



Bulletin of Advanced Spanish

Home

Feliz Año...

Welcome to the third edition of the Bulletin of Advanced Spanish – a free online resource for those with an interest in the Spanish-speaking world, especially students and teachers preparing for Cambridge International's Pre-U exam.

We welcome especially readers in seven new Pre-U 'centres' added to our mailing list this month. If you want to catch up on previous editions, you can use the Archive link at the foot of this page.

This February 2018 edition of the Bulletin features even more suggestions about teaching and studying Pre-U texts and films than hitherto. We conclude our series on the new (2019-21) Pre-U Spanish Topics and Texts syllabus by looking at the García Márquez, Cercas and Borges texts. We offer reflections on Vargas Llosa's *La tía Julia y el escribidor*, including detailed suggestions from a teacher currently teaching the text. Editors Hart and Wallis discuss approaches to studying film at Pre-U and beyond. Our language focus turns to *ser* and *estar*, while our new features writer Belén Sánchez Alonso casts a withering gaze at this month's Día de San Valentín and, in a separate article, explains the pre-eminence of *Operación Triunfo* in Spanish popular culture.

In putting together these offerings we have been inspired and guided by our readers. Thank you: if your input came to a halt, so would we. Please don't hold back. We anticipate our next edition appearing in late May/early June, as the dust starts to settle on the summer 2018 public exams.

We welcome you forwarding this publication on to others who you think may be interested: they can contact us directly to join our mailing list. Bulletin content may be reproduced and used with attribution for educational purposes.

Finally, a number of our readers are in 'centres' that will be taking the Pre-U exam for the first time this year: to them especially, and to all our student readers, *suerte y ánimo* for the months ahead.

Así arrancó 2018...

Midnight grape-popping and *reyes magos* sweet-hurling in the plazas and streets of Spain during the first week of 2018 made a welcome break from the flags and banners of the previous three months. The high tide of Catalan separatism on which we reported in our November edition has left some disillusionment on both sides. Pro-independence parties won a slender majority of seats in the Catalan parliament, but on less than half the popular vote. Like recent national elections, the Catalan regional election generated an inconclusive outcome.

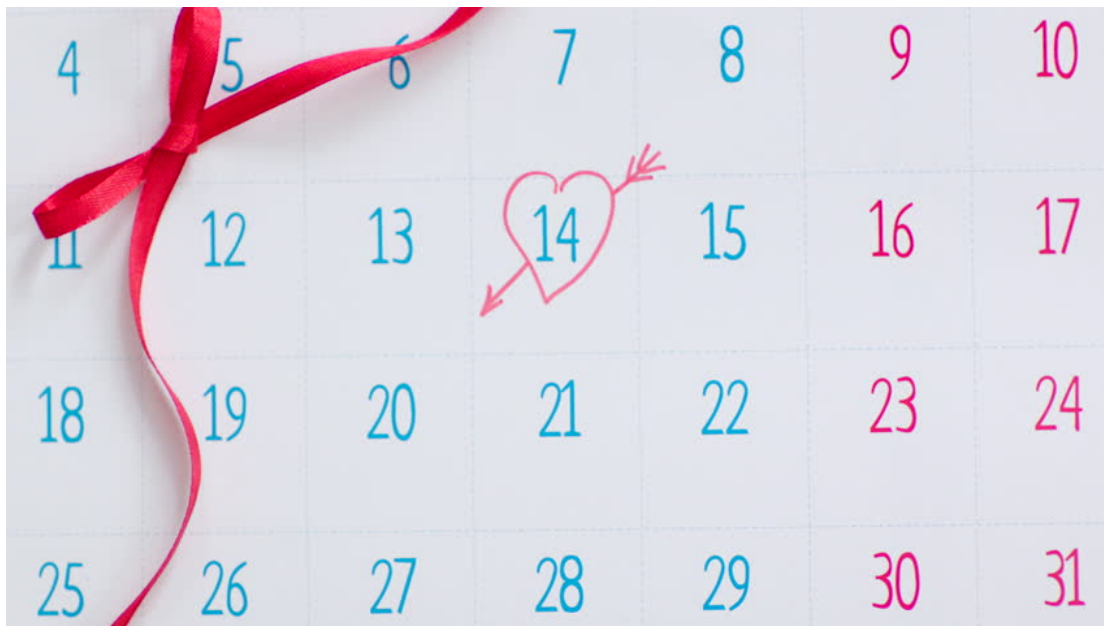


Would-be President Carles Puigdemont's indeterminate status, hovering between exile and homecoming, is an apt metaphor for a region in flux. Meanwhile the semi-humorous Tabarnia movement is promoting the notion of a separatist region based on Barcelona and Tarragona (the area of Catalonia with least support for

secession) that would break away from Catalonia if Catalonia were to break from Spain. They delight in provoking Catalan separatists to use against them the same arguments that Madrid uses against Catalan secession.

Those with a historical perspective may be put in mind of the muddle and inefficiencies that prevailed in 19th and early 20th century Spanish politics. However, there have so far been no significant echoes of the disdain for party politics of those behind the 1981 coup attempt. Rajoy and Puigdemont may not be the most inspiring statesmen of our times, but looking around the western world, they could be a lot worse...





