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Political Wishful Thinking versus the Shape of Things to Come: Manuel de Pedrolo's "Mecanoscrit" and "Los últimos días" by Àlex and David Pastor

Pere Gallardo Torrano
Universitat Rovira i Virgili, Tarragona, pere.gallardo@urv.cat

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The present Catalan cultural and linguistic revival is not a new phenomenon. Catalan language and culture is as old as the better-known Spanish/Castilian is, with which it has shared a part of the Iberian Peninsula for centuries. The 19th century brought about a nationalist revival in many European states, and many stateless nations came into the limelight. Dreams of independence and hopes for international recognition of a culture often went hand in hand. The Spanish Civil War (1936-39) put a dramatic end to the dreams of a politically independent Catalonia. Actually, some hours before the proclamation of the Spanish Republic on April 14th 1931, Francesc Macià, leader of the winning party in the municipal elections in Catalonia, proclaimed the Catalan Republic as a state within a so-called Federation of Iberian States, as he waited for the other peoples of Spain to follow suit. In 1934, Lluís Companys, president of the regional government of Catalonia (the Generalitat) again proclaimed the Catalan State within the Spanish Republic. One of the weaknesses of the newborn Spanish Republic was the lack of a clear slant towards federalism or unitarianism. Those were times of extreme political and social unrest not only in Spain, but in the rest of Europe as well, as it was becoming obvious most nations were preparing for what seemed an inevitable World War II.

The Republican side lost the Spanish Civil War in 1939. A military coup d'état put an end to the short-lived Second Spanish Republic and, as a consequence, Spain became a dictatorial regime led by General Francisco Franco, who abolished all the pre-existing institutions and erased all attempts to recognize cultural difference. The Catalan language was banned and it disappeared from all public spheres. Its survival can only be explained thanks to the stubborn attitude of many Catalans who kept using it privately.

Although Franco's dictatorial regime somehow softened over the years, it was not until his death in 1975 and the approval of a new democratic constitution in 1978 that Spain recognized the existence of regions and historical nationalities within its boundaries. Accordingly, autonomy (home rule) was granted to Catalonia in 1979. Despite the years which have passed by since then, some of the articles included in the original text have not yet been implemented. In 2005 a new text was passed by the Catalan Parliament, which, substantially modified by the Spanish Parliament, it was finally passed and approved by referendum in 2006. However, some political parties and certain regions in Spain protested against several of the articles, with the result that a mutilated version of the original text was approved by the Constitutional Court on June 28th 2010.

It is still unclear what the future of this modified text will be. Meanwhile, the number of pro-independence voters has grown with some fluctuations after 2010. According to several demographic surveys carried out by the Centre d'Estudis d'Opinió, in March 2016 the percentage of pro-independence voters was 45.3% whereas the so-called unionist bloc reached 45.5%. Pro-independence voters reached a peak of 47.7% in July 2016 whereas unionists only reached 42.4% in the same survey. This trend was

reversed for the first time in November 2016, when the percentage of voters who rejected independence reached 45.1% as opposed to 44.9% who defended independence.

What some politicians and the media refer to as *the Catalan defiance* is observed with just as much curiosity and prudence from abroad¹ as it is with incredulity and disgust in the rest of Spain. Simultaneously, Catalan observers recurrently focus on the cases of Quebec, Scotland, Greenland or Flanders to illustrate the similarities and differences between Catalonia and the afore-cited examples.

Beyond Politics

Farah Mendlesohn (10) contends that “science fiction is part of a polysemic discourse”. In her opinion, “texts are vulnerable to a multiplicity of interpretations, each of which produces a different landscape of science fiction, as reflected in the numerous academic and ‘fan’ canons which have emerged over the past decades”. The purpose of this article is, therefore, to analyze two Catalan texts, Manuel de Pedrolo’s novel *Mecanoscrit del segon origen* (1974) (English translation *Typescript of the Second Origin*, 2016) and Àlex and David Pastor’s film *Los últimos días* (2013), bearing in mind the social, political and cultural changes which provided the required framework for both works to appear in Catalonia. Following Sam Lundwall’s statement that “science fiction by its very nature must be a subversive thing, as it points out that there will always be changes, something that no establishment wishes to admit” (69), the pages that follow will try to demonstrate that the works discussed, especially Pedrolo’s, do include a subversive element which clearly aims at the destruction of the current economic and/or political status quo. Clearly, this does not mean that there is only one acceptable reading for each of the texts. On the contrary, in the present-day context of crisis in economic, political and ethical values the Catalan nationalist readings function equally well and, indeed, highlight the potential of each text.

