TRAUMATIC TECHNO-IDEOLOGY IN CONTEMPORARY US FICTION AND FILM: THE LIMITS OF THE HUMAN IN THE POSTHUMAN ERA*

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INTRODUCTION

Even if the belief in the stability of the entity we call "human being" still seems to be taken for granted in the classroom, the fragmentation and instability of being has been a reiterative topic in criticism and art representation in English-speaking culture for at least the last sixty years. The pervasive presence of this notion may have different scientific and ideological explanations, and its analysis has become the main concern in the course I teach as part of the master's degree in English Studies at the Universidad de Zaragoza. If literary modes, topics and forms frequently respond to specific social concerns and historical processes, then there should be a number of significant ways to help us explain the pervasive presence of the concept of human fragmentation and instability in contemporary art and literature. Additionally, because the issue itself directly affects us, its presentation and discussion demands the active participation of both students and teacher in the classroom. The cultural concern about human fragmentation and instability should not be given a mere theoretical approach because it involves the study of *our own condition and our limits as human beings*. The academic discussion of the issue demands, first, the selection of a very specific corpus of analysis that may help students to reflect on the condition of their own humanity. Nevertheless, it also requires the practice of certain skills that may allow them to clarify the role of the media in the development of the multimodal narrative processes by means of which we know the world and ourselves. Accordingly, this essay has two main aims. The first one is to review some of the cultural and scientific concepts that have resulted in the coming of a new period, labeled as "posthuman" by some

critics, which is characterized by its concerns about the limits and fluctuations of the (post)human being. Secondly, the essay suggests a selected corpus and teaching strategies for the discussion of these concerns in the classroom.

1. THE SUBJECT'S FRAGMENTATION IN CONTEMPORARY FICTION AND CULTURE

As early as 1978, Josephine Hendin described a new type of literary "fragmentation" in her book on post-war American fiction, *Vulnerable People*. She contended that post-war North American fiction was divided over the methods that reduce emotional vulnerability, alternating between two ways that she defined as the *holistic*, that stresses the virtues of management, wholeness and reason, and the *anarchic*, that stresses what she qualified as "the mystical values of self-effacement, fragmentation and disintegration" (1978: 6). Some years later, Edmund J. Smyth edited a collection of essays, written by several well-known critics, which focused on the philosophical notions and textual strategies used in postmodernist literature. In his Introduction, Smyth referred to one of the most reiterative topics of contemporary culture, the fragmentation of the subject:

> Several of postmodernism's literary historians have asserted that postmodernism differs from modernist aesthetics principally in its abandonment of subjectivity: the representation of consciousness is alleged to have been forsaken with the emphasis on the fragmentation of the subject. That the self can no longer be considered a unified and stable entity has become axiomatic in the light of poststructuralism (1991: 10).

In the same volume, Linda Hutcheon argued that in postmodernist fiction all the ways of talking about subjectivity (character, narrator, writer, textual voice) "fail to offer any stable anchor," and are used to be subsequently abused and undermined (1991: 116). Contemporary fragmentation, in her analysis, became the result of a failure in the process of meaning-making. The absence of a stable subject or center of consciousness meant no stable meaning and forced writers to resort to experimental fiction. What had happened, then, to the old concept of the unified stable human subject?

2. PRELIMINARY GROUNDS: FROM SCIENCE TO LITERATURE AND TRAUMA

The humanist notion of a unified subject (body and mind), which had been privileged by modernity for an extensive period, became the object of intense intellectual debate, first among the modernist and then among postmodernist

artists and critics. After the beliefs in future prosperity and human perfection that characterized the project of the Enlightenment, the effects of the Industrial Revolution showed that such perfection seemed to be, at least for the time being, unattainable. During the 19th century, doubts about any possible happy future for human civilization increased as industrial societies also led to uncontrolled migratory waves of millions of country people into the cities. Liberal economy resulted in pollution, misery, social unrest, low wages, and increasing political corruption, lending credence to the Darwinian views defended by Herbert Spencer that in human societies only the fittest survive. Thus, naturalist representations of human lives, such as Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*, drew a picture of societal life as a jungle where the predator systematically devours the weaker prey. However, in Dreiser's representation of ten-current North American city life, a character such as Carrie, who shifts from prey to predator, was still an observable creature, somebody readers could mentally represent as having a body and a mind. The notion of a unified human subject was still taken for granted and so were her physical limits.