San Valentín: la compra ha comenzado

Siempre he sido de la opinión de romper con las obligaciones de calendario. Realmente no entiendo el porqué de tener que hacer algo solo porque esté impuesto por la sociedad. Hoy en día hay que regalar por el cumpleaños, el santo, el día de la madre, del padre, incluso del abuelo y, claro, por Navidad, pero ¿por qué?

Cuando éramos pequeños se premiaba la manualidad, la originalidad de escribirle un poema a un ser querido, eso sí, siempre siguiendo el calendario. De algún modo, era bonito. Ahora esa esencia se ha perdido en favor del consumismo, del comprar por comprar.

La necesidad frente al deseo

Gran culpa de esto la ha tenido El Corte Inglés, ya que ha contribuido a la esclavización de los españoles a la compra de productos innecesarios con sus promociones y ofertas. Que si 2x1, que si 'Esta Navidad tus regalos están en El Corte Inglés'... Y es que, en España, hasta hace pocos años, las rebajas no empezaban hasta que lo marcaban estos grandes almacenes.



El problema principal al que nos enfrentamos en nuestros días es el consumismo: hemos llegado hasta el punto de confundir querer con necesitar. Como entenderéis, uno se siente menos culpable si cada vez que compra un capricho nuevo se autoconvence de que era algo que necesitaba. Así de sencillo.

La farsa de San Valentín en España

Si teníamos pocas tradiciones en las que regalar, España se rindió a la celebración de un nuevo santo en el siglo XX, un tal San Valentín, que hasta el momento no formaba parte de nuestra tradición. Se dice que su introducción estuvo motivada para incentivar la compra de regalos, ¿te sorprende?



¿Por qué necesitaríamos regalar? Ah claro, para demostrar que realmente queremos a alguien. Si tenemos días para todos los miembros de nuestra familia, no podemos dejar de lado a nuestra pareja, ¿cómo se sentiría sin un regalo? ¿pensaría que ya no le quieres? Ante la duda, mejor regalarle algo, ¿no?

Si tenemos poco presupuesto seremos románticos y le compraremos unos bombones (esto siempre triunfa). Si contamos con un poco de dinero más, lo último son los packs de Mr. Wonderful, una taza de 'hoy siéntete especial porque lo nuestro es de otro planeta' (seguro que así conquistas a tu pareja). Finalmente, si realmente quieres a la persona, lo mejor es gastar una fortuna para celebrar ese fin de semana tan romántico juntos (si puedes ir a París, pues mejor aún).

Podemos decir entonces que, sumándola a nuestras celebraciones de calendario, ahora San Valentín es una imposición social más en la que jugamos un papel de víctimas. Nos hemos visto obligados a seguir esta pseudo-tradición para no desentonar con los demás: no queremos ser los únicos que no regalen ni reciban regalos en esta fecha tan señalada. Los necesitamos.

Entonces, creo que ha llegado el momento de que abramos debate: ¿somos las víctimas de una sociedad consumista o somos aquellos que escogen consumir? No creo que nadie tenga una pistola en el pecho que le obligue a seguir la norma. Seamos francos, quizás haya llegado el momento de dejar atrás los discursos victimistas y tengamos, por fin, que aceptar nuestra responsabilidad en el abuso de consumo.

Como muchos dicen, pero pocos hacen: el amor, la amistad y el cariño a nuestros seres queridos se celebran a diario. Entonces, no olvidéis que para celebrar algo no es necesario gastar ingentes cantidades de dinero en regalos, simplemente basta con disfrutar de la compañía. ¡Feliz San...

Belén Sánchez Alonso, profesora de lengua española y literatura trabajando en Abingdon School.



Somos los que estamos

The arrival of spring brings the Upper Sixth hispanists closer to facing the unavoidable mock exams, looking for formulae that will elevate their linguistic performance to the higher grade-bands within the mark scheme. With that in mind, many wisely turn to their revision notes on *ser* and *estar* to polish up the perhaps more basic usage, but also looking for idiomatic expressions that will impress the examiner.

Few lexical items can rival the potency of *ser* and *estar* for their ability to alter the meaning of the words we combine them with. In most cases, only *ser* or *estar* can be used in a given context but, in some, either can be used, producing a variety of meanings. It is precisely the large number of idiomatic combinations that make *ser* and *estar* one of the most rewarding aspects of Spanish grammar to master.

The most widespread rules take *ser* (from *esse*, meaning “to be” in Latin) as the verb we use to describe features of identity or nature that are unlikely to change in the short term, if ever. Sentences like *Teresa es una buena negociadora* would point towards a broadly accepted feature that would characterise an individual called Teresa, whether the fact may be true or not. In the same way, *Carlos es español* implies that someone called *Carlos* holds Spanish nationality, an inherent feature of his identity.

