

# Spanish Cultural Studies in the Undergraduate Classroom

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The unprecedented growth of cultural studies at universities in the United States has been greeted with enthusiasm by graduate students and professors (particularly junior faculty), often by skepticism on the part of senior faculty, and even serious concern by some of its leading exponents.<sup>1</sup> It is an intellectual project that, despite its clear connections to the social sciences, is making a strong impact in the humanities, particularly in departments of language and literature. Nonetheless, cultural studies has yet to find its place within the undergraduate curriculum, and it is that situation which I would like to address here.

This essay is essentially a chronicle. It is the story of a successful undergraduate course which linked cultural studies to language acquisition. By telling this story, I wish to draw attention to the value and efficacy of teaching Spanish cultural studies to language learners and to stimulate some discussion about the pedagogical and theoretical challenges of just such a project. In addition, by examining what I felt to be both the benefits and difficulties of this type of course, I also hope to encourage professors to consider offering courses with a specific focus on cultural studies at a much earlier point in the undergraduate career.

Finally, by narrating this story, I wish to signal at the very least my awareness of the various interpretive possibilities within it, both pedagogical and theoretical. Incorporating theory into undergraduate teaching is a challenge in itself, and the addition of foreign language instruction

certainly affected the shape of the course. But, as I hope to demonstrate, the advantages of weaving the teaching of cultural studies into the project of foreign language acquisition and the presentation of political and historical information proved to be an advantageous mix in helping my students arrive at a better understanding of contemporary Spain. Perhaps not surprisingly, some of the tensions most evident in the project of cultural studies actually reinscribed themselves into the structure of the course in a subtle yet powerful fashion.

### Cultural Studies and Contemporary Spain

Before elaborating on the form of the course and the actual experience of teaching it, I feel it is necessary to address the issue of cultural studies as an academic discipline. There is no doubt that socio-historical factors have promoted the development of cultural studies in the academy today. The proliferation of postmodernist theories of literature (and by extension of various other forms of cultural production) has created an almost limitless variety of approaches to an equally vast set of objects (literature, film, television, advertising and lived practices). As a result, nearly every critical foray into this field begins with an explanation of what cultural studies is or is not as well as an attempt to position one's self into the context of the discussion. This essay will be no different, except that I hope to demonstrate the connections between this theoretical rationale and my own pedagogical practices and experiences in the classroom in the last section of the essay.

Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson

and Paula Treichler define cultural studies in the introduction to their anthology, *Cultural Studies*, as the study of "the entire range of a society's arts, beliefs, institutions, and communicative practices" (4). This wide range of possibilities for study has occasioned criticism that accuses cultural studies of being a field with no stable disciplinary base nor an established methodology. This perception, while incorrect, points to the core of the project's postmodernist nature. Cultural studies, because it does not offer a master narrative, becomes the site for perpetual re-evaluation and reconfiguration through its analysis of representation. In his introduction to the *Cultural Studies Reader*, Simon During notes:

... cultural studies is a discipline continually shifting its interests and methods, both because it is in constant and engaged interaction with its larger historical context and because it cannot be complacent about its authority. (20)

As important, Stuart Hall has forcefully argued that there is indeed "something *at stake*" in the project of cultural studies (278) and that only by holding "theoretical and political questions in an ever irresolvable but permanent tension" will the project make a difference to any of us outside the academy (284).

In a recently published review of a cultural studies text, the eminent Hispanist and historian J.E. Elliott has criticized cultural studies for its separation from and irrelevance to the very societies and cultural phenomenon that the field purports to analyze:

... sustained theoretical debate remains securely in the hands of paid intellec-

tuals in higher education, who are the only ones with the time and interest to argue on such terms; academic writing for other academics.... (76)

Setting aside the issue as to how much theoretical debate in almost any field of intellectual endeavor occurs outside the university today, Elliott's criticism does merit reflection. It is true that a great deal of the discussion that labels itself as cultural studies is limited to circulation within academe. Yet, true to the very political nature of cultural studies, it is not only possible but also crucial to bridge that gap and make a critical examination of culture worthwhile for those outside our own immediate circle. I define undergraduate students as being outside this circle for a variety of reasons. First, most students take our courses and pursue their degrees with a view of working outside the university setting. Thus, in teaching undergraduates, we are not necessarily embarking on the project of duplicating ourselves. Second, these same students, as products of the university and future members of a privileged segment of society, will be in a unique position to generate shifts in social attitudes and to wield political and economic power.

Consequently, the role of these students in a project such as cultural studies is not a simple nor a purely intellectual one. These students represent both a driving market force in the university, pressing the institution to meet their needs in a specific economic sense, and an impressionable group of young adults whose intellectual interests and perspectives, and subsequent development, are very much influenced by their experiences in the classroom. To that end, I'd like to address this course's role in our undergraduate curricu-

lum and how it was a result of student demand as much as it was a product of my own desire to stimulate student interest. After describing the course, I will return again to some of these larger issues at stake, not the least of which is the overarching economic paradigm which seems to influence much of our current pedagogy.