Paradoxically, by the end of the 19th century science started to contribute to a gradual lack of confidence in its own capacity to know the world and, by definition, the allegedly rational creature known as *man*. In 1865 Rudolf Clausius formulated the Law of Entropy, which implies that energy dissipates in physical thermodynamic systems, supporting the philosophical notion of the ultimate imperfection of Nature. At the time, new powerful microscopes also resulted in the study of a subatomic reality whose existence had been so far denied or considered only in hypothetical terms, but whose eventual description was jeopardized by the difficulties in understanding the behavior of subatomic particles, an impasse which eventually led to the paradoxical Copenhagen Interpretation of Quantum Physics around 1927. The beginning of the 20th century also meant the confirmation of an existing fourth dimension in life that human beings are not equipped to perceive, a notion that led to Einstein's assertion that knowledge is always relative to the observer (Nadeau, 1981: 41-64).

The accumulation of new scientific theories in such a short period led to a situation characterized by epistemological problems. The cultural changes brought about by Modernism and its attack on rationalist perspectives meant a new worldview in which artists put their emphasis on fragmentation and multiplicity while still fighting to discover a unifying set of conditions in life. Writers and painters were at pains to associate their art with the new scientific paradigm represented by Relativity and Quantum Physics. Additionally, they incorporated theories coming from James Frazer's anthropological views in *The Golden Bough*, which contends the similarities existing among many religions,

or were attracted to the interpretations provided by Freudian psychoanalysis. In a sense, the discovery of bourgeois taboos and the extent of human hypocrisy, associated with the relativity of knowledge, meant that the human need to understand the world from a stable perspective was now denied by the new physics. The ideological and cultural result was an irresolvable epistemology that gradually brought about the new ontology of uncertainty that characterizes a substantial part of 20th century philosophy and culture (McHale, 1987).

In their quest for effective knowledge, modernist artists appealed to the classic motto of the inner gaze: Know thyself if you want to understand the world. Accordingly, psychoanalysis, alchemy, and anthropology mixed into the influential Jungian interpretation of life in archetypical terms. Carl Jung's theory of a collective unconscious – that reflected Frazer's unifying anthropological research and coincided with De Saussure's integrative views on structuralist linguistics – was adopted and reframed by a number of artists, poets, novelists and critics. From Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* to Joseph Campbell's anthropological views in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, examples abound that offered mythic or integrative answers to keep at bay the oppressive sensation that humans are ultimately unable to understand the world or themselves.

The intellectual difficulties the modernists had in coping with the necessity to know themselves and the world were supplemented by their incapacity to understand human evil and its destructive ability. The First World War meant a terrifying shock for our alleged reasoning capabilities: how could human actions result in so much death and destruction in the name of mere ideas? The cynicism of all wars, denounced by Eliot in *The Waste Land* – the most representative English poem written in the 20th century – was one of the major forces that explained for critics of the period the proliferation of experimental devices in modernist art. The concept of psychic trauma, already suggested by Sigmund Freud in his *Studies in Hysteria* (1885), is to a large extent one of the most important notions arising from the Great War. The medical definition of trauma as an injury or bodily wound finds its mental extension in the modernist epistemological crisis: limits, bodily or mental, start to be understood as fluctuating. In Modernism, amidst an imperfect, complex life that can be known only in relative terms, artists became aware of their unstable human condition and their tremendous incapacity to know. Their self-consciousness eventually brought forth an existentialist understanding of life and an experimental representation of it. Finally, in one of the biggest cultural paradoxes of all times, modernist intellectuals came to put an end to the enlightened project of Modernity. The world was not leading to perfection:

as Eliot expressed it in *The Waste Land*, the human being could only encounter ruins and fragmentation in the heart of darkness, in the heart of light.

3. SCIENCE HIDES MORE SURPRISES: ENTER, CYBERPUNK. THE SELF AS INFORMATION AND THE EXTENSIONS OF MAN

For the Western world, the period between the two great wars was one of economic depression and ideological struggles between liberal capitalism and the left wing. Political propaganda became for many a tool to be necessarily associated with art. As a result, literature recuperated its realist approach; forms and techniques that reaffirmed the sense of the human being's stability became both popular and canonical again. Poetry was followed by fiction. Even when writers and artists applied experimental techniques to their works, the notion of the subject as a unified being became valid once more. Narrators were witnesses, as happens in *The Great Gatsby*, or omniscient, as in Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. It is true that under the influence of the cinema they could already be human or machine, offering multiple perspectives – as Dos Passos did in the *Camera Eye* sections in his trilogy *U.S.A.* – but in modernist fiction humans were still centers of consciousness. However, the Second World War was in part responsible for a further shift in the understanding of the fluctuating human condition. It meant not only a new period for the proliferation of traumatic effects but also the kernel of a new understanding of being and of new scientific fields that would dramatically alter our perception of the human: biotechnology, genetics, and cybernetics.