On the other hand, we resort to *estar* (from the Latin *stare*, “to stand”, which also gives us the English term ‘state’). It therefore refers to the state of something or someone at the given moment, or its location. Of course, the well-known exception here, and a favourite feature in Oxford’s entrance tests, is the use of *ser* instead of *estar* to indicate where an event is taking place – *La negociación es en Bruselas*. Otherwise, *estar* covers the rest of our needs to point out something’s location, as in *El parlamento está al borde del Támesis*, or a person’s location as in *Sus aliados están en Estados Unidos*. Sentences like *El presidente está contento* suggest a state of mind that could rapidly change.

But perhaps the most interesting features of these verbs appear when we turn to their idiomatic uses. The combination of these verbs with certain colours result in a variety of interesting and at times unexpected meanings. *Margarita es roja* would imply that her political ideology is Marxist, whereas *Margarita está roja* would suggest that she is embarrassed. *Margarita está embarazada* tells us that she *está en estado de buena esperanza*.

When combined with the colour green we come across expressions like *Felipe es verde*, meaning he is fully committed to ecology. This has no correlation with a sentence of the type *Felipe está verde*, which denotes he is an inexperienced individual. We complete our chromatic exploration with *negro*: *Tomás es negro* makes reference to his natural skin colour, and in the Hispanic world has no racist connotations whatsoever. By contrast, *Tomás está negro* would gist towards the idea that he is angry or upset.

Other adjectives broaden up the range of meaning, so that if we are not careful we can find ourselves in a minefield, as with the literal translation of the English “Juan is hot” to convert it to *Juan está caliente*. Similarly, *Juan está bueno* can either mean that he is enjoying good health or that his stunning physique make Juan irresistible (this being perhaps the least likely context that Upper Sixth students will encounter in an exam). Common cases are also examples such as *Amancio es rico* (he is rich) and *La comida está rica* (the food is tasty), or *El ministro es listo* (he is clever) and *El ministro está listo para dar su discurso* (he is ready to deliver his speech).

The use of *ser* and *estar* with nouns can be even more cryptic and offers a vast number of colloquial expressions. *Ser* seems to pair up nicely with names of animals to describe certain mostly negative features in a human being. *Ser un burro* (being not particularly bright), *ser un gallina* (to be a coward), *ser un buitre* (to be an opportunist), *ser un Borrego* (said about someone without strength of character). On the other hand, *estar* when followed by *como* and certain nouns delivers expressions of the type: *estar como una rosa* (to be very well), *estar como un toro* (to be physically strong and sound), *estar como un fideo* (to be very thin) or *estar como una cabra* (to be crazy).

The versatility of *ser* and *estar* is truly exceptional, as both verbs provide an endless amount of meanings that range from basic descriptions to sometimes extravagant idiomatic expressions. Whatever the case, they make the advanced hispanist stand out.

By BAS editor Francisco Compán

Alex among the Argentines

“Sos de Londres, ¿qué pensás del Brexit?” This was one strand of my conversation with the taxi driver during the ride from Ezeiza airport to my apartment in Palermo where I was to reside for the next six months. It was two days after *that* referendum in 2016 and the driver’s curiosity about British politics came as both a relief and a concern. A relief because it confirmed that Buenos Aires wasn’t completely cut off from what was going on at home, despite being 7,000 miles away (a genuine worry of mine), but a concern because for most of the journey I could barely understand a word of what he was saying.



I was in an unfamiliar city, about to start a new job, and I was unable to grasp the “sh” sounds of the *porteño* accent.* It was not the most encouraging start to the year. I’d spent the last four months telling everyone how excited I was, which was true, but the early realities of moving halfway across the world were daunting.



Naturally, there had been months of organisation leading up to my departure for Buenos Aires, but nothing can really prepare you for that moment of arrival. Argentina had been very high on my list when considering options for my Year Abroad. Indeed, it seems to be a popular choice for many third-year university hispanists, who tend to divide from quite early on between those that want to stay in Europe and those who prefer Spanish America. For the latter, Buenos Aires seemed an obvious choice, thanks to the slightly more European nature of the city, one of the many aspects that appealed to me.

Determined to work rather than study (UCL didn't have any links with UBA the year that I went anyway), and following countless rejections and dead-ends, I managed to secure an internship with digital marketing company, Apernet. It was made pretty clear to us that finding a job is completely the responsibility of the student, which understandably puts a lot of people off. However, I think it provided me with valuable experience which I would not have had if I had chosen to study. Working primarily as a Quality Assurance assistant, I picked up a lot of technical skills but also really improved my language at the office. All internal communication was in Spanish and I also did a fair bit of translation both to and from English as a lot of clients were UK or US based. There is no doubt that it can be tough at times trying to juggle a full-time job with a social life and the year-abroad essay (2,500 words on a topic of your choice), but I am so pleased that I persisted, as it definitely helped open doors when applying for jobs in my final year.



Therapy in Argentina – the topic of my YA essay

Furthermore, my decision to work rather than study meant that I was around Argentines a lot. As such, it was not long before I started saying “sho me shamo” rather than “yo me llamo”, and got to grips with the details of the Argentine way of life. This meant eating dinner at 10pm rather than 8pm, making plans spontaneously rather than the week before, and greeting everyone in the office with a kiss on the cheek each morning, a trend that I don't see taking off in the UK!

