



Bulletin of Advanced Spanish

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¡Bienvenidos!

The Bulletin of Advanced Spanish is intended for students, teachers and others with an interest in the Spanish-speaking world.

In this first edition, we look back over the summer break with an eye-witness account of the **anti-government protests in Venezuela** (Guest Contribution, with attached 'Venezuela briefing'), a review of significant events for **London's Spanish community** (*Perspectiva Hispanófila*), an assessment of the **new Pre-U Topics** syllabus (Special Features), suggestions for how to teach and learn **irregular preterites** (Language lab), **exam tips** (Exams) and an analysis of the selected **Borges** stories from the current Pre-U syllabus (Literary Feature).

The Bulletin draws inspiration from the Pre-U syllabus of Cambridge International Exams, who have encouraged us in putting together this publication.

During this academic year we aim to publish an autumn, winter and spring edition of the Bulletin. It is free of charge and may be printed off, forwarded or photocopied for study purposes. Anyone receiving the Bulletin from a third party is invited to send us their email address to add to our mailing list.

We welcome feedback, as well as contributions offered for publication in future editions.

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London Spanish



UK-Spain 'unwavering affection'

King Felipe VI's state visit in July celebrated the 'unwavering affection' between Spain and the UK, whose relations are currently 'among the strongest in our history'. Speaking in almost unaccented English to both Houses of Parliament, the King said that sustaining the relationship would be a 'challenge under the new circumstances' (i.e. Brexit, which 'saddened' him). He called for 'decent and stable living conditions' post-Brexit for the 130,000 Spaniards living in the UK and the 300,000 British residents in Spain. He highlighted the UK's importance as the second largest investor in Spain and the top destination for Spanish outward investment. He listed the EU, the Mediterranean and 'Ibero-America' as Spain's foreign policy priorities. On the cultural front, he called English and Spanish 'the main means of international communication' and paid tribute to the 'extraordinary British hispanists' responsible for generating a high level of interest in Spain. He referred to historical connections between the British and Spanish royal families, most notably his predecessor Felipe II becoming King of England in 1554 through marriage to Mary Tudor (prompting a requirement that all documents in the English court be available in Spanish – ed.). Felipe VI is related to Britain's Queen Elizabeth through their common ancestor, Queen Victoria.



Okupa in the Albert Hall

Spanish songwriter **Joaquín Sabina** performed at the Albert Hall in June. A full house of Spanish and Latin American Londoners bellowed his lyrics and cheered his take on current affairs, such as ¡mierda pa'l Brexit! Sabina recalled his life as an okupa in London in the early 1970s when a refugee from Franco's Spain: "Aquí canté durante siete años en la calle, canté en el metro, canté entre las mesas de restaurantes inmundos. Lo último que podía soñar, ni en el mejor de mis sueños, es que iba a acabar tocando en este escenario por el que han pasado todos – mis maestros y mis héroes". His latest album *Lo niego todo* enjoyed a prolonged stint at the top of the Spanish charts, supported by a tour of Spain and Latin America that culminates in an 8-night run in Buenos Aires. (*Serrat y Sabina en la cultura hispana* is a new Pre-U Topic from this September – see Special Features)



El héroe del monopatín



On a sad note, both King Felipe and Sabina paid tribute to **Ignacio Echevarría** during their visits to London. Dubbed the 'skateboard hero' by the UK press, he lost his life on 3rd June defending others from the London Bridge terrorists by using his skateboard to fend them off. Spain's Prime Minister Rajoy was present when Ignacio's body arrived back in Spain with full official honours, and he was posthumously awarded a Gran Cruz de la Orden del Mérito Civil. The 38-year-old from Madrid had been in London for a year, working for HSBC's operation to combat money-laundering by terrorists and others. The British-Spanish Society called him 'part of a diaspora that has contributed for the better to the economy and the cultural and social vibrancy of London', and honoured him for 'heroically sacrificing his life in defence of a civilised, multicultural, democratic society'.



