films. Sirk is a director with an extraordinary talent, but it is based on a conviction that, from the point of view of the concept of the film, in order to function as a film, it has to be accepted as such by the audience.

That destruction of fiction in favour of documentary about the making is what explains the confluence of themes as opposed to Hollywood cinema and Rossellini's cinema. At best there are examples that amount to excellent recreations. In less successful cases they are pastiches. We can find examples of both in the work of Godard, for example, who has extraordinary things in that respect and others which are simply a calligraphic recreation.

That is why some experts, particularly the ones who come from the most extreme world, talk about a loss of innocence. That loss of essence leads us to a form of reception and creation of art in which, if until Chaplin or Dreyer it was a matter of accepting fiction as if it were reality, now we have come to a point where we do not accept fiction, but we see the reality behind it, the real shoot and, therefore, when the creator begins to make creative literature, fiction literature or fiction film, he has to treat fiction as reality and reality as fiction.

Yesterday the starting point was an artistic representation of a reality. Was that reality completely truthful? I do not know. For practical purposes it was presented with the whole artistic apparatus of a fiction. The evolution of taste in films, starting from a tiny minority but gradually invading the territory of everyone working in the audiovisual field, eventually reaches the general public in a context in which until quite recently no one studied the history of the cinema seriously. Moreover, there is no history of the cinema that is accepted by everyone, nor any immovable canon. The canon has been made little by little.

We find ourselves in a situation where, on the one hand, fiction continues to be the centre of dramatic, narrative and cinematic literature and, on the other, as far as narration in images is concerned, there is the ambivalence we have described if we dispense with products designed solely for immediate consumption, comparable to pure entertainment. There are many examples of that ambivalence in the small number of interesting films today, the films of Kiarostami in Iran and Manoel de Oliveira in Portugal.

All film narrative, all narrative in images, is a reflection on the creation of that reality through shooting and writing, through the script and, conversely, all literary narrative is also a reflection on the possibility of doing a treatment not so different from the one done with images, making it seem that reality is fiction more than fiction is reality. Thank you.

Speech by Mr Vázquez Montalbán



The word fiction comes from the Latin *finco fingae* and may give rise to interpretations such as model, represent, suppose, disguise, but the meanings that gained acceptance were along the lines of supposition or hypothesis.

In the case of the relation between the word fiction and literature, with the proposal of a literary imaginary, the word does not appear frequently until the Middle Ages or the Renaissance and not in a good sense. Then what was considered fiction literature, fables that contained a story that need not have happened, was regarded as a second rate form of culture. Within poetic theory drama enjoyed far greater prestige it had been established in all its connotations since the very origin of literature and, of course, poetry or the attempts at chronicles or historical science that might have emerged at the time.

The accusation that fiction involves unreality and, therefore, makes knowledge banal, stuck almost until the 19th century, and even in the literature of the 19th and 20th centuries authors have appeared trying to explain and persuade the reader that he is inside a literary convention and that he should not build up too many hopes about the level of knowledge proposed from fiction.

The idea of self-contained truth linked to fiction does not hold water with all its consequences, and indeed was not widely used or accepted almost until the 20th century. As a curious piece of information, in the 19th century a post-Kantian philosophical current appeared: it was called fictionalist and called itself a philosophy of theoretical suppositions. It used the Kantian *as if*, as if things were as philosophy supposes them to be, which is very close to the concept of literary fiction. If philosophy declares itself to be a possibility of ordering chaos through knowledge, literature, through fiction, is doing something very similar. It is a clarification that gradually imposes itself on the strict function of literature and it is the possibility that, through language, through the ordered word, we can make a form of alternative order to what reality can offer, which is no more nor less than masked chaos which is difficult to penetrate.

Almost until the 20th century, literature held the monopoly on fictionality, on proposing fictioned alternative realities, with all their variations, through all their genres, from the most primitive form, oral literature, by way of the theatre to the other genres. It was at the beginning of the century when competition with other linguistic codes, the audiovisual ones, appeared and contested the hegemony of literature in offering a fictional alternative to reality as it is seen.

One step further in that legitimation of fiction as creation of a legitimate illusion of reality was taken in defence of the idea that fiction conveys knowledge. If we analyse the literature of the 19th century, that is evident. First of all, fiction creates an internal logic of deeper linguistic treatment, in other words, in itself literature communicates, increases and deepens, even goes beyond the learned degrees of linguistic knowledge and experiences and proposes examinations, investigations into individual and social behaviour.

Insofar as the literature of the 19th century and the early part of the 20th uses those territories as its own, there comes a moment when it is aware, up to a point, that it is being replaced as a way of knowledge and investigation of a new awareness by the special sciences. A writer like Galdós in *Miau* could allow himself a dreamlike interpretation of dreams perhaps he had read Charcot but, undoubtedly, he did not have the analytical instruments of Freud's discoveries. There is already a concern with investigation of the subject, of the bourgeois ego as a subject of behaviour. Literature dares to make investigations. That even happens in Spanish literature in this context.

One final problem that appears for fiction in the 20th century is that of verisimilitude, the impression that that is truth in relation to the narrator's ideology, to his philosophy of the world explained through delegated characters. It is truth through conclusion, through the moral we can reach at the end of the work, or it is truth linked to a strictly literary impression of verisimilitude, in other words, when you finish a literary work, you have the feeling that it is literarily the truth. When you read a novel by Céline or a poem by Saint-John Perse you have that feeling. That is literarily the truth, but you do

not agree with the authors' ideology.