The third year abroad is most certainly what you make of it. It is up to you to adapt and to ‘put yourself out there’. I joined a running club that met three nights a week in the Palermo parks. I would occasionally go out with friends from work in the evenings, and was invited to the Independence Day party at the Mexican

Embassy and drinks with the La Dolfina polo club to celebrate the start of the season.

On top of this, I was able to travel to some amazing places. I spent a month in Patagonia in November, trekking Torres del Paine, walking on the Perito Moreno glacier and visiting Ushuaia, the southernmost city in the world. I went to Mendoza, Iguazú Falls and Córdoba for long weekends (as well as a taking the ferry across to Uruguay a couple of times to renew my visa!). Argentina is a country with much to offer, and it proved itself to be a fantastic year abroad destination.



True, it's easy to forget those evenings spent binge watching Friends on Netflix, eating a rather sad-looking cheese omelette because the local *chino* only stocks store cupboard ingredients or you don't know the word for which cut of meat or which vegetable you want at the *carniceria* or *verduleria*! But I left having developed a strong sense of independence. I had learnt to laugh about the bizarre, and sometimes frustrating, experiences of daily life in the city rather than stress out over them (for example, waiting 45 minutes for the bus, only for three to come at once because the drivers found it boring to do the route on their own) and along the way picked up a funny accent. I'd go back in a heartbeat, and if any readers considering Buenos Aires for their year abroad, for work, or even for a holiday, have got this far, I hope I've persuaded you to do so.

**This 'sh' sound is derived from Italian immigrants using the 'gi' sound of buon giorno as their best shot at the sound made by the Spanish 'll' and 'y' consonants.*

Alex Campbell-Harris is BAS' editorial assistant, now in her last year at UCL.



New Pre-U Texts (Part 2)

This article concludes our review of the 2019-21 Topics and Texts (Paper 4) syllabus for Pre-U Spanish, the earlier instalments of which appeared in our first two editions.

In this edition we look at Texts 10 to 13. At this point we repeat the warning we issued previously: at the time of writing, the 'Specimen 2019' Paper 4 on the Pre-U website does not in fact use the 2019-21 syllabus!

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Borges, the inspiration for many later Latin American authors, retains his place on the syllabus, albeit with a modification to the 2016-18 collection of stories. *La muerte y la brújula*, *El jardín de los senderos que se bifurcan*, *El encuentro* and *El sur* remain, while *La casa de Asterión* and *Emma Zunz* are replaced by *La forma de la espada* and *El milagro secreto*.

Aside from their succinct style and length, common features of these stories include protagonists whose identities lie on a fault-line of culture (eg Oriental/European), nationality (eg Germanic/Latin American, English/Irish) or belief (patriot/traitor). Standing on this uncertain ground, characters become vulnerable to mysterious forces beyond human control. Each story reaches a tipping point where rational cause and effect ceases to operate.

These stories have been selected partly because they are thrilling and dizzying tales for any reader, but specifically because they are accessible narratives for students at Pre-U level. Of the new stories, *La forma de la espada* has echoes of *Asterión* through its haunting atmosphere as the hubris-laden anti-hero dashes through the labyrinthine house. In *El milagro secreto*, the protagonist

‘justifies’ his existence the moment before he dies by asserting his will-power against everything that has led him to his sad fate, including time itself.

Our readers have asked: ‘do I refer to other stories when answering the question A context passage?’ In our opinion: question A is about analysing the passage, and that takes priority. But it would be a shrewd move for a candidate to link something in the passage – the pace, a theme, an image, a stylistic element, a turn of phrase, etc – to other stories, just as with other texts, a candidate might helpfully link an aspect of the passage to a different section of the work. After all, the exam is the candidate’s opportunity to show how well s/he knows the texts.

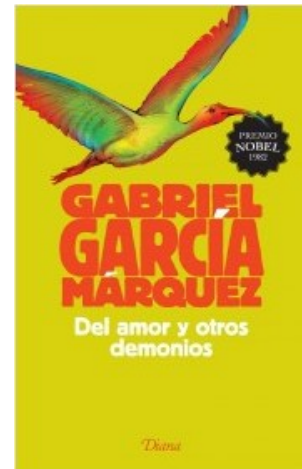
Also: ‘how many stories should I refer to when answering a B or C question (ie not the context passage) on Borges?’ In our view: as many as you find useful to answer the question without lapsing into irrelevance, repetition or excessive length. In practice, that’s likely to be no fewer than three, probably four – but it depends also on the nature of the question and your style of writing. Thus, 2015’s ‘Analyse the significance of labyrinths...’ might best be answered with reference to *La muerte...*, *El jardín...*, *La casa...* and *El encuentro*; but when answering the 2016 question ‘Analyse the significance of the titles of these stories’ it might be tempting to refer to all six.