Although almost forty years separate both texts, it is not difficult to find several socio-political areas of intersection which converge on (or are suggested by) a biological issue at the end of both stories, namely, pregnancy. Both works can certainly be included within an international, multicultural tradition of apocalyptic texts, but a closer look suggests that they can also be read from a specific Catalan perspective, thus suggesting that the Catalan political scenario may have had an influence on their development. Moreover, the fears, hopes and expectations depicted in both texts conceal major concerns about the future of Western democracies and the endurance of capitalism. This anxiety, however, shifts from the general to the particular and so, it is relatively easy to discover a Catalan slant in many situations that would otherwise be dealt with as generic examples of apocalyptic fiction. This does not necessarily mean that *Typescript* and *Los últimos días* ever had an *intended* political message. Nevertheless, as I contend later, the links between

the real political context and Pedrolo's novel are relatively evident, whereas in the case of *Los últimos días* they are not so strong. As the Pastor brothers have declared, "We obviously like the [postapocalyptic] genre, but between [*Carriers* and *Los últimos días*], we have written many screenplays which belong to other genres. These two films have materialized because the theme is *fashionable* and because it is *what the market demands*"² (in Guix, emphasis added).

Los últimos días is a Spanish film that was originally shot in Spanish, although there is a sprinkling of Catalan. The few phrases actually spoken in Catalan are so brief and sketchy that they seem to have been added in order to make the script more plausible. Apart from this, other considerations are required here. At a personal level, it is important to remember that David Pastor has been living in the United States since 2000 and his brother Àlex since 2006. At a socio-political level, let us remember the 9/11 terrorist attack against the World Trade Center (2001) and the Lehman Brothers bankruptcy (2008). Given the relevance of these international crises, it would, therefore, be rather far-fetched to assume that there is a subtext linked to a Catalan political agenda in *Los últimos días*. What this analysis attempts to do, is to contribute a local (i.e. Catalan) reading which has been largely ignored in Spain. Indeed, the film was hailed as a landmark in *Spanish* science fiction, and located the action as taking place in *Barcelona, Spain*, not in *Catalonia, Spain*.

Manuel de Pedrolo's *Mechanuscrit* (or *Typescript*) of the *Second Origin*³ is one of the most successful SF novels ever published in Catalan. Actually, as Munné-Jordà contends, it is "the most often read Catalan novel (...) and truly the most popular literary work in this language" (in Martín Alegre, "*Typescript*" 338). Though originally it was never meant to target the teenage market,⁴ it has become enormously popular among this age-group thanks to (or despite) the fact that it has been recommended reading in Catalan secondary schools for many years.

On September 10th 1983 a new television channel called TV3 was launched in Catalonia, though regular broadcasts did not begin until January 1984. It was the first public channel ever to broadcast exclusively in Catalan. Two years later, TV3 produced and aired "the first major fiction project" ever shot in Catalan.⁵ The series happened to be *Mecanoscrit del segon origen* and consisted of seven episodes which were based on Pedrolo's novel. As is well-known, the novel tells the story of a nine-year old black boy (Dídac) and a white fourteen-year-old girl (Alba), who are seemingly the only survivors of an alien attack that destroys the entire population of the Earth. Their survival is purely accidental. As some boys were harassing Dídac because of his skin color they push him into a weir pool. However, Dídac can't swim, so he sinks into the water. Alba, who happens to be around, immediately jumps into the water and dives deep until she is able to bring him back to the surface. When they recover, they realize with horror that everybody else seems to be dead. Alba and Dídac immediately set off on a twofold journey, which implies both

physical displacement and emotional development. Because she is older, Alba soon becomes a motherly figure whose role gradually evolves from elder sister to close friend, and finally an emotional and sexual partner. At first, they try to settle in a cave in the forest, but they soon discover a farm, where life seems to be easier. Eventually, they decide to explore the territory in search of food, clothes, medicines and anything that can be useful, settling near Barcelona. Their journeys even take them abroad. They follow the French Mediterranean coastline and even reach Italy only to discover with dismay that the few other survivors they meet have gone mad or are extremely violent. Four years later, when Alba is already eighteen and Dídac is twelve, she gets pregnant and gives birth to a baby boy, Mar. The story then comes to a sad though promising ending: while Dídac is on a local expedition to a nearby village in search of gas canisters, he has an accident and dies. The narration ends with Alba calculating how old she will be by the time the baby boy is twelve so that she can get pregnant again and the human species can continue. Then, in a surprising twist, the novel displays a final chapter written by a different narrator, a person from the far future who wonders whether the information contained in the typescript found four thousand years before (and which corresponds to the previous chapters of the novel) really means that Alba is the mother of the human species, or the text should simply be regarded as “one of the many works of that genre which the ancients used to call ‘science fiction’” (485).

Los últimos días (US title: *The Last Days*) premiered in Spain on March 27th 2013 and, in general, was received with mixed-to-negative reactions. A Filmaffinity poll⁶ with 12,508 participants gave it a rating of 5.5/10. Most viewers, including critics, complained that besides providing just another example of apocalypse in a universe already too densely populated,⁷ the script was poor and unoriginal. In a review for *El Mundo* newspaper, the critic Luis Martínez wrote: “Thus, the movie wants to be at the same time an almost mythological tale (emotional and analytical), and a reason for reflection (distant, intelligent and precise),” and lamented that the film lost much of its potential because of this lack of definition (Martínez).