Protestas y represión a orillas del Caribe

Maria Teresa Díaz-Smith



Ser venezolana en estos últimos dieciocho años ha sido una experiencia difícil de describir. ¿Cómo explicar la razón del chavismo o del actual madurismo desde mi perspectiva ciudadana tras diecisiete años viviendo fuera de mi país? La respuesta es simple: aunque estemos fuera, esa conexión con el país no se ha perdido, en parte gracias a las redes sociales que nos han permitido romper con las censuras impuestas por el gobierno que se han incrementado en los últimos meses.



En julio de 2017 tuve la oportunidad de visitar mi ciudad natal Maracaibo, la capital del estado Zulia localizada a 117 Km de la frontera colombiana. Es la segunda ciudad más importante de Venezuela después de Caracas. El lago de Maracaibo, siendo el más grande de Sur América, posee también la reserva de petróleo más importante del país, y la población alcanza aproximadamente 1.500.000 habitantes. Es una ciudad que creció gracias a las dádivas de la industria petrolera, y tiene una infraestructura recreada a la par de ciudades de los Estados Unidos: puede ser vista como una mini Miami.

A solo dos años desde mi última visita, el recorrido desde el Aeropuerto Internacional de Maracaibo me impactó: el deterioro de la ciudad, las calles cubiertas de basura y escombros, las señales de las tiendas sucias y desteñidas, las calles oscuras sin bombillos. Ese trayecto desde el aeropuerto hasta mi casa familiar fue muy triste – mi país había cambiado, esa Revolución Bonita descrita por el chavismo como una especie de panacea se había convertido en la miseria de todo un país que había sido ejemplo de progreso en la región. El país donde nací y crecí era de oportunidades, donde había fluidez de clases sociales. Aun con las marcadas diferencias que siempre estuvieron presentes, en Venezuela existía la oportunidad de mejorar la calidad de vida, donde el ciudadano colaboraba con la movilidad económica que nos caracterizó hasta los años 90. Somos una nación de inmigrantes europeos y de países latinoamericanos que huían de conflictos políticos o buscaban mejoras económicas, esto nos hizo un país diverso étnicamente. El Chavismo introdujo el odio a esas diferencias que alguna vez nos llenó de orgullo y caímos en un ciclo que nos polarizó.

Este julio de 2017 yo no vi polarización. Vi a ciudadanos unidos en un objetivo: recuperar el país, la libertad, las oportunidades, esas que los jóvenes menores de 18 años no conocieron. En las tres semanas que estuve, participé en guarimbas y trancazos: la primera es una forma de protesta realizada en los vecindarios donde los vecinos paralizan el tránsito en las calles usando escombros de cualquier tipo, banderas y carteles con eslóganes 'libertarios' como son llamados. El trancazo es otra forma de protesta, cuyo objetivo es paralizar al país: nadie sale de su casa, los negocios no abren y se cierran las calles de los vecindarios.



Durante las protestas vi a niños, jóvenes, adultos y ancianos protestar, también vi con horror y pena a los esbirros del gobierno con uniformes de la Guardia Nacional Bolivariana reprimir la protesta pacífica, haciendo uso de una artillería de guerra descomunal en contra de ciudadanos desarmados, estos que ya perdieron el miedo. Salí a la calle con mi sobrino de 18 años y todo fue porque lo vi casualmente preparando su mochila: él me vio y me dijo que no le dijera a su madre que él iba a salir porque ella se asustaba. Razones no le faltaban: la Guardia Nacional Bolivariana ya había asesinado a quemarropa a varios jóvenes en varias partes del país, si no los mataban los torturaban, y los desaparecían. Preferí acompañarlo, caminamos algunas cuadras, pude conversar con personas que vivían en barrios marginales y que se mezclaban con aquellos médicos e ingenieros que en otra situación sería esa clase media alta que ya no era tal. Les pregunté si tenían miedo porque yo sí lo tenía, muy cerca se escuchaban detonaciones de armas de fuego, se olía el humo de bombas lacrimógenas y esta gente estaba allí, estoica esperando la represión. Me decían 'tenemos que resistir o nos quedamos sin país, sin nada, sin futuro', los jóvenes de primeros en la fila como peones – sentí miedo y también orgullo.