In 1944 Oswald Avery, Maclyn McCarty, and Colin MacLeod identified DNA as genetic material. In quick succession, James Watson and Francis Crick discovered the molecular structure of DNA in 1953. In the early 1970s, Stanley Cohen and Herbert Boyer created the basis for biotechnology; from here to the Human Genome project, there was only a small step forward. What these results mean in lay terms is a new conception of life: genetic information, present in complex patterns in our DNA code, is responsible for the way life exists, for its variety and all its traits, including the peculiarities of each being. To understand and manipulate a code that shows a basic paired structure (similar to informational binary codification) could eventually mean, among many other things, ending all diseases and the possibility of extending life *ad infinitum*. In other words, during the second half of the 20th century science insistently presented the idea that we are the result of informational patterns with the result that this notion started to take form in different cultural representations.

Not surprisingly, the world that had treasured gold for thousands of years, and replaced it later by the black gold of oil, now conceives of information as its most important good. Meanwhile, the notion of *human being*, traditionally defined by the categories that Aristotle named as *substance*, *matter*, *form*, and *essence*, becomes nothing but fluctuating information patterns.

Such a shift of ideological perspective started to receive ample cultural attention, as I contend below, by the end of the 20th century; but it had already been a basic tenet some decades earlier, in the theories proposed by the mathematician Norbert Wiener, one of the most important intellectual sources for the posthuman era in which we allegedly live. After having done some work on the automatic aiming and firing of anti-aircraft guns, which led to the completion of the first radars for military purposes in the Second World War, Wiener created the basis for the interdisciplinary studies known as *cybernetics*, an area of research in which communication and evolutionary biology play very important roles. Eventually, Wiener's aim was to make it possible for a computing machine to develop a reasoning capacity similar to that of a human mind. In 1950, he published an influential book addressed to lay readers, *The Human Use of Human Beings*, where he synthesized the new, terrifying understanding of the human being that eventually became the core of posthuman thinking:

> Our tissues change as we live: the food we eat and the air we breathe become flesh of our flesh and bone of our bone, and the momentary elements of our flesh and bone pass out of our body everyday with our excreta. We are but whirlpools in a river of ever-flowing water. We are not stuff that abides, but patterns that perpetuate themselves. (1954: 96)

Those perpetuating informational patterns go from parents to their children, but once computers as artificial intelligence became a reality, the perspective, as already suggested by writer Thomas Pynchon in his first novel, *V.* (1963), started to shift: what if humans become computerized machines now that machines have become computerized intelligent beings? Backing Pynchon's understanding of our present condition were not only Wiener's theories. The novelist's encyclopedic knowledge of both science and literature, which insistently makes his fiction refer to binary thinking (that connects our categorical behavior to that of the computer), also points to an early awareness of Marshall McLuhan's prophetic realization of what he called "the extensions of man." In his often-quoted volume *Understanding Media* (1964), McLuhan discusses and anticipates what for many is now becoming the most important threat to humanity, as we traditionally conceive of the term. For the

influential cultural guru, the media and the new technologies operate as the extensions of man, that is to say, they have the capacity to extend the range of the human body and mind. However, McLuhan also warned his readers that for any extension to function, another process has to happen: media and technological extensions require our "self-amputation", or the modification of our traditional or natural capacities and bodies. For instance, the use of the telephone extends our physical capacity to communicate but it also amputates our older capacity to write. McLuhan pointed out that we happily greet the use of new media and technology extensions but tend to forget the consequences of the self-amputations they imply. His was a clear warning: "Any invention or technology is an extension or self-amputation of our physical bodies and such an extension also demands new ratios or new equilibriums among the other organs and extensions of the body" (49). When he died in 1980, the effects of radio or television broadcasting, which he had carefully considered in his research, were already being superseded by the effects of the new extensions provided by video games and personal computers. His famous concept of the "global village" soon became for many a blatant reality thanks to the Internet. However, before the World Wide Web took over our lives the fluctuating limits of self-amputated man had already been a big preoccupation in the works of some influential North American writers.