Text 11 is Javier Cercas’ *Los soldados de Salamina*, on which we shall include a longer feature in our next edition. Set in contemporary Spain, this novel is a metafictional narration that mixes historical facts and fiction, as the writer takes us through his exploration of the events that led to the failed execution of Sánchez Mazas. Following an interview with Sánchez Ferlosio, the son of the leader of the Falange, a fictional Cercas starts to investigate Mazas’ escape from a firing squad close to the French border. Following a series of clues, Cercas meets Miralles, a Republican veteran who he believes may be the soldier who spared Mazas’ life. Cercas concludes by questioning the nature of truth and heroism,

with particular reference to the official historical line taken during the *Transición* after Franco's death.

Gabriel García Márquez remains a fixture in the Texts syllabus, but with one of his later works *Del amor y otros demonios* replacing *El coronel...*. If the latter is sometimes seen as low on action, *Del amor...* makes up for it in this tale of an aristocrat's 12-year daughter incarcerated for demonic possession in a Caribbean slaving port in the late 18th century. The novel is an excoriating critique of the Spanish colonial system in its dying days. The colonial authorities are variously sunk into a stupor of decadence and/or unable to face down the intolerant and superstitious Catholic hierarchy. The text abounds with magical realism as the contemporary narrator buys into the characters' mystical perspective.



García Márquez explores attitudes to forbidden love, cultural identity, communication and learning, and does not hold back in exposing the barbarity of the era. A vivid depiction of the times, and a harrowing tale.

By contrast, Text 13, Mario Vargas Llosa's *La tía Julia y el escribidor*, is an enchanting and humorous coming-of-age narrative that walks a teasing line between autobiography and fiction. A detailed review appears in this edition's Literary Feature.

Por amor a la Tía

How and why to study *La tía Julia y el escribidor*



Tía Julia is a charmer. The story of the 18 year-old Mario and his first forays into writing and adulthood in 1950s Lima has delighted readers of all ages and cultures with its ironic humour and the ‘did that really happen?’ suspense of its autobiographical veneer. The tone is one of gentle self-mockery as Mario the narrator makes fun of his younger self, his work colleagues and his *selvática parentela*– the web of relatives that spreads across the Peruvian capital. And, despite being a story to which all readers can relate, it offers layers of sophistication for those wanting to practise their analytical skills.

A spoiler-free synopsis would tell you that the text works on two levels. In the odd-numbered chapters we have Mario’s first-person narrative, looking back at a time of innocence both for him and for Lima. Condemned by his family to study law and become a millionaire (*‘o, en el peor de los casos, Presidente’*) he aspires to becoming a writer – yet his early attempts at literature end up in the wastepaper basket.

Mario works part-time at a radio station where he becomes the friend and confidant of a range of colourful personalities, including the eccentric *cincuentón* Pedro Camacho, whose *radioteatro* soap operas enjoy a cult following. Their curious friendship develops in tandem with Mario’s audacious relationship with Julia, his aunt by marriage who is fourteen years his senior. Both Pedro and Julia are outsiders, recently arrived from Bolivia: Mario becomes a kindred spirit to whom each can cling in their tempestuous new environment.

The even-numbered chapters tell self-contained stories apparently unrelated to each other nor to the Mario-Pedro-Julia main theme. Each has a hero in his fifties (*‘la flor de la edad’*), a cliff-hanger ending and a setting in a diverse range of Lima suburbs – not just Mario’s middle-class haunts. It becomes apparent that these chapters are novelised versions of Pedro Camacho *radioteatros* – but why are they here? Are they written by Camacho, or by the Mario-narrator of the odd-numbered chapters, or by Vargas Llosa as omniscient author?

Who is the *escribidor*?

English translators have rendered *La tía Julia y el escribidor* as ‘Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter’ – thereby indicating clearly that the characters featured in the title are Julia and Pedro Camacho.

The Spanish *escribidor* is more subtle. In conveying the sense of a writer who is something less than a proper *escritor*, it makes the title ambiguous as to whether it refers to Pedro, writer of disposable *radioteatros*, or to Mario himself, dilettante storyteller and the central character of the story. In any event, the not-quite triangular relationship between Mario, Pedro and Julia is the axis around which the text revolves.

The more gripping the Mario-Pedro-Julia plot becomes, the more likely readers are to skip the intervening *radioteatro* chapters. Herein lies part of Vargas Llosa's achievement: the text recruits the reader into affirming that a novel is an inherently more absorbing format than *radioteatro*-style melodrama, despite the latter's popularity. However, the distinction blurs when it becomes clear that the 'real life' Mario-Pedro-Julia chapters are somehow influenced by and starting to resemble the *radioteatros*.



The one-page *Prólogo* gives a clue about the novel's unusual structure. In it, Vargas Llosa refers to melodrama as *una de mis debilidades precoces*. He explains that the *collage autobiográfico* of the odd-numbered chapters was included to offset the artificiality of the *radioteatro* melodramas. He notes, however, that *el género novelesco no ha nacido para contar verdades*, and that the *verdades* of his youth therefore become *dudosas e inverificables* in this novel.

Verdades dudosas: some memorable lines from *La tía Julia y el escribidor*

A time of innocence: "En ese tiempo remoto, yo era muy joven..."