Tuvimos suerte: en esa oportunidad no llegó la represión, pero ese día la resistencia sufrió una gran cantidad de retenciones ilegales de jóvenes y allanamientos a residencias. De lo vivido, puedo concluir que el país cambió, pero en esta nueva dirección veo una unión, el deseo de surgir como sociedad, como nación. Hay una generación de jóvenes a los que les ha tocado madurar muy rápido, con conciencia de lo que pierden si no se consigue recuperar la democracia. Regresé con la convicción de que ese objetivo será alcanzado pronto. Ellos son los hijos de Bolívar.



Venezuela briefing

The street-protests described in the preceding article are against the government of Nicolás Maduro, the successor to the late Hugo Chávez (pictured right) who launched the self-styled 'Bolivarian Revolution' after his election as president in 1998. Social justice had not been a priority before Chávez came to power, and in the early 2000s his avowedly socialist regime used some of the country's huge oil wealth to improve the conditions of life for poor Venezuelans, winning the admiration of progressive western politicians including Jeremy Corbyn and the leader of Spain's Podemos party Pablo Iglesias. However, his government over-reached itself economically: when oil prices fell, inflation soared, corruption spread and Bolivarian ideological zeal ran rife through public administration. Life for most Venezuelans has become a nightmare of shortages, queuing, lack of access to medical provisions and urban violence. Chávez dubiously cast himself as both a ruler in the tradition of the nation's independence hero Simón Bolívar and a socialist in the model of Cuba's Fidel Castro. He died in 2013 and was succeeded by the more brutish, charisma-free Maduro. Like Chávez before him, Maduro denounces his opponents as fascists and claims to be the victim of economic sabotage driven from the United States. While on the one-hand preserving a pretence of democracy, those around Maduro have let on that they intend never to allow their political opponents to win power. Recent street protests have focused on Maduro's constitutional manoeuvre to take power away from the democratically elected congress, in which the opposition holds a majority. This has drawn condemnation from other Latin American states and even improbable tweets about military intervention from Donald Trump.



From around the examiners' coffee machine...



Re-marks aside, autumn brings sweet release from the dominance of the exam schedule. Red pens are put away, stillness descends on the exam halls and teachers bask in the relative lack of exam constraints. Pupils have few if any exam sessions to dread in the coming term, while examiners take refuge in their day-jobs. Their reflections on the summer's papers surface in the Examiner's Reports, which, together with the mark schemes/indicative content, offer insights for both students and teachers.

More informal comment in the wake of the 2017 Pre-U Spanish papers might include:

Paper 1 (speaking): candidates presenting on topics that are still current need to monitor developments up to the date of the exam: for example, this year it was helpful for the student presenting on corruption in Argentina to know that, three weeks before his exam, former President Fernández de Kirchner was charged with fraud and her passport confiscated.

Papers 1 and 2 (comprehension): a broad familiarity with issues that shape the historical, cultural, social and political experience of those living in the Spanish-speaking world is part of a good hispanist education, and can help put exam passages into context.

Paper 3 (discursive essay): citing real-life examples is not only required by the rubric, but is also crucial to keeping the argument grounded in reality. Regular exposure to quality news sources such as the BBC or The Economist, as well as Spanish-language media, is a great way to achieve this.

Paper 4: examiners enjoy reading candidates' personal responses to texts and films. Where the candidate's ideas are backed up by evidence (and are relevant to the question), they can often be more convincing than arguments derived from critics. The Olympic gold answer would be persuasive, insightful, focused, legible and succinct.

¡Vaya cebolla!



The new Lower Sixth returned to class in September coyly acknowledging that a whole new level of commitment to their chosen subjects is expected. Except... they'd forgotten their Spanish over the summer holiday. Hardly a surprise in a system that leads students to cram for each GCSE paper and then purge their memories on leaving the exam room in order to cram for the next day's subject.

I always harboured the pious hope that my pupils' Spanish might not slip backwards between the end of GCSE and the start of Sixth Form. Repeating Year 11 lessons in Year 12 seemed dispiriting. To this end, in hope rather than expectation, I would issue a modicum of holiday reading and a list of websites to be 'enjoyed' during the break.

In my view, there is one steep section of the learning curve in both GCSE and Sixth Form Spanish courses. For GCSE, it is learning seven indicative verb tenses, with all those itty-biddy endings that make all the difference between who does what, and when. For Sixth Form, it's the subjunctive, which must be learned partly to avoid inadvertent error and partly as a display-case for the candidate's linguistic credentials.