Set in a troubled present time, *Los últimos días* tells the story of Marc (Quim Gutiérrez), a computer programmer who must cross an apocalyptic-looking Barcelona to meet his pregnant girlfriend Julia (Marta Etura). The year is 2013 and a new, mysterious, and so far uncontrollable disease has spread all over the world. People afflicted with it develop an irrational fear to be in the open and therefore remain inside buildings, or else they die. Although most people try to carry on acting as if nothing had changed, most routines have turned into a nightmare and individual life has become a struggle for sheer survival. In this context, Marc sets off on an underground journey to meet his girlfriend at the other end of the city. First with the open hostility of Enrique (José Coronado), a former Human Resources director employed by his company to get rid of redundant workers, and later with his sincere though unfriendly help, Marc eventually manages to overcome various

ordeals such as hostile individuals, violent gangs, the lack of food and tools, attacks by runaway zoo animals and his own uncertain health condition. In the end, Enrique, who was secretly trying to reach his father, now bedridden in a hospital after a stroke, saves Marc's life though he pays with his own. Marc and his girlfriend are finally reunited and she delivers her baby with only his help. The narration then takes a surprising shortcut. In less than five minutes, the audience sees the baby boy grow up in an apocalyptic cityscape and reach adolescence. Then, Marc and his girlfriend let him leave along with a number of other boys and girls, presumably in search of a more favorable place to live. Meanwhile, the buildings in downtown Barcelona are overgrown with vegetation while the final stills suggest that the future of the city may lie precisely in humanity's rural past.

The two works under discussion share several features. First, both of them are apocalyptic tales, though they display various degrees of optimism for the future of humankind. Secondly, both narratives show a concern for the survival of Western civilization be it in the form of a general uneasiness about the endurance of the capitalist system or more specifically, as an underlying anxiety about the future of Catalan society. Thirdly, both works seem to share a chronological link with some major event at the time of their publication or release. *Typescript* was published in 1974; that is, some months after the first oil crisis questioned the soundness of the economic foundations of Western societies and the eco-viability of a world based on the mass consumption of oil. In turn, *Los últimos días* was released in 2013, precisely when the world economic crisis triggered by the Lehman Brothers bankruptcy on September 15th 2008 was in its heyday, at least in Spain. Given these coincidences, it seems appropriate to interpret these stories as *chronicles of a death foretold*, though, as was mentioned before, with various degrees of faith in the political or economic future of Western societies in general, and in the viability of Catalan culture or even a Catalan independent state. It is therefore necessary to consider both narratives from a twofold perspective. On the one hand, they read as texts that fit comfortably within the Western tradition of apocalyptic tales (religious connotations included). On the other hand, they also function as cultural harbingers of a domestic socio-political crisis which, though not impervious to a worldwide situation of crisis, basically focus on the uncertain future of Catalonia as a political and cultural reality potentially severed from Spain.

Political Wishful Thinking: *Typescript of the Second Origin*

The Catalan specificity of Pedrolo's novel is defined by the setting of the story, the role of Catalan as a vehicular language, and Dídac's race. The action in *Typescript*, takes place mostly in Catalonia (Benaura, Barcelona, l'Hospitalet, El Prat de Llobregat, Esplugues and the spaces between), although in the last part of the story Dídac and Alba sail along the coast of France and the west coast of Italy as far as the Straits of Messina. Their need

to find out whether there are more survivors takes them on a voyage where the few people they come across have become insane: A group of three men for whom the very presence of a sensuous young woman like Alba only arouses a reaction of violence and lust, and a woman who upon seeing Alba's uncovered breasts, asks her to breastfeed her deceased baby—now a skeleton.

The presence of other survivors does not motivate Alba and Dídac to change their lifestyle. They understand that communication and collaboration are bound to be extremely difficult, given the physical or psychological condition of those survivors, so they decide to proceed as if they were the only ones. The whole Earth becomes thus a stage where they are the only actors and the script needs to be developed as they mature. Bearing in mind Alba and Dídac's isolation (and alienation) from other potential survivors, the aliens' surprising departure from the Earth, and that Alba has no metaphysical concerns but rather feels the urge to continue/restart civilization instead, the foundations of the new society seem laid.