As did Pynchon, Philip K. Dick, especially in his novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968), also establishes the emotional and bodily human/machine frontiers as one of his main literary concerns, a concern that became popularized thanks to Ridley Scott's film adaptation of Dick's novel in 1982. *Blade Runner* marks the beginning of cyberpunk film history at a moment when *cyberpunk* was in the process of being created literarily as a new science-fiction subgenre by writers such as William Gibson, Bruce Sterling, Lewis Shiner, Rudy Rucker, and John Shirley. Cyberpunk, Sterling says, "simply means 'anything cyberpunks write' " (1997: 2). In this way, he defers the existence of any other more precise definition of the new Sci-Fi mode that since the 1980s has attracted the critical attention of researchers interested in contemporary culture and in the new living conditions brought about by technology.

The new understanding of the human being in contemporary science, together with their own political beliefs and their confessed appreciation of writers like Pynchon or Dick, led the creators of the new Sci-Fi subgenre to explore the limits of being in a future characteristically depicted as dystopic. As Sterling put it, cyberpunk writers were ready to show that the idea that "there are sacred limits to human action is nothing but a traditional illusory belief" (1977: 4). Early in the 1990s, Brian McHale already suggested that

cyberpunk fiction overtly actualizes the new understanding of the world that postmodernist fiction subtly evokes or symbolizes (1992: chapters 10 and 11). Analysis of some of the already canonical cyberpunk works – which have their beginning in William Gibson's path-breaking novel *Neuromancer* (1984) – shows that the new genre shared a postmodernist, at times overtly poststructuralist, understanding of life. For many critics, cyberpunk fiction became "the paradigmatic example of textuality in the age of information overload, the veritable cutting edge of the literature of the twenty-first century" (Collins, 1995: 9). Both in film and in written form, literary scholars soon noticed the recurrent presence of a limited number of motifs and situations in most cyberpunk stories. Writers like Gibson or Sterling foresaw a world where social hierarchies sharply divided the haves from the have-nots, where mafia gangs and private armies protected the very rich, who set their residences in the skies (the new heavens for the atheist), their main concern being to defeat death by means of drugs and genetic manipulation. Meanwhile, the have-nots live on a heavily polluted earth, in dystopic cityscapes, their ranks oscillating between the very poor and the remains of a middle-class constituted by the military, clerk officers or cybernetic couriers who, like Johnny Mnemonic, transport information in hard disks *placed* in their previously emptied human heads (Gibson, 1986).

While in the 1980s cyberpunk writers were already predicting a highly dystopic future, Hollywood was also bombarding its massive audiences with Sci-Fi films that frequently resorted to the presentation of dystopic futures in which the protagonist was already a hybrid figure, half-human half-machine: the cyborg. The new creature meant the physical actualization of McLuhan's concept: the technological amputated cyborg was better equipped than ancient heroes to defeat the present enemy now represented by the purely evil machine. In *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), Kubrick had anticipated the machines' attempt to supersede a humanity that, however, could still count on a Nietzschean superman to defeat the supercomputer Hal. In the 1980s, allegedly the (white male) human condition had suffered so many threats in the hands of women and other marginalized minorities that Hollywood had to offer Arnold Schwarzenegger's superbody to reassert the white male's social significance. In a period in which the role of traditional enemies was being assigned to all-powerful machines, James Cameron begins the Terminator series with a film in which the future Governor of California plays the role of an evil killing machine (*The Terminator*, 1984). However, in the second film in the series Cameron shifts Schwarzenegger's role from evil machine to protective cybernetic father figure for humanity's savior, John Connor (*Terminator 2: Judgment Day*, 1991), in this way signaling the cyborg's human side and capacity to be

trusted. Although not as popular as the character played by the Austrian actor, in 1987 Paul Verhoeven's Robocop also achieved a certain success as cyborg protagonist, despite his more machinelike appearance. Certainly, Robocop was a heavily amputated being but he was also ready to defend what was left of humanity from a new generation of evil machines in a time in which social minorities, technology, global warming, and scientific experimentation had become the new threats to old humanist notion of patriarchal man.