Consolidating the indicative at the start of the Lower Sixth means students discovering that there are more stem-changing present tense verbs and irregular preterites than they needed to know for GCSE. They will soon realise that mastering these conjugations is crucial to forming the subjunctive.

Pupils' memories are finite and should be exploited with care. For GCSE I calculated that there were only 10½ irregular preterites that pupils needed to learn. (The ½ is *hubo*, for which they only need the third-person singular.)

Beyond GCSE they need more. I recall my own student days, with a cloud of partially learned irregulars swarming around in my head at which I could only snatch in desperation when the requirement arose. In an effort to spare my pupils similar disorientation, I developed the *cebolla* – an onion-ring approach to irregular preterites: the easiest ones lie in the outer layer (those whose irregularity consists only of a spelling change in the first-person, eg *jugué*), while the wholeheartedly irregular verbs occupy the centre of the onion (*ir/ser, dar, hacer...*). There are three 'rings' between the outer layer and the centre: in ascending order of difficulty, those which add a 'y' in the third-person (*leyó, leyeron* – the 'y' swallowing up the 'i' of the 3rd person plural); those which change their stem in the third-person (*pidió, pidieron*); and those which change their stem throughout (*pude, pudiste,...*). A subset of the latter are the few verbs whose irregularity is characterised by the insertion of a 'j' before all endings (*conduje*) – the 'j' swallowing up the 'i' of the 3rd person plural.

I gave each of these rings a cheery name to encourage a rapport between onion and student. The outer ring of 'yo-yo' verbs (those which change only in the *yo* form) was followed by the 'y-oh-y' ring, the 'third time luckies', the 'grave-diggers' (*pretérito grave*, in Spanish grammar jargon) with its subset of 'j-drivers' (*conducir* = to drive), and finally the 'bulls-eye' (mixing our onion metaphor with that of the dartboard). In this way, the swirling mass of irregular preterites from my youth were corralled into a 5 (okay, 5 ½) ring structure and domesticated as a *cebolla* (one onion-averse pupil preferred the image of a tiered wedding cake, which I grudgingly accepted would do just as well). Either way, instead of 70 muddlesome irregulars at large, there were now just a few neatly packaged templates to master. And when it comes to irregulars, 5½ is plenty.

Borges in the labyrinth

Insights into the author's art from the six stories on the Pre-U syllabus



One of the central leitmotifs of Borges' work is the labyrinth: according to the dictionary, 'a maze-like network of tunnels, chambers, or paths, either natural or man-made'. The distinction between a natural and a man-made network of paths is crucial to our understanding of Borges. In these stories, he is particularly interested in the latter: a construction made by man in which man then loses himself.

What does it mean to be lost in the labyrinth? Separation from home, from one's roots? Alienation from the self? The sense of the self as not-one? When Jorge Luis Borges was awarded an honorary doctorate by Cambridge University in 1984 he announced that he should not be referred to – in his seminar – as don Jorge or Doctor, but simply as Borges. In his essay "Borges and I" we read:

Al otro, a Borges, es a quien le ocurren las cosas (...) de Borges tengo noticias por el correo y veo su nombre en una terna de profesores o en un diccionario biográfico. (...) Yo vivo, yo me dejo vivir para que Borges pueda tramar su literatura y esa literatura me justifica.



Borges' work contains recurrent instances of this 'doubleness' – which perhaps we might call a multiplicity of selves. The idea here is that once the self has been split – and the primary example of this is the image of oneself in a mirror — this splitting can be imagined as a process leading to multiple re-creations, or 'ghosts', of the self.

1. *El jardín de los senderos que se bifurcan*

Borges' short stories play with the reader and play with genres. A number of genres are at work in *El jardín*.... The first level is the scholarly review: as Donald Shaw has pointed out, "in 1935 Borges approached the short story from a different and more original direction, that of a fake book review." Borges: *Ficciones* (London: Grant & Cutler, 1976), p. 9. Borges had discovered a new narrative voice: "En la página 22 de la Historia de la Guerra Europea, de Liddell Hart..."