Perhaps the first important question relative to pedagogy is, what is at stake in terms of undergraduate education? Is the increasing demand on the part of students for courses which address issues of race, gender, class and difference a result of changes in contemporary society or is it more an indication of the pressure members of the academy bring to bear on the rearticulation of curriculum as a vehicle for their own retention, promotion and advancement in the field? Regardless of how one perceives the directional flow of change, there is no doubt that pedagogical decisions are political. At the very least, we must recognize as teachers and scholars that we are

... bearers of critical knowledge that should empower others to make sense of their position in the world, discover the neglected or suppressed aspects of the tradition and seize the initiative to disrupt the hegemonic order. (Kecht 7)

While cognizant of the political nature of the project, I believe that my own experience with offering a course labeled specifically as "cultural studies" had more to do with the presentation of basic historical information without which students could not even begin to think critically about contemporary Spanish culture. What was also at stake for me was making

Spain and Spanish culture an object of student interest. My motivation was intellectual, but at the same time both personal and professional. I wanted my students to gain insight into contemporary Spain even as they acquired the theoretical, linguistic and even technical vocabulary which would allow them to think about cultural production in a more sophisticated fashion.<sup>2</sup>

Through discussions with students over the last several years about Spain and Spanish culture, I have not been able to ignore how much students simply do not know about contemporary Spanish history, politics and society. How, for instance, can one understand the political maneuverings of the PSOE or the PP and their effects on contemporary culture, particularly in regard to mass media, without any knowledge of the political transition from Franco to a constitutional monarchy in the late seventies? While many students have at least a passing knowledge of the Spanish Civil War, they remain blissfully unaware of the regional divisions, cultural and political, which play an equally important role in understanding current events. My students had no basis of knowledge to understand such expressions as "después de Franco, las instituciones," or the lament of the early eighties, "con Franco vivíamos mejor," let alone the importance of the spray-painted signs across Spain in the early nineties of "CorruPsoe" or "Gora ETA." Whether it be from *Hola* magazine articles, *El País* editorials and political cartoons or the Canal+ program *La semana de guiñol*, there was a lot to learn about cultural production in contemporary Spain.

By offering a course in cultural studies, I reasoned, it would be possible to provide the kind of background which

would allow students to understand various expressions of social instability and unrest even as they began to examine them from a critical perspective. The course would provide very current information gathered from the press, from recent scholarship and from classroom presentations of Spanish film, television, art and music. I also wanted to offer a course which would promote student interest in Spain specifically. Our college has a small but thriving Latin American Studies program, and students in Southern California are deeply interested in the connections between North American culture and Latin America. But many students assumed that Spain was simply less vibrant and dynamic, a perceptual error which I hoped to rectify. By pointing out the complex structure of contemporary Spanish society, as something both a part of and quite distinct from other European nations, with cultural connections both to Europe and Latin America, not only did I think it possible to renew student interest in Spain but I hoped to change in some degree the way I myself approached the teaching of culture. What I had not anticipated, however, was the degree to which pedagogical concerns would mirror theoretical issues and how that would impact my own perceptions.

### "The New Spain"

In the spring of 1998, I offered a course to fifth semester language students entitled, "The New Spain: An Introduction to Spanish Cultural Studies." "The New Spain" was the first course in my department to focus primarily on cultural studies. Our curriculum does include a very popular film course, but with the exception of that course and one other on

Spanish linguistics, our transitional courses and upper-division undergraduate seminars focus exclusively on literature. Accordingly, I chose not to include literature as a specific cultural artifact in this course. Pomona College, as a small liberal arts college serving approximately 1,200 undergraduate students, offers both unique advantages and obstacles to curriculum development, a situation which in itself was instrumental in structuring "The New Spain." For instance, because of its size, Pomona is unable to offer a large number of undergraduate seminars which focus on highly specific or esoteric topics. There simply isn't always a market for such courses, and we therefore must adjust the scope of our seminars to include a wider range of student interests and needs. Similarly, when students do demonstrate a particular interest in a subject, Pomona's size and sensitivity to demand makes it easier to respond, adjusting the curriculum and adding new courses or altering existing courses accordingly. In short, enrollment figures do matter. These specific forces played a powerful role when I began thinking about the possible addition of a cultural studies course in the Department of Romance Languages and Literatures.