The Catalan reading of *Typescript* is also encouraged by the fact that it was written at a time in which the public use of the Catalan language was far from being regularized. Yet, it may be easily assumed from the beginning that Alba and Dídac communicate in Catalan and therefore if there is a future for them and their descendants, it will be (at least in the early stages and at an oral level) in Catalan⁸. Moreover, Alba and Dídac come from Benaura, a fictitious rural town in the province of Lleida. Benaura was inspired by the actual town of Tàrraga, where Pedrolo spent part of his life until he moved to Barcelona in 1935. Tàrraga lies more than 100 kms inland. By the time *Typescript* was published, its population barely exceeded 10,000 inhabitants and it had a limited contact with the more cosmopolitan coast. Considering that the implementation of the 1978 Spanish constitution and the 1979 Catalan *Estatut d'Autonomia* (Autonomy Statute) did not have an effect on the extensive translation and production of books in Catalan until some years later, it may be inferred that most of the books Alba and Dídac rescue from libraries and accumulate here and there are in Spanish. This linguistic diglossia reflected the actual situation of Spanish and Catalan in 1974 and hinted at the already mentioned underlying fear about the future of a minority language. More than forty years later, many experts still contend that despite all legal and economic efforts, Catalan may die out in about fifty years if the current affirmative action initiatives are abandoned.⁹ Apart from this, Pedrolo's political views always remained faithful to the Catalan nationalist cause before and after the restoration of democracy in Spain. Likewise, he was often presented as a political, cultural and linguistic asset of Catalonia.¹⁰ As Munné-Jordà contends, the revolutionary unrest that shook the world in the 1960s took a particular slant in Catalonia, where it served both as a way to question the old system of values (personified by dictator Francisco Franco), and to help surface the revolutionary pro-independence movement.

The third major element which supports the Catalan-oriented reading of *Typescript* is Dídac's race. Although at the beginning of the novel it is

explained that only his father was black, Dídac himself is not happy with his color, as he voices on several occasions: “‘I wish I were whiter’ (...) ‘And you don’t mind my being black?’” (373-4) Given the multi-ethnic and multicultural aspect of most Western societies nowadays, this should come as no surprise. However, back in 1974, Spain was a society largely homogeneous as regards ethnicity and religion. Still outside the European Union until 1986, Spain was basically a net exporter of workforce and so the figures of foreign residents in Spain were very low and did certainly not suggest that non-white communities were visible enough to propose a major role in the demographic future of the country. In this sense, it is remarkable that Pedrolo chose his male protagonist to be black. Therefore, making ‘the father of humankind’ black could only be interpreted in that context as wishful thinking for a universal race (the result of multiple miscegenation), an idea in consonance with the late-hippie message deployed by international pop stars in texts of universal fame such as “Imagine”, by John Lennon (1971):

(...) Imagine there’s no countries
It isn’t hard to do
Nothing to kill or die for
And no religion too
Imagine all the people
Living life in peace
You may say I’m a dreamer
But I’m not the only one
I hope some day you’ll join us
And the world will be as one (...)

And yet, Dídac’s black race may also be regarded as the anticipated anxiety over an uncertain future for the Catalan race (broadly understood here as *nation* or *culture*). Dídac’s race becomes thus a destabilizing element in Pedrolo’s text as it may be seen in a contradictory way. First and foremost, it may be regarded as the longing for a multiracial society where this issue is considered irrelevant; but also as the fear of an interracial society where Catalan identity would increasingly be diluted until its complete disappearance.

Typescript shares many features with previous science fiction and dystopian works, and also displays most traditional elements present in apocalyptic/catastrophic fiction. Leaving aside the structure of the plot and the diary form, which would clearly inscribe this novel within the tradition of the *robinsonnade*, it would be safe to say that Pedrolo was influenced by classics such as Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man* (1826), H.G. Wells’ *The War of the Worlds* (1898) and John Wyndham’s *The Day of the Triffids* (1951) to find inspiration for his novel. Throughout his life, Pedrolo translated a great deal of American and British roman noir, and also some science fiction—Golding’s

Lord of the Flies, among other texts—, which no doubt helped him channel his own narratives. All in all, *Typescript* is just one item in his science fiction production—though not the only one—which can be said to be inspired by science fiction written in English.¹¹

It has been suggested (see Clute and Nichols 623-625) that whereas disaster narratives do not fit comfortably within the American science-fiction tradition because they run against the optimism which stemmed from pulp magazines such as Campbell's *Astounding Science Fiction*, British science fiction usually accommodated such narratives more easily as there was a historical component which made them more acceptable, namely, that the British Empire might disintegrate or be invaded. Along the same line, Luckhurst contends that Wells' *The War of the Worlds* "expressed the ambiguities of British Imperialism in the 1890s, which was in an expansive phase yet simultaneously gripped by anxieties of 'sunset' and degeneration" (57), all of which may be valid for the understanding of *Typescript* as well. In the case of Pedrolo, though, the anxiety over the alien invasion is almost non-existent. From the very beginning, and perhaps because they are scared, Alba and Dídac adopt a conformist attitude which allows them to accept the new reality without questioning the aliens' reasons for invading the Earth. Actually, the aliens' predator-like behavior can only be understood at the end of the novel when the narrator suggests that they obviously chose not to stay because, for some unknown reason, the Earth was not the right place for them; a decision which places *Typescript* alongside with *The War of the Worlds*. Not even when they actually face an alien, presumably stranded because of an accident, do Alba and Dídac react with *believable* apprehension. Eventually, Alba shoots the alien dead and they bury her. In a reaction reminiscent of Crusoe's after spotting the footprint on the beach, they decide to keep an eye on their surroundings, as their assumption at the time is that there must be more extra-terrestrials around. So, "No matter how far they went they would always take the Mauser rifles in case of who knows what kind of unfortunate meeting" (388). Ever since that moment, given the absence of more encounters with the invaders, Alba and Dídac's fears become faint images that end up fading out completely, thus helping them focus their efforts on their own survival and the reconstruction of civilization.