The fake book review is then mixed with the spy story. Doctor Yu Tsun – whose written account interrupts the fake book review – is a spy working for Germany. We follow the intrigue of his story as he attempts to transmit his message to the German high command, and we experience the suspense of his escape from the clutches of Richard Madden, who is pursuing him and who – at the conclusion of the story – apprehends him. The story evokes the intrigue, trickery and deception of the genre of the spy story. It also evokes the leitmotif of the use of codes to hide one's secrets from the enemy, as well as the drama of breaking the enemy's codes. It alludes to the machine-like ruthlessness we associate with spies: *Yo quería probarle que un amarillo podía salvar a sus ejércitos* (*Ficciones*, p. 104).

El jardín... also builds into the narrative a sense of the eerie nature of human personality: the other who replicates the self and disturbs its tranquility, as we find in, for example, Edgar Allen Poe's short story, *William Wilson*. Doctor Yu Tsun is the *bisnieto* of Ts'ui Pên, the author of a novel about a labyrinth, which comes to form a central part of the story. Yu Tsun replicates and re-lives his ancestor's story. He becomes his ancestor's double, conjuring up the unexplained fear which animates the nineteenth-century Gothic story, typical of Poe's tales.

El jardín... also contains a number of thematic elements which characterise Borges' distinctive style. Thus, the Orientalist dimension adds a twist to the canonic genres already mentioned. Orientalism is here understood to mean a Western fascination with all things Eastern. Yu Tsun is a Chinese spy and his victim – Stephen Albert – is a Sinologist who knows a great deal about Yu Tsun's ancestor, Ts'ui Pên. The Orientalism of the nineteenth century is allowed to form one of the atmospheric strata of the story. In typically erudite manner, Borges is referring to nineteenth-century British and German rivalry in the field of Orientalism. The First World War is therefore converted into a repeated path of the previous century's intellectual contest.

The central motif of *El jardín...* is, of course, the labyrinth, which operates in a variety of interlocking ways in this tale. The creator of the labyrinth is Ts'ui Pên and, as Stephen Albert suggests, the labyrinth is not just described in the book; the book is itself the labyrinth. The book contains a garden of bifurcating paths: *todos los desenlaces ocurren; cada uno es el punto de partida de otras bifurcaciones* (*Ficciones*, p. 112). The book therefore takes on the air of the Borgesian Aleph, the summation of all possible paths which are available simultaneously. It thereby becomes a timeless universe: *no emplea una sola vez la palabra tiempo* (*Ficciones*, p. 114)

The conclusion of *El jardín...* brings all of these levels together triumphantly as – rather anti-climactically — Yu Tsun kills Stephen Albert and is himself captured by Richard Madden (*Ficciones*, p. 115). Yu Tsun is able to express a secret message to the Germans: *El Jefe ha descifrado ese enigma. Sabe que mi problema era indicar (a través del estrépito de la guerra) la ciudad que se llama Albert y que no hallé otro medio que matar a una persona de ese nombre.* (*Ficciones*, p. 116). The intriguing point about this dénouement is that it indicates that for Borges there is an intrinsic and mysterious relationship between language and reality, between the word and the human body. For

Borges, language can function as a body, while the phenomenal world can function as a language to be deciphered by mankind. The tragedy occurs when that language becomes a labyrinth which, though created by man, ends up imprisoning him within it – leading to his demise and death.

2. *La muerte y la brújula*

Many of the other stories of Borges' *oeuvre* have a similar combination of elements. *La muerte y la brújula*, for example, contains the following motifs:

1. the fake book review (in the references to the Kabbalah);
2. the detective story (like the spy Yu Tsun, the detective Lönnrot uses his wits to achieve his goal, only to fall victim to his own machinations);
3. the double (Lönnrot is, as the story shows, a double of Red Scharlach, as indeed their names suggest; "rot" = "Red");
4. Orientalism, which, in this story, is represented by allusions to the Kabbalah, esotericism and Judaism;
5. the labyrinth (Lönnrot traps himself within a maze of his own making; he is his own Minotaur).