Pedro Camacho's *radioteatros*, described by la tía Julia: "dramones que parten el alma".

Mario's elderly aunts' liking for *radioteatros*: "las distraían, las hacían soñar, vivir cosas imposibles en la vida real, porque enseñaban algunas verdades o porque una tenía siempre su poquito de espíritu romántico."

La tía Julia to aspiring writer Mario: "los escritores son unos muertos de hambre".

Mario the idealistic writer: "todo el mundo, sin excepción, podía ser tema de cuento".

The ascetic Pedro: "la mujer y el arte son excluyentes".

Nancy warns Mario: "se armó el gran escándalo".

La tía Julia: "¿Yo, corruptora de menores? ¡Eso sí que no!"

La tía Julia's conclusion: "Ahora sí que tienes tema para un buen cuento".

La tía Julia y el escribidor is thus a reflection on the nature of storytelling, whether as autobiography, melodrama, novel, *radioteatro* or radio news broadcast; on the age of radio and the development of popular culture; on conventional and unconventional love; on the position of women in conservative, Catholic society; on innocence and lost innocence, brought into focus in the final chapter (chapter 20, which moves the story on ten years and breaks the usual

odd/even sequence). The novel is also partly confessional, giving an insight into Vargas Llosa's early life that is startling in view of his later achievements as a presidential candidate and Nobel laureate.

This amounts to a rich vein of themes for students to develop in their studies. Its pervasive humour makes it fun to read and its unique ingenuity lodges in the reader's imagination for life. Enjoy!

– by BAS Editor Robin Wallis

How to study *La tía Julia y el escribidor*

Mari Carmen has taught La tía Julia y el escribidor for examination at Pre-U.

We asked her how she approaches the task. “For Sixth Formers, I would recommend reading the first three chapters and the very start of chapter 4 in class at the end of the Lower Sixth summer term. That allows us to discuss the tone and structure of the novel before the summer break and to ensure the students are picking up the main themes.

They read the rest over the holidays. I make two concessions to the length of the novel: I let them read it first in English, and I tell them it's okay to skip even-numbered chapters (if you've read the novel, you'll understand why: Vargas Llosa has deliberately made those optional extras once you've sampled one or two).

Returning to the Upper Sixth year, we switch exclusively to the Spanish text. I spend up to two-hours per week during the first term working through and discussing key passages of the odd-numbered chapters (such passages are not hard to spot). As preparation, I would issue key quotations for the students ahead of reading the chapter in which those quotes appear: that way they could work out for themselves the context and significance of each quotation. I set a weekly essay on a core theme that is illustrated by the chapter we are reading that week. By the end of the first term in the Upper Sixth we've finished the novel and students have written on all major themes.



I have taught this text to pupils of all abilities, and I've yet to find one that doesn't score to their full potential in the exam. It certainly opens their minds to new ways of appreciating literature.”



Lights – camera – examination!

Eight of the fifteen works on the 2019-21 Pre-U Spanish Topics syllabus are feature films. BAS editors Stephen Hart and Robin Wallis discuss approaches to studying film and what is expected of exam candidates.

SH: When I teach Latin American film in my undergraduate courses at UCL I normally split the discussion up into a set of discrete bundles, such as (i) plot; (ii) historical and cultural context; (iii) analytical overview; (iv) themes; (v) symbolism; (vi) cinematography and soundscape, though, to be honest, I don't have a set formula since it can change from film to film.

I think it's important to look at the way a film enunciates its ideas, its ideology, but it's just as important to analyse the style of a film, the devices that make the film distinctive in terms of its cinematic language. This is more or less the strategy I used in my book, *A Companion to Latin American Film* (2004). In many ways, this approach grew out of my work in literary studies. After all, film is a close cousin to literature: films start out, of course, with a written text – the script.

How would you expect Pre-U students to set about studying film?

RW: I'd simply suggest that students watch the film through once in its entirety, as though they were a cinema audience, to understand the effect produced. Then, after discussion of first impressions, go through it again, pausing as necessary to consider genre, structure, mood, characterisation, themes, etc.

In general, students interpret film more confidently than they do a written text. They can sit down with pen, paper and a timer and quite readily jot their responses



and observations as the film progresses. Assessing *Todo sobre mi madre* in that way, you might note down some unease at the opening mother/son scenes, the pathos of Esteban's death, the irony of the way it is broken to Manuela, her disorientated response, the conflicting images of her arrival in Barcelona – the beauty of La Sagrada Familia, the horror of *el campo*, the idiosyncrasy of Agrado – then (skipping forward) the reestablishment of order in Manuela's life as she reasserts her maternal vocation. These observations would gain credit in an exam essay (if relevant to the question...). For more ambitious candidates, the goal is then to explain *why* the director wants to show us these scenes and generate these responses: what is his larger purpose?

SH: A good short-cut to acquire that understanding with Almodóvar (and maybe others) is to read his online commentaries or watch his interviews. That can be really helpful in giving you the backstory on how the film came into being, as well as his aim in making the film. While you have to take the things Almodóvar says with a pinch of salt – at times he seems to exaggerate the point – the ideas in there are certainly helpful for exam purposes!