The anxiety referred to before is thus refocused as is shown by Alba's interest in Dídac's education. Alba makes sure he keeps on reading and acquiring the skills in keeping with his age. Later, still led by Alba, they start a frantic search for books that takes them to several libraries as they intend to salvage as many books as they can. As Alba puts it, "And we too, Dídac, must study very hard, as you know" (410), the obvious purpose being the reconstruction of civilization. Again, this attitude is reminiscent of similar cases of cultural decline and places *Typescript* next to Wells' *The Time Machine* (1885) or Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), where various situations have taken civilization to a metaphorical apocalypse. So Alba, and through her influence Dídac too, is convinced that civilization deserves to be

restored, perhaps with just some minor changes: “If there is no one else we need to save many things; we cannot let the efforts of so many people be lost...One day you’ll understand” (395, original ellipsis). The same idea reappears when they are in Naples and Alba reckons, upon seeing some works of art, that “all those riches and many others would be inevitably lost. Humanity’s heritage would vanish” (443).

Unlike the situation in *The Time Machine* or *Fahrenheit 451*, however, the new society dreamt of by Alba and Dídac will be free of the errors that they could perceive in their short, inexperienced life prior to the alien attack. Surprisingly enough, if the societies described by Wells or Bradbury had relied exclusively on the knowledge compiled in the books they have abandoned or destroyed, they would be bound to make the same mistakes that have led humans to their present plight. However, this is not the case in *Typescript*. Pedrolo took great pains in voicing through his characters his own progressive views on religion, education, ethics, sexuality, race or gender. Actually, the voice readers hear is Alba’s, since throughout most of the novel Dídac is a child who needs to be instructed into the new set of values that one day will guide civilization. It cannot be a coincidence that the name Alba means ‘dawn’ (i.e. the beginning of light) and the name Dídac means ‘instructed’. The boy is the cultural tabula rasa upon which Alba rewrites the principles of the utopia-to-be. Against the current type of religion, Alba advocates agnosticism (361); against ignorance, Alba suggests massive learning (410); against oblivion, memory (both physical and in the form of photography and film, 426, 431); against hypocrisy, love (356, 440); against actual loneliness, self-reliance (450); against cosmic loneliness, a cult of the senses (444) and childbearing (453); against racism, miscegenation (439-40); and above all, against adversity, practical-mindedness (the whole text).

In his analysis of Wells’ *The War of the Worlds*, Simon Pearson maintains that “the alien-invasion film also provided America with an imaginative space in which they could express their fears about science and technology and *rival ideological systems*” (229, my italics)”. In *Typescript*, Pedrolo’s use of the alien invasion trope is a way to avoid more revolutionary ideological scenarios, which back in 1974 Catalonia and Spain, might have resulted in political prosecution (most of his books were affected by censorship). At the same time, the never explained reasons for the invasion (and the desertion) of the Earth provided a fast turning point which allowed him to concentrate on the society to come. As most of the pre-invasion world was considered flawed and obsolete, and lacking in responses to Catalonia’s identity problem, the narrative may be read as a clean slate where Catalan readers could write their own future if they so wished. In this context, Alba’s pregnancy becomes part of the allegory. She is pregnant with ideas and plans for the future; but these ideas and plans will produce an improved version of society because its framework is liberal and democratic, and also because it accepts a Catalan reading of history without major tensions. It is, however, possible to add an element of doubt to this interpretation; namely, that the new

society resulting from Alba's second pregnancy (by her own son, Mar) would be an endogamic one. Yet, considering the optimistic approach to the new situation displayed in *Typescript*, and the fact that Mar is a mixed-race child—which was exotic enough in 1974 Spain—the negative connotations of a potentially isolated Catalonia seem out of the question.

The Shape of Things to Come: *Los últimos días*

Los últimos días impeccably responds to Sue Schopf's type-questions for apocalyptic narratives: a) What could have been done to prevent the total destruction? b) What will it take for human beings to regroup and reconstitute their society? and c) What do we learn about human nature in a state of extreme distress and deprivation, and what do we also learn about the human values we care about most? (video 2:10). All three questions are addressed directly or indirectly by the script and invite the audience to negotiate possible answers. Question a) includes the indirect accusation that the protagonists are agents whose actions or omissions have resulted in the present predicament. In other words, Marc, Enrique, Julia and by extension the whole society, each has a share of responsibility for not having identified the problem and prevented social decline. Question b) expects the reply "great doses of sacrifice", the message being that when civilization is carelessly challenged to the limit, any price we need to pay to save it will be a bargain. Question c) promises forgiveness and redemption to those who learn the lesson. Enrique repudiates his previous life and becomes a brother figure willing to help Marc find his girlfriend.