Nonetheless, *La muerte y la brújula* has its own distinctive resonance: for example, the hubris of the protagonist who pays the price for over-reaching man's intellectual limitations, or the transformation of the city into a landscape laden with symbolic menace.

3. *El sur*

El sur alludes to the double (in the sense that the self after the illness is a new individual, a double of his former self), the Orientalism is fulfilled by the exoticist *gauchismo* epitomised by the knife fight, and the labyrinth is suggested by Dahlmann's acceptance of the death which he confronts – as if he were Theseus accepting his fate at the hands of the Minotaur.



The most striking feature of the story is the way in which it operates on different levels simultaneously. It is difficult to establish whether the story is to be read in a straightforward way or whether the journey towards the South is a hallucination of a man trapped in an asylum, even the dream of a man returning home after his death. There are uncanny connections between the two levels: the owner of the store reminds him of a male nurse; the pellet of bread strikes his head like the edge of the door which originally produced his wound; the knife-wound from which Dahlmann expects to die is compared to the hypodermic needle which has freed him from pain. Most conclusively of all, the storekeeper, a stranger, addresses him by name.

4. *Emma Zunz*

Like *El sur*, the short story *Emma Zunz* works on a number of levels. On a primary level it can be read as the story of a young woman who takes her revenge on a man who ruined her father's life. However, there are a number of enigmas within the text that cast doubt on this reading.

Firstly, we note the subversion of the detective narrative genre – in that Aaron Loewenthal, though guilty of one crime (ruining Manuel Maier's life by falsely accusing him of embezzlement), is made to pay via another crime he did not commit (raping Emma).

Secondly, the minute description of Emma's decision-making process allows the reader to empathise with her, despite her deceitfulness – thereby breaking down any easy distinction between good and evil. Thus, it is possible to read the story initially as one of clever revenge, but then to re-interpret it as a tale about self-deception.

Thirdly, the description of Emma's life transforms the story into a perplexing playground for the reader's expectations, for we see how Emma becomes unable to distinguish between internal and external reality. How do we know that the letter she receives is telling the truth? Why doesn't Emma check the details with the author of the letter? Why does she decide to avenge her father when he is dead, and not before? When using a man who has sex with her in order to frame her enemy, why does she see the sex in terms of the *cosa horrible* that her father did to her mother? All of these questions allow us to see Emma as someone who has become unhinged from reality, thereby throwing into question the extent to which her narrative is a 'true' account of events.

5. *La casa de Asterión*

The short story is a monologue by Asterión about his house. As the last lines of the short story suggest, Asterión is the minotaur, that is, the half bull-half man mythological creature that lived at the centre of the labyrinth in Crete.

Once more we can see that the Borges short story ends on a note of death. The short story allows us to hear the thoughts of the Minotaur and, in a curious reversal, we see the story of Theseus and Ariadne not from their perspective but from that of Asterión who seeks his redemption (death) via his meeting with Theseus: *¿Cómo será mi redentor? ¿Será tal vez un toro con cara de hombre? ¿O será como yo?* Asterión's question shows that he will be killed by his symmetrical double. Just as he is a man with the head of a bull, so he will be killed by *un toro con cara de hombre*, that is, Theseus. Like the narrator of *El sur*, he accepts his fate gladly: *¿Lo crearás, Ariadna? – dijo Teseo. El minotauro apenas se defendió.*

6. *El encuentro*

This story relates the death of one man as a result of a knife-fight. The story is allegorical and works out a process of what the anthropologist, George Frazer, in *The Golden Bough*, called 'contagious magic', since the knives – as a result of a sympathetic bond with their original owners – take on a life of their own, as if by magic. And Duncan is killed by Uriarte as a result of the two knives' actions. There are reminiscences in this story of Edgar Allen Poe's story-telling style.



Conclusion

In this study I have focused on how these stories work on a number of levels simultaneously, exhibiting themes such as:

1. The fake book review;
2. The use and often deconstruction of the conventions of the spy story/detective story;
3. The use of the double, which might be your opposite number in this life, or an ancestor whose narrative you re-live;
4. The use of Orientalism as a stage-prop;
5. The use of the labyrinth, not just as a mythic device (i.e. the Minotaur of Crete) but as an intellectual trap created by the human mind;
6. The slippery relationship between inner and outer worlds, and between language and reality.