RW: I'd just add a recommendation to candidates to attribute any such comments they use in their essays. The examiners are familiar with such material...



SH: Perhaps there's a distinction to be made here between Almodóvar and the other directors in the syllabus (with the possible exception of Sorín). Almodóvar is an *auteur* who is consciously creating a body of work characterised by a specific aesthetic fingerprint: his films are almost designed to be studied, and he drops *pistas* into them that repay

viewers who watch them more than once. In terms of how the Pre-U Topics work, Almodóvar is also a case apart because the Topic itself is *El cine de Almodóvar*, so being able to refer to (semi-) technical aspects of his style could be useful: his famous *mezcla de géneros*, for example, or *hiperrealismo*.

RW: It's also useful to look at his historical context, and the way his films reflect the changes in Spain that have coincided with his career – the transition from *machista* autocracy to plural democracy. His stylistic exuberance is a way of affirming a new, more inclusive and vibrant Spain, while also delighting in its traditions: for example, the street scene in *Volver* where Raimunda talks her neighbours into supplying food for her first catering venture – timeless village culture transposed to a modern, multicultural city, and a great excuse for some tomato close-ups...

SH: Speaking of history – at UCL we have a balance in our courses between history, literature and film. So if you like film you can study film, and if you like literature you can study literature. As well as Spanish language of course!

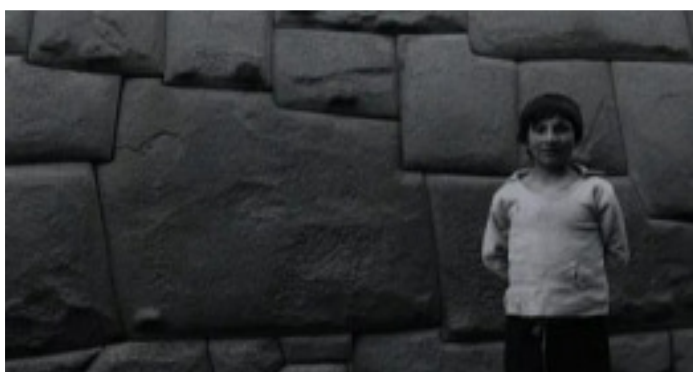
RW: Pre-U candidates study a literary work in the Texts section of the Topics and Texts paper. Some find that studying a film-based Topic gives scope for tackling a longer novel as a Text. Anyone averse to studying film can find text-only combinations in Topics 2 and 5 of the 2019-21 syllabus. Better still, four of the five Topics allow a film and text combination (several of which complement each other very nicely, e.g. Neruda/*También la lluvia*). So there should be an option for every taste.



SH: I'm struck again by the breadth of contemporary Hispanists: not just the four language skills, but also history, literature, film....

RW: ... drama, song lyrics! The point I'd make about film in the Pre-U syllabus is that candidates aren't expected to have specialist knowledge of cinematography etc. Many of the stylistic devices on which film-makers draw – tension, pathos, etc – are intuitively understood by their audience. We've watched films all our lives – we're attuned to it. So non-specialist students can identify these devices, but then add in the kind of critical analysis they would bring to a literary text. Typically, that would cover structure, which is highly visible in a film through flashbacks/flash forwards, and through what the director chooses to show or not to show; and also mood – i.e. how a director manipulates mood (or 'tone') through music and imagery.

For example, the musical motif in *Historias mínimas* amplifies evocative moments such as Don Justo sitting outside his *almacén* surveying the bare Patagonian landscape – an image of the personal and collective solitude that is a



key theme of the work. Likewise, the 'portraits' at the end of *Diarios de motocicleta*, accompanied by Andean music, affirm the film's message that poor people's lives matter, and challenge the audience to buy into Che's empathy for them.

SH: Yes, those portraits are very powerful: wobbling photographs! Talking of buying into Che's empathy, it was his legacy, of course, that inspired the founding back in 1985 of the Escuela Internacional de Cine y Televisión in San Antonio de los Baños in Cuba, where I had my first experience of teaching documentary film-making. The Cuban *cineasta* Julio García Espinosa invited me over there in 2006, and the experience was an eye-opener: as a result of long discussions with film directors, cameramen, editors, and producers, I developed an interest in the technical side of film-making. I became gradually more persuaded of the logic of Lev Kuleshov's argument that the best type of approach to film is one that blends theory with practice, and started breaking down the language of film in my classes, analysing the three walls of cinema, eyeline match, POV, the Kuleshov Effect, DOF, *puesta en escena*, *montaje*...

RW: Now that is specialist! But a good insight into how far a student can take an interest in film.