Much like *Typescript*, *Los últimos días* offers the possibility of a universal interpretation, which would incorporate it within the ongoing trend of dystopian films produced for adolescent or adult audiences, and a domestic interpretation, which would suggest a reading that contemplates the peculiar socio-political situation of Catalonia ever since 2010, when the new Autonomy Statute was passed.

In the first case, the Pastors' film recalls M. Night Shyamalan's *The Happening* (2008), where a strange plague begins to afflict the world and people feel compelled to commit suicide; *Blindness* (dir. Fernando Meirelles, 2008; based on José Saramago's novel *Essay on Blindness*, 1995) or *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (2008)—Scott Derrickson's distant rendering of the same film directed by Robert Wise in 1951.¹² *Los últimos días* also echoes recent Hollywood dystopias of pseudo-Marxist flavor such as Andrew Niccol's *In Time* (2011) or Neill Blomkamp's *Elysium* (2013), as both of them depict a near-apocalyptic social landscape the result of taking Fredric Jameson's notion of *late capitalism* to the limit.

As regards the general interpretation, *Los últimos días* portrays the end of an epoch. Marked by individualism, the new time has imposed a new lifestyle based on economic limitations, and individuals—viewers are led to believe—do not live but survive. This unhappiness has materialized in the

longing for a new situation no one really knows how to describe. In the case of Marc, this is reduced to a vague ancestral need to find his partner and in the case of Enrique, to a dutiful filial obligation to take care of his father before he dies. Both of them experience guilt: Marc did not know his partner was pregnant and Enrique laments his father's efforts to give him a proper education which he now uses to destroy other people's lives.

If, on the contrary, one focuses on the Catalan interpretation of the film, this situation might be assimilated to the frustration generated when the 2010 Autonomy Statute was denounced before the Spanish Constitutional Court, and by the impossibility to redress the Catalan economy¹³. Moreover, for the first time ever since joining the European Union in 1986, in 2014 Spain contributed to the EU economy more than it received. This put an end to a period of relative economic tranquility despite the severe crisis. As many people anticipated, the European *cushion* would no longer be there to compensate various political and economic errors. That scenario was perceived in Catalonia with increasing uneasiness, and the idea spread among many Catalans that the Spanish government was not being fair with the economic situation of a community which contributes almost 20% of the Spanish GDP.

In *Los últimos días* this situation is personified in Enrique, a Human Resources expert employed by Marc's company to optimize the workforce. In other words, to lay off employees in an attempt to diminish the effects of the crisis. It may not be a coincidence that Enrique is not Catalan and does not understand the language, either. His mission takes him to companies in various parts of Spain, including Barcelona. There, he begins to harass Marc to make him work faster. Simultaneously, he fires another employee, Rovira, who ends up dying. Surprisingly, Rovira is the only noticeable character in the film that uses Catalan as his main language. Once he is laid off, the company security guards take him outside the building. Upon leaving the company premises Rovira begs—in Catalan—not to be forced to go outside. The prospect of having to face a new, unknown reality (suggested by the absence of a sheltering roof), makes him panic. He has a seizure and starts foaming at the mouth, and although Marc tries to save him by dragging his body back into the building, he finally dies while Enrique observes the whole episode with an ice-cold look. Enrique may thus be identified with the Spanish neocapitalist technocrat bent on controlling the poor panic-stricken Catalan employee who simply tries to survive. All in all, a rather simplistic interpretation which, nevertheless, befits the Catalan-oriented interpretation of the film.

In the Pastors' film, Julia's pregnancy also appears as a soothing factor, much like Alba's at the end of *Typescript*. Unlike *Typescript*, though, whereas Alba's pregnancy is desired by both protagonists who see it as the climax of their growing relationship, and as a way to populate and develop a new world based on more solid principles, in *Los últimos días* this is not so evident. When the issue surfaces in conversations with his girlfriend, Marc insists "It's not about me deciding to. It's the timing" (09:51). His argument

seems based on the harsh conditions the company is imposing on employees, so he utters a vague “Who knows if I’ll be able to pay the rent” (10:00), which suggests a certain fear of becoming redundant inspired by the economic crisis but, at a deeper level, also a personal fear of fatherhood.