In the first wave of cyberpunk criticism, the hybrid human-machine creature was soon understood as a step forward in the Darwinian development of the species. Self-amputation was worthwhile if, by prosthetically extending the body the resulting cyborg could extend his strength and physical capabilities. For some authors a new era, the posthuman, was born then (see Featherstone and Burrows, 1995). The new cyborg creature could represent the end of gender distinctions (Haraway, 1985) even if followers of the popular *Star Trek: The New Generation* series were still warned about the evil effects that mixed breeds like the cybernetic Borg represented for humanity (see Dery, 1993: 3).

However, close to the beginning of the third millennium, the hybrid cyborg is ready to progress into a new type of cultural entity that, superseding the process of physical self-amputation, now appears as the ultimate possibility to declare extinct what may be left of humanity in us: the virtual being.

The first stage for the virtual being implies the bodily connection to the computer: once wo/man's capabilities are extended thanks to this connection, s/he is ready to "leave the meat behind," as Gibson put it in *Neuromancer*. McCoy Pauley, one of the characters in Gibson's path-breaking novel, has become so virtual that his consciousness can be transported in different hardware devices once his body is dead; his immortality is granted as long as nobody erases his mind from the device that supports it. After its birth in cyberpunk fiction, the progressive importance of virtual wo/man was signaled in the 1990s by a number of films, such as Brett Leonard's *The Lawnmower Man* (1992) or Farhad Mann's sequel *The Lawnmower Man 2* (1996). Commercially, these films were not very successful because many spectators could not follow their intricate plots. Although it also has a rather complicated story, the Wachowski brothers' film *The Matrix* (1999) became the first huge commercial success that deals with the new virtual entity. The protagonist, Neo makes good his nickname: he is not only the new savior of a human world enslaved by machines; he is above all the new posthuman virtual being. After a long series of trials, by the end of the film Neo is able to *navigate* at will from the real dystopic world where his physical body resides to the virtual, simulated Platonic reality of the Matrix, the program in cyberspace devised by the machines to use human bodies as batteries for their own maintenance.

Obviously, the Wachowskis' representation of virtual wo/man is so far nothing but a cultural metaphor for the new state of being that the proliferation of personal computers has brought about for the last three decades. Our selves cannot navigate along the telephone line yet, as Neo does, but when we enter the matrix, or maternal Internet, our sense of being becomes extraordinarily expanded; we feel that we can reach the whole world, confirming McLuhan's prophetic understanding of the extensions of man.

The beginning of the third millennium also meant new fears when facing the possibility of having human clones that would replace us, who those of us who are still the *original* beings (Roger Spottiswoode's *The Sixth Day*, 2000). But such replacement was a conventional one; as happens in classic horror movies like *The Body Snatchers* (Don Siegel, 1956), in cloning, flesh still replaces flesh. However, more recently Hollywood has recaptured another idea that, again, was already present in Gibson's *Neuromancer*: the possibility for virtual wo/man to take the space and sensations of another being. "SimStim," as stated in the famous cyberpunk novel, is the stimulation of the brain and the neural system using a recording or live broadcast of another person's experience. When the frontiers that are trespassed are not just those between (posthuman) being and machine but the sensorial limits between people (Kathryn Bigelow's *Strange Days*, 1995), we are dealing with the crime of *surrogation*, which constitutes the main motif in recent films such as Jonathan Mostow's *The Surrogates* (2009) and James Cameron's successful *Avatar* (2009). *Surrogation* represents, so far, the ultimate total use of one being by another; the notion itself implies slavery and signals, once again, that there seem to be no limits for (post)human depravity.

4. POSTHUMANITY IN THE CLASSROOM, REPRESENTATION AS MULTIMODAL NARRATIVE

To teach students not simply the cultural lines along which human beings have been representing their own fluctuating limits during the last decades – as this essay has so far attempted to do – but also the ethical implications arising from such matter, is a complex undertaking. It requires not only the presentation in class of a number of philosophical and cultural concepts but a process of reflection in which students and teacher have to evaluate their own state as entities affected by the posthuman condition and therefore subject to the multiple extensions provided by technology, including to McLuhan's process of self-amputation. Let us not forget that McLuhan's notion is *per se* traumatic. It involves a loss that, although not necessarily physical, is metaphorically

associated to the human (and humane) origin of our personality and integrity as intelligent subjects.