Films in the 2019-21 Spanish Pre-U Paper 4 Topics syllabus:

Historias mínimas (Carlos Sorín)
Familia rodante (Pablo Trapero)
Las 13 rosas (Emilio Martínez Lázaro)
Todo sobre mi madre (Pedro Almodóvar)
Julieta (Pedro Almodóvar)
Volver (Pedro Almodóvar)
Diarios de motocicleta (Walter Salles)
También la lluvia (Icíar Bollaín)



El FenomenOT

El 22 de octubre de 2001 Operación Triunfo abrió sus puertas como el primer 'reality musical' y cambió el concepto del mundo televisivo en España. 16 jóvenes sin apenas formación musical y con una pasión por el mundo de la canción nos conquistaron semana tras semana con su música. Escondidos, Noches de Bohemia, Vivo por ella, Sueña y, sobre todo, Mi música es tu voz, la canción que dio voz a este concurso, siguen resonando en nuestras cabezas.

Operación Triunfo nos mostró la cara más humana de gente corriente en su paso a la fama. En la primera edición del concurso nadie sabía lo que ocurría fuera de la Academia* ni lo que las cámaras estaban mostrando. España siempre ha apoyado a la gente de la calle y fue esa falta de conciencia y el don de naturalidad de los aspirantes lo que realmente conquistó al país.

Nos reímos, lloramos, disfrutamos y sufrimos con ellos: 'a su lado'. OT1 se convirtió entonces en El Fenómeno televisivo de nuestro siglo y los, entonces apodados, triunfitos se sintieron como parte de cada familia española. Puede que no fueran los mejores cantantes que había dado nuestro país, pero eran, de algún modo, nuestros: nuestra historia y nuestra cultura; y, sin lugar a dudas, crearon un antes y un después en el mundo de la canción española. Ese fue y sigue siendo realmente el 'triunfo' de esa 'operación'.

Después de muchas re-ediciones de este reality, como cantaba Rocío Jurado, 'se nos rompió el amor de tanto usarlo', puesto que el éxito de la primera edición con una media de casi 7 millones de espectadores por programa fue, poco a poco, cayendo en declive hasta el punto de cancelar la edición de 2011. De algún modo, se perdió la esencia del concurso ya que se ligó más con el fenómeno reality y se llegó a comparar con una versión cantada de Gran Hermano.

Entonces, ¿qué sentido tiene de hablar de esto 16 años más tarde? Pues, lo tiene: La Uno de televisión española (RTVE1) nos ha devuelto la magia.

Primero, empezaron con el famoso Reencuentro, que tuvo lugar a mediados del año pasado, donde pudimos ver qué les había deparado la vida a nuestros queridos triunfitos, puesto que la gran mayoría habían desaparecido de la escena televisiva, pero ¿sería ese el único triunfo posible? Descubrimos que algunos de aquellos que nos hicieron soñar habían cumplido sus sueños o los habían cambiado por otros más humanos. Fue un viaje al pasado, una manera de revivir nuestra adolescencia y nuestra niñez. Y fue realmente emotivo, pero España se quedó con ganas de más.

Entonces llegó la nueva idea: hacer una nueva edición de OT, la de 2017. Y España se revolucionó. Es gracioso y triste a la vez ver cómo nuestro país no sale a la calle a manifestarse por el paro, la corrupción y los desahucios, pero luego no le falta tiempo para ir a una firma de discos en El Corte Inglés más cercano. Así nos va.

Son muchos los que se preguntan a qué se debe el ‘triunfo’ de OT2017, dado que no contamos con grandes voces ni artistas, sino que más bien con un conjunto de amateurs. ¿Entonces? Yo, personalmente, diría que contamos con distintos factores.

Siguiendo con esa fase melancólica que nos devuelve al pasado, los que entonces eran niños y adolescentes ahora son adultos, gran parte de ellos pertenecientes a la generación ni-ni, sin tiempo para trabajar, pero con mucho para ver el 24h de OT, eso sí, financiado por sus padres.

Además, YouTube nos ha dotado con un escaparate constante donde ver todo lo que ocurre en la Academia en una época en la que la televisión ha perdido todo su prestigio. En tiempos de Netflix, los españoles ven la RTVE a través de YouTube. Realmente quien tuviera la idea ha conseguido lo que durante años se deseaba: ha adaptado un programa exitoso de principios del 2000 a los tiempos actuales sin romper con su esencia.

Finalmente, la mayoría de los candidatos rondan los 18-20 años y no tuvieron la oportunidad de conocer el formato. Asimismo, todos los jóvenes adolescentes de nuestro país nunca vieron una edición triunfadora de OT y pertenecen a la generación que vio ganar a España el Mundial de fútbol durante su niñez. Son jóvenes con ilusión que se ven reflejados en la televisión por otros jóvenes con diferentes sueños que hace dos días, como quien dice, no eran nadie.

Nadie sabe qué le deparará el futuro a este programa y si OT2017 solamente habrá sido un oasis de aquello que pudimos vivir hace 16 años con OT1. Solo el tiempo nos lo dirá. Hasta entonces, solo queda decir: gracias por la música.

*La Academia en Operación Triunfo es la escuela donde los aspirantes aprenden técnicas de canto y baile. Además, es su lugar de residencia durante el tiempo que forman parte del programa.

Belén Sánchez Alonso, profesora de lengua española y literatura trabajando en Abingdon School.