Yet, the script tries to indicate that despite this personal (though international) factor, a deeper crisis of values may be affecting the world. And so, the TV news reports that a cloud of ash erupted by the volcano Mt. Hekla in Iceland may soon reach Southern Europe. Immediately after this news flash, a scene follows which shows a 16-year old boy in Canada shooting himself after begging his father to understand why he could not leave his room after a 6-month period of self-confinement. This triangle of negative news involves references to three major current concerns in developed societies: a) world economy, b) climate change, and c) individual confusion, all three underlined by the baffling speed of change brought about by globalization, social networking and technoscientific progress. Already in 1970, Alvin Toffler coined the term *future shock* to describe “the shattering stress and disorientation that we induce in individuals by subjecting them to too much change in too short a time” (4). This might be the explanation behind the mysterious disease in *Los últimos días*. While most characters feel scared (and therefore trapped; i.e. prisoners) in a world they hardly recognize any more, audiences are presented by examples of people who suffer from Diogenes syndrome, or near-*hikikomori* youth incapable of facing reality. Cosmic solitude brought about by ruthless competition at all levels is made responsible for the current state of things. So Julia’s pregnancy is meant to be the only way out of this situation. Incidentally, hers is a pregnancy without any hope and rooted in despair. Marc insists that his reluctance to becoming a parent was rooted in fear: “I was scared [...] that I couldn’t protect him” (1:00:29). To make things worse, the element of optimism present in *Typescript* is nowhere to be found. There is lack of definition instead that further contributes to the characters’ anxiety. The end of the film shows Marc, Julia and their son Enric as a seemingly happy (adapted? resigned?) family unit which, nevertheless, lives a life of isolation. The audience is never given the chance to glance at other examples of post-apocalyptic adaptation, the assumption being that the world needs another big change to regain pre-apocalyptic bliss.

The hasty ending of *Los últimos días* increases the feeling that Àlex and David Pastor (directors and also scriptwriters) were more concerned about the hypothetical reasons that led to “the end of the world as we know it” back in 2013, than about the future of a post-2013 world. In an interview with Simone Bruno on the financial crisis of 2008, Noam Chomsky stated that

In the international economy the effect of financial liberalization has been quite harmful. You read in the press that the last thirty years, the thirty years of neoliberalism, have shown the greatest escape from poverty in world history and tremendous growth and so on, and there is

some truth to that, but what is missing is that the escape from poverty and the growth have taken place in countries which ignored the neoliberal rules. Countries that observed the neoliberal rules have suffered severely. (in Bruno)

This interpretation of reality surfaces as pessimism in *Los últimos días*. It widens the divide between Pedrolo's novel and the film as it is more in keeping with the gloomy visions of the (no)future triggered by the world crisis than with Pedrolo's hopes for a new civilization. When Enrique asks Marc "You think this is the end?" his laconic reply "Don't you? Who knows" (1:00:44) can only mean that both of them have lost faith in a new beginning and that their actions are based on mere survival instincts, which cannot be compensated with the birth of a baby.

Despite the pseudo-rural home Arcadia built by Marc and Julia on the terrace of the building they inhabit, the audience feels cheated in the end. The film, which so far had basically used muted colors of the blue-grey-brown range to highlight the gloomy atmosphere, suddenly depicts exuberant images of the garden on the roof. Shades of bright green, red and blue, plus the sound of gentle rain they have learned to collect cannot disguise the fact that Marc, Julia and their son are alone. The friendliness of the world outside cannot be proved so their future is rather limited and the risk of a new wave of agoraphobia remains. The unexplained departure of Marc and Julia's teenage boy, Enric, with a group of boys and girls in search of a better place/future is reduced to a vague hope in adolescent vitality, but little else. Opposed to this, *Typescript* offers an exciting recipe for the future:

Now and then, when [Dídac] asked a question about the past, she also answered but without lingering on the subject as she did with other issues that mattered for the future. She could hardly conceal the ruins yet she wanted Dídac to see them as the materials for building a new world rather than as a sign of the old world's disintegration. (381)

Whereas in *Typescript*, the enemy is outside, but individuals may have a future if they stick together and remain faithful to certain values, in *Los últimos días*, the enemy is inside (i.e. people's minds, people's buildings, people's own country) and is extremely difficult to single out because it keeps individuals paralyzed with fear.

Conclusions

In his seminal works *Demand the Impossible* (1986) and *Scraps of the Untainted Sky* (2000), Tom Moylan developed the notions of *critical utopia* and *critical dystopia*. Rather than the analysis of literary texts as blueprints to be imitated meticulously (i.e. More's *Utopia*, 1516; Bellamy's *Looking Backward*, 1888) or avoided at any price (i.e. Huxley's *Brave New World*,

1932; Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 1949), Moylan contends that critical utopias and dystopias offer sufficient examples of potential improvement, though they linger on the nightmarish quality of the present to reinforce the underlying need of (hope for) change. This notion is taken up by Schopf when she explains that “[post-apocalyptic fiction] has a moral vision and seeks to awaken in its readers and viewers a renewed commitment to avoiding the circumstances that might lead to our destruction, and also to reawaken in us an appreciation for the meaning and value of a peaceful and abundant existence. (02:40)”

In the two works discussed, the notion of change, however, seems encapsulated between the present and the future. Their respective societies move in opposite directions. *Typescript*, from the past to the future: from a culture of hypocrisy and ignorance, to a democratic new time based on freedom and reason; from a simple condition—living with the basics—to a potentially sophisticated future; from a rural setting to a developed urban world. On the contrary, in *Los últimos días* society moves from a declining late capitalist model to a survivalist one; from a dilapidated urban setting to a rural and inevitably primitive one; from a voyeuristic society where everything is exposed, to a self-imposed repressed condition; in short, from a postmodern present, to a neo-agrarian future.