Nowadays, the teacher has to face an audience of students who get connected daily to the Internet and take notes directly on their laptops, or who continuously use cellular phones for reasons apparently other than effective communication. It seems clear, then, that they have developed new skills, new forms of being, while they have also rejected other more traditional skills. Where are their limits in the classroom? How can teachers help students to become aware of their condition and of the new ethical order that such a condition implies?

In my own personal experience, contrasted with other colleagues' opinions, students – especially the ones who have started to use computers for learning purposes since the first stages in school – may develop a better capacity for oral expression and expertise in, for instance, PowerPoint presentations; but their ability to present complex and personal ideas seems to be decreasing. Such a decrease is possibly the result of a diminishing practice of their reading skills due to a substantial reduction in the number of compulsory written texts they have to read in school. The fact that reading written texts is not one of the basic learning activities any more – not even among students of the Humanities – is certainly distressing for many teachers of literary and cultural studies, but at university level the effects of such intellectual amputation can only be partially remedied. A way to motivate students to increase their reading capability is to offer them the possibility to reflect on the self-amputation process itself and on the notion of narrative as a multimodal communicative process by means of which we represent the world and ourselves[1]. Reading, especially creative literature, also offers an immediate, personal, and pictorial – not only linguistic – mode to represent and understand life.

This does not mean, though, that other skills and recourses have to be rejected. In practice, teaching concepts should be helped by multimedia strategies accompanied by a multimodal evaluation of the corpus of analysis, in which students have to read written texts but also use audiovisual material combined with a supplementary bibliography and activities that include the use of the web and other material. There is no point in going back to the almost exclusive use of the traditional lecture and long reading lists to accomplish the didactic aims in the course. We have to take advantage of our students'

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[1] For Page, "multimodality insists on the multiple integration of semiotic resources in all communicative events" (2010: 4). Therefore, in multimodal narratology critics have as their aim the analysis of the different semiotic resources used in narrative. It is also important to consider that semiotic modes "are realized materially through particular media. Although closely intertwined with multimodality, the analysis of medium is a separable and independent issue" (2010: 6).

new capacities while improving their traditional reading skills, threatened by the progressive power that images external to the mind have in our narrative understanding of life in a new era in which language seems to be losing its hegemonic, monomodal role to narrativize the world (Page, 2010: 1-9).

My main didactic aim when dealing with the notion of posthumanity in the classroom is not only to analyze the corpus I have selected but especially to encourage my students' awareness of the perspectives provided by contemporary fiction, cinema, and computer use in the definition of their own beings as fluctuating mental and bodily entities. However, there are some other aims in my course also associated with the notion of our present condition. Namely: a) As argued above, we have to work with different media (printed literature, audio-visual presentations, film, and computer tools) because they constitute an effective means both to bring about the students' awareness of our present condition and to increase their competence in "reading" narratives from a multimodal perspective (Hutcheon & Hutcheon, 2010: 65-75). b) Accordingly, they will continue to develop the computer and audio-visual skills they have been learning since school but they will also revert to reading printed texts in the belief that it will compensate for their previous self-amputated loss of reading skills. c) Additionally, in their dual role as self-conscious beings but also as students of cultural criticism, participants in the course will have to face the ethical aspects of literature and art, the importance of narrative in our understanding of life, and the capacity of art to act as model and interpreter of our condition. d) Hopefully, while having to deal with these notions, they will also understand that originality does not mean downloading files from the Internet and putting your name on them; plagiarism is an academic offense and, in some places, a legal crime; but it is also a concept deeply associated with our intellectual limits and capacities. Teamwork, individual essays and presentations, and having to select bibliographies and materials to carry on their own tasks for the course help students to dispel the extended belief that previous authors and their ideas are mere surrogates at our disposal.

The fact that narrative is now understood as a multimodal way to represent life and conceive of ourselves, and that narrative representations can be effected by different media implies that to accomplish the teaching aims presented above I had to develop a syllabus specifically concerned with the main topics of discussion to be addressed within the course's temporal limitations. Accordingly, in my course the syllabus progresses from critical studies about the poststructuralist understanding of the human subject and of language as unstable factors, to fiction written since the 1960s, and from there to film examples of the transgression of physical and metaphorical human limits. Class presentations are usually carried out with the help of PowerPoint,