The impression of verisimilitude is not only linked to what can be accepted of that scrap of fragmented reality; it involves an impression of literary truth, of artistic truth that can be extended to any other type of fiction within the audiovisual.

As exhibition techniques advance, what we need to establish is a maximum complicity between the writer and the reader. In objectivist literature that complicity reaches the extremes of leaving the final writing of the fictional proposal in the hands of the reader. That is a distant current that comes from Robbe-Grillet's aesthetic formulations when he claims that any work of creation is the result of the creator subjects, the one that sends it and the one that receives it and is in a position to decode it. It is the last path in that vision of objective literature. A path which, if we begin to detect influences, is strongly marked by cinematic education, by the role of the human eye in the ordering of the elements of reality, and is related to an original behaviourist technique tried out by American literature, specifically, and, within the detective novel, by Dashiell Hammett, who tries to offer a form of reality through objects and voices with no level of interpretation, inviting the reader to be the one to order the elements. The objective novel obviously carries a load of influence from audiovisual culture.

That advance of literary fictionality through the territory of the audiovisual is to be found early on in a period that has been hastily – perhaps because there was no time to look for another word – dubbed postmodernity: an undesignated transition period that hangs on to that word without realising how dangerous it is, in the sense that when we have already passed the postmodern period the only thing left is to start to stammer absurdly and talk about post-postmodernity, as if there were some paralysis of our capacity to discover the historical time we are living in. It would be better to see the period as the passage from an idea of modernity and progress, in crisis since the crisis of the dialectic between capitalism and socialism, to a new idea of modernity, new ideas of progress which, beyond any doubt, are lighting up on the dialectical frontiers of the reality of history and society.

That postmodern period, which from the aesthetic point of view is born when one analyses what is being done in certain particular territories of creation, such as architecture, which then reaches the cinema, is characterised in literature by the liberalisation of the canonical, by going beyond the limits and fixations of the canonical, by assuming that any creative tradition can be valid and that all the creator has to do is to modify a creative tradition without aspiring to or hoping for the possibility of introducing himself into an avantgarde structure, without trusting that an avantgarde idea will open up horizons towards the unknown, towards the absolutely new.

Within postmodernity fiction has attained a capacity for movement without strengthening its own limits which seems fascinating to me. One cannot offer a work of struggle on the boundaries of the evolution of fiction such as *A la recherche du temps*

perdu or *Ulysses*. Those works are written and what remains to be done is to force the limits they have reached, to observe that maxim of Eliot's which says when there is an encounter between tradition and revolution, the heritage of a literary or expressive culture and the possibility that the creator can modify it, there must be a possibility of flouting the code received.

Within that situation, we are in a period which for some people has insisted too much on its character of confusion, which places us once again in that famous division between the apocalyptic and the integrated where I would like to find, not a happy medium because there never has been one – mediums have always been rather unhappy but a capacity for synthesis.

First of all, within literary fiction there is a need to assume that the realistic is always post-textual, that any work has to be read and not supposed in the ideas it puts forward to the receiver of the fiction and that afterwards there is a dispute and an overlap of territories between literary and audiovisual fiction. For example, the receiver of a fiction at the end of the 19th century and even until 1940 or 1950 depended on a literary memory when it came to storing imaginaries and so, when Jules Verne wrote *The Mysterious Island*, he needed 40 pages to describe the island. The receiver of the 60s, 70s or 80s has 5 million mysterious islands in his mental store, the ones he has seen on television, in the cinema, in comics) and so the writer, if he wants, can save 40 pages by taking it for granted that those clichés are already there in the reader's imaginary and receptive memory. There are other territories of overlap. The appropriation of dialogue by the talking cinema took place with the complicity of several novelists. The great writers of dialogue in a certain period of Hollywood cinema are major novelists, from Faulkner to Chandler, and other novelists we do not know here, but who are part of the immediate second degree, almost the first, of American literary culture.

Audiovisual culture, a modification of literary fiction, these are elements that I have considered and which lead in the relation of those two systems of fictions either to cohabitation or a tendency to introspection, that resource of many writers who, in an attempt to flee from what they consider a bastard cohabitation with an audiovisual genre, take refuge in introspective literature, in a literature that only justifies itself through its keys and the mobilisation of the linguistic mass and, in that sense, has to do everything possible to distance itself from the contaminating tendencies of the cinema.

To end with a certain praise of fiction, I believe that the future of fiction is guaranteed by one fundamental element. There are people who face reality, mix coal and iron and obtain steel, or there are others who face reality, put one brick on another and we say that they are bricklayers, or there are others who face reality, launch an aggressive takeover bid and then they turn out to be Mario Conde. And then there are a series of people who devote themselves to denying, or at least not accepting reality as it is and to presenting a hypothesis of some other possible reality, using literaturisation or any other fiction system that can come today from audiovisual codes as elements. And an

immense territory of fictionality still remains open; it could come using other media, other vehicles, as people have been trying to do all through the 20th century. No doubt new clothes will appear, new scaffolding, to carry on with this form of fiction.