The gap between the quiet, unexplained departure of Enric with the other teenagers in search of their future creates anxiety and could not be more different from Alba and Dídac's perception of their own future: When they reach the vicinity of Taormina, “Here the blueness of sky and sea was implacable and the beauty of the land exulted with a sort of delirium that possessed the spirit. The landscape, the season, the loneliness, the luxurious conditions of the waters, all invited a pagan unleashing of the senses which they certainly had to satisfy” (444).

As a novel written before Franco's death, but at a time in which the end of his dictatorship was regarded as imminent, *Typescript* offers an optimistic approach which at a general level could be understood as a prelude to democratic change and at a Catalan level, as the launching pad for a new political status quo. When Alba delivers her baby “who seemed healthy and had a very wrinkled face, [he] was the exact color the boy had wished for, neither white nor black, but a lovely light brown as if suntanned.” (469) In other words, the perfect starting point for the new utopia.

Conversely, as a product of the post-Y2K millennialist craze imbued with the pessimism and phobias of the post-9/11West, and sailing the stormy waters of the current economic crisis, *Los últimos días* stands out as a languid cry for change; a change not to be found in globalized urban centres of postmodern design, inhabited by aggressive CEOs, but rather in rediscovered green spaces that offer reconciliation with the essence of the human being. But nothing can be taken for granted. If humans do not react at once, nature may claim its toll at any time, as the vegetation-engulfed buildings show in the very last frame of the film.

Notes

¹ The Catalan independence issue has been given coverage by *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Guardian*, *The Independent* or *Financial Times*, to mention but a few international newspapers ever since the beginning of the conflict, immediately after the 2010 home rule statute was curtailed by the Spanish Constitutional Court.

² All quotations originally in Catalan or Spanish appear here in my own translation.

³ *Mechanuscrit of the Second Origin* is the translated title suggested by Clute and Nicholls in *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* (1993). The online version of the *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* (3rd edition) gives the title *Typescript of the Second Origin*. (See: http://www.sf-encyclopedia.com/entry/de_pedrolo_manuel (accessed January 16th 2017). A new translation by Sara Martín Alegre with the title *Typescript of the Second Origin* has been accepted by Wesleyan University Press and is scheduled to appear in Spring 2018. Meanwhile, the same translation was used in the trilingual edition (Catalan/Spanish/English) which was given as a present to EUROCON-Barcelona attendants in December 2016.

⁴ Pedrolo's own daughter, Adelais, has confirmed that her father "never intended *Typescript* to be fiction just for young readers." See Martín's introduction "*Typescript of the Second Origin*" (343)

⁵ "Mecanoscrit del segon origen" (Dir. David Reguant; Perf. Àgueda Font, Guillem d'Efack, Moisés Torner; Prod. TV3-Televisió de Catalunya; 7 episodes; Airdate: December 29th 1985).

⁶ See <http://www.filmaffinity.com/es/film503152.html> (accessed January 18th 2017).

⁷ Without taking into consideration TV movies, a ten-year span list with examples of the apocalypse fad would include at least *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004), *The War of the Worlds* (2005), *I Am Legend* (2007), *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (2008), *2012* (2009), *The Road* (2009), *The Book of Eli* (2010), *Arctic Blast* (2010), *Melancholia* (2011) and *Oblivion* (2013).

⁸ Despite the lack of official figures about the use of Catalan before 1979, when the autonomy statute was approved and Catalan was recognized as an official language in Catalonia (along with Spanish), there is general consensus that "[d]uring the period of the Franco dictatorship (1939-75), the Catalan language was once again prohibited and repressed, *thus being confined to use within the family*. Spanish was the only language allowed in formal, public usage." (See Pradilla 63; emphasis added).

⁹ Visit, for instance, <http://www.ccma.cat/video/embed/5600881> for a debate where several experts including politicians and linguists discuss the issue. The debate was broadcast on May 12th 2016 by TV3 (in Catalan).

¹⁰ See <http://www.fundaciopedrolo.cat/?seccio=ped-Biografia> (accessed January 15th 2017).

¹¹ See, for instance, *La creació de la realitat, punt i seguit* (*The Creation of Reality. Full Stop*), 1987, which is clearly reminiscent of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1986).

¹² Based on the short story "Farewell to the Master" by Harry Bates (1940), Wise's version deploys all the artillery of most SF movies released during the Cold War, whereas Derrickson's remake zeroes in on the possibility of the total (and deserved) annihilation of humankind, given the humans' carelessness towards nature.

¹³ By the end of 2008, the Catalan public debt amounted to 20,825 M€, whereas by 2011 it had reached 41,778 M€, Catalonia being the Spanish autonomous community with the largest debt (29.8% of the total debt generated by all the autonomous communities in Spain). Source: *Nació Digital*.

See: <http://www.naciodigital.cat/noticia/40820/42000/millions/deute/catala> (accessed January 15th 2017)

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