which allows for the use of (audio)visual material to which students are by now more accustomed than to traditional sequential reading. For writing their own individual essays and for the preparation of optional group presentations in the class, students have access to the course's page in the university on-line (Moodle) platform, from which they can download the PowerPoint presentations I use in class, together with additional written and audiovisual bibliography and materials. From the on-line platform, they can also download the course syllabus, notes on narratological methodology, and bibliographies on the main notions and topics to be discussed in the films that have to be viewed for the second half of the course. I think it is convenient to offer participants in the course the opportunity to download more information than they actually need to write on any specific topic in the syllabus so that they will have to revise and select the possible material that they can use. Any activity that implies keeping at bay the temptation to contemplate passively any item in an audio-visual medium is beneficial. Additionally, on the on-line page, students also find two *webquests* that they may want to develop for better grades; the quests can be undertaken individually or in groups of three or four students.

Here is a summary of the course syllabus[2]:

a) The first part consists of a theoretical introduction to postmodernism, its ideological effects and the role the poststructuralisms and the new physics had in the impact of the notions related to the instability of the self/subject, of language as a free play of signifiers, and the coming of the posthuman. Special emphasis is given to the theories proposed by Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault. From the field of science, students are given some basic notions concerning Relativity Theory and Quantum Mechanics before we address Norbert Wiener and Marshall McLuhan's views on the human being and the role of the media and the new technologies. This part of the course is structured as lectures aided by PowerPoint presentations.

b) The second part of the course is devoted to the discussion of the limits of being in postmodernist fiction in the U.S.A., together with critical notions related to trauma studies, historiographic metafiction, and the new scientific interpretations of being as reflected in creative literature. Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), and Eric Kraft's *Where Do You Stop*? (1992) are the selected novels for class discussion.

c) The third part of the course centers on the concepts of posthumanism, posthumanity, the blurring of barriers in narrative genres, and the cultural role

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[2] The course, called "Main Trends in Contemporary U.S. Fiction," offers a 7,5 ECTS subject addressed to master students and is developed through 50 hours of class activities, including lectures, presentations, text analysis, and film viewing and discussion.

of the novel in its relation to information sciences, the cinema and audiovisual culture, with special emphasis on the creation of new values that disrupt the traditional understanding of the humanist self. Our blurred mental and bodily frontiers at the turn of the millennium and the notion of the posthuman are discussed with the help of three stories written by cyberpunk author William Gibson, from his collection *Burning Chrome* (1986). To them is added Bharati Mukherjee's novel *The Holder of the World* (1993), which offers an outstanding example of postmodernist and posthuman motifs in a story characterized by its metafictional, historiographic, traumatic, and gender concerns. This part continues with the discussion of several films that reflect cyberpunk and philosophical worries about the new posthuman condition. Scott's classic *Blade Runner* (1982), as has already been mentioned, offers a good starting point in the discussion of human/machine boundaries and the pervasive idea of the 1980s that machines were taking control of all life on the planet. As anticipated by Gibson's short story "The Belonging Kind," science fiction has associated frequently with gothic and horror elements. David Cronenberg takes this association to the limit in his remake of *The Fly* in 1986, where students have the opportunity to test the social concerns of the period (especially the impact of AIDS) in a context where the cyborg has already taken over as cultural icon. Terror and bodily limits are also reiterative elements in Jonathan Frakes's *Star Trek: First Contact* (1997), a film extracted from the popular universe of *Star Trek* that captures the paradoxical attraction exerted at the time by the figure of the cyborg, even if it implies a loss of individual consciousness.

The course comes to its climactic end with the viewing and discussion of *The Matrix* (the Wachowski brothers, 1999), which already represents the arrival of virtual wo/man within a sustained context of fear when facing the power we have provided machines with.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The traditional frontiers between teaching and learning are also collapsing, thanks to the strategic use of different media, together with new ideas on methodology and, I believe, the gradual understanding that we are also fluctuating creatures. Many of us have heard our (traditionally oriented) teachers say that in the classroom they also learn from their students as if it were something extraordinary or even magical. It is not. Categories and physical limits are continuously trespassed even between apparently inanimate objects, and more so in the case of animate creatures. Teaching and learning are no exception, as this paper has tried to show. Theory about the trespassing of limits

may take us to consider our own (post)human condition and our multimodal capacity to conceive of life. With the help of an adequate corpus of analysis and the appropriate methodological tools and technological equipment, our students may extend their own multimedia capacities and wish to recover, at least in part, the old amputated skill of reading.

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