There is much more for students of Borges to consider! What do these stories say of his outlook on human intellectual constructs, such as politics, philosophy or religion? How does Borges hook his readers and generate tension? Are his characters mere cyphers, as some critics suggest, or credible individuals? Does the recurrence of death indicate a remorselessly bleak authorial perspective? Share with us your thoughts on these issues or raise other ones and we will be glad to comment in future editions.

New Pre-U Topics



This September the cycle of Topic and Texts syllabus renewal kicked in for Pre-U schools. The process brings relief to examiners who have asked just about every question imaginable for works such as *Réquiem...* and *Casa...* that have featured since the very first syllabus. It also lets teachers free the mind by experimenting with new texts and dipping into authors and directors they may not previously have encountered, making them glad to be alive after all.

Each edition of the Bulletin will analyse part of the syllabus (in this edition, see our separate literary feature on Borges). Here, however, we offer an overview of the 2019-21 syllabus Topics (NB beware – at the time of writing the ‘Specimen 2019’ Paper 4 on the Pre-U website does not use the 2019-21 syllabus!)

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Topic 1 is new – ***La Argentina del siglo 21***. Its three works actually straddle the turn of the century and reflect in their different ways the impending social and economic crisis of the time. Sorín’s *Historias Mínimas* is a gem of a film (very linguistically accessible) touching on the lives and dreams of characters trapped in unpromising circumstances in southern Argentina. *Familia rodante*, by contrast, heads north to offer a wry ‘disintegration blues’ take on the collapse of middle-class values attendant on the country’s 2001 existential crisis. Aira’s short novel *La villa* conjures a fascinating and partly magical reimagining of a Buenos Aires shantytown and its relationship with the surrounding neighbourhood.



Topic 2 – ***La mujer en el mundo hispano*** – is unchanged. The delightful *Como agua para chocolate* thereby becomes the only text to survive since the first Pre-U syllabus of 2008. Its darker companions are the harrowing Civil War tale of the *Trece Rosas*, and *Esos cielos* – a portrayal of a former extremist’s transition from jail to civilian life as she tries to put distance between herself and her former fellow-militants.



Topic 3 – **El cine de Almodóvar** – brings in his 2016 film *Julieta* to sit alongside the two *universo femenino* classics that have caught the imagination of many candidates since 2008. The removal of the brilliant *Hable con ella* is regrettable, but the introduction of fresh material is always welcome, and *Julieta* is arguably the *cineasta*’s first quality film since *Volver*. At least the new trio of films

makes it more excusable for candidates to declare in their exam papers that ‘Almodóvar’s films are about women’.

Topic 4 – ***Justicia y opresión en América Latina*** – also changes one of its component works, with *La historia oficial* giving way to a Neruda selection. Many students find the story of Argentina’s ‘dirty war’ fascinating, so it was perhaps strange that none ever wrote on *La historia oficial* – perhaps it seemed dated compared to the two Gael García Bernal films (or perhaps teachers just like García Bernal: on which subject, what a pity that Pablo Larraín’s two García Bernal films, *No* and *Neruda*, aren’t better structured – the subject matter is interesting and would make good syllabus fodder). Anyway, the return of Neruda to the syllabus can only be a good thing, and the eight featured poems provide a thrilling perspective on the Topic.



Topic 5 – ***Serrat y Sabina en la cultura hispana*** – is both new and innovative, in that it comprises a documentary (*El símbolo y el cuate*), a reference book (*Serrat y Sabina: A vista de pájaro*), and selected lyrics from the *Dos pájaros de un tiro* album. Alongside Almodóvar, Serrat and Sabina have arguably shaped contemporary Spaniards’ cultural perspectives more profoundly than any other artists. This Topic brings out their humour, originality and cultural awareness, with the documentary in particular offering informative insights into Spanish and Latin American society – worth watching even if you don’t study this Topic. The syllabus helps teachers and students by directing them to specific lyrics and sections of the reference book. Our tip: make the documentary and the lyrics your main focus, then draw on the book if you wish to deepen your focus on specific issues (it’s structured alphabetically by subject to make that practicable).

In our next edition: an overview of the syllabus Texts.