"I really want to continue with Spanish, to improve my language skills, but I don't really enjoy reading literature. Aren't there any courses that don't focus on literature?" In the last few years, this was the type of comment I increasingly heard from students. Though painful to me personally as a teacher of literature, as someone who is passionate about literature, this attitude nonetheless led me to reconsider the situation within our department. Certainly the traditional vision of the foreign language curriculum, as a pro-

gram of study which begins with language but progresses toward ever higher levels of fluency, with a focus on literature as the highest form of linguistic expression, is in a state of crisis. Students have lost faith in this vision. Though often they see language learning as simply a functional skill which will increase their attractiveness as job candidates after graduation, students perceive literature to be less relevant to their daily lives and have a difficult time justifying its study. I believe this change has at its core the contemporary distinctions between elite and popular culture, but that is a discussion better saved for another time.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, what the student response cited above says to me is that my undergraduates have a preconceived notion of literature as distant and isolated, when in fact they are already well-versed and deeply interested in narrative and in complex systems of symbolic representation. They just don't connect their experiences with film and television as being relative to literature, nor do they see literature as a reflection of anything other than elite culture.

I began to envision a course which might address this problem. Clearly the new narratives and symbolic systems with which students are more familiar come in the form of cultural expression and lived practices which have not traditionally been included in our class discussions or course syllabi. But what would their inclusion into a new course mean for our curriculum? Certainly there was some trepidation on the part of senior faculty, who initially saw in the introduction of a cultural studies course an attack on the notion of literature which had heretofore been assumed to be stable and indisputable.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, I was concerned about connecting the course to the department's vision



of the major and the curriculum in Spanish. John Beverley has argued that cultural studies' attempt to re-aestheticize mass or popular culture is a fundamental challenge to the existing structure of disciplines, one which repudiates the ideology of literature and instead assumes a "more agnostic posture toward it" (21). Yet I felt certain that this course could serve a number of purposes, some which might mitigate any possible perception of the course as antagonistic to the department's larger goals. This course would also have to mesh with other institutional goals. Accordingly, the evolutionary process of this course was neither straightforward nor simple. I want to include a brief discussion of this process because it might resonate for others at similar stages of thinking.

Besides wanting the course to address student interests, another initial concern was to add a course to the curriculum which would have a strong link to the College's study-abroad offerings. Pomona College has a particularly strong commitment to study abroad, with nearly one-half of the student population electing to spend at least one semester outside the United States. There are quite a number of overseas destinations for students who wish to improve their Spanish language skills, with four sites within Spain alone. To develop a successful link, this new course would have to function equally well for those students preparing to go abroad and those recently returning. As important, if it purported to support language learning, any course would have to be conducted in the target language, a prospect which would undoubtedly lower enrollment figures. To guarantee sufficient enrollment, I briefly envisioned a course which would address both Spain and Latin

America as areas of cultural study. My first thought was to build from individual experiences with Spanish-speaking cultures, attempting to better understand those experiences through an analysis of cultural differences. After many discussions with the college's director of the Office of Study Abroad and with faculty within the Romance Languages Department, it became clear that there were very few models available from other institutions for this type of course and a number of fundamental problems with such an approach, not the least of which involved the initial focus on personal experience.

I chose, ultimately, to focus exclusively on Spanish cultural studies. The reasons for such a decision involved an unavoidable recognition of the degree of difference in historical and cultural background in Latin American countries, and my own reticence to tackle this broad area when there were others in my own department much better trained to do so. I stepped back and reconfigured the geographical boundaries of the course to Spain alone. Language by itself, I concluded, could not endow the course with structure or meaning. Instead, language acquisition had to function as secondary to the course's content. There was one other compelling reason for me to make that decision as well, the simple fact that I find Spain to be a country in a unique historical and cultural moment. Marsha Kinder has noted:

Spain is an ideal case study for exploring the process of redefining national, regional, and cultural identity over the past twenty years, primarily because its rapid transition from Francoism to democracy prefigured the sudden collapse of the entire cold-war paradigm.

(1)

Certainly my own experiences of living in Spain made me more amenable to a strictly peninsular focus, but there was something more than just a level of individual intellectual comfort. For years I have listened with great interest to senior colleagues as they discussed their own perspectives on the rapid changes in Spanish society. Spain, they note, always with amazement and even on occasion somewhat wistfully, is fundamentally different today from what it was just a couple of decades ago. They remember the Franco years and the great difficulties of the transition. While it is impossible for junior faculty like me to share those experiences in the same way, our knowledge of the history of that change, and our ability to explore its manifestations in Spanish politics, society and above all in cultural production, do help us become more sensitive to the fullness of the experience.

Indeed, for those of us who are committed hispanophiles, the desire both to understand the significant changes in Spain and communicate them to our students is constant. But it is not always easy to find ways to interest students in those things that most interest us. The course on cultural studies, then, offered the possibility of answering both the student demand for a course which continued the process of language learning through the study of something other than literature and my own desire to promote the study of Spain and its culture. Not only would such a course make the study abroad experience more meaningful, but it could offer even those students interested in international relations, economics, history, politics and sociology an opportunity to bring their own disciplinary interests into a course which would stimulate their foreign language skills. The course, as it was

coming together, was assuming the form often referred to as "language through content" or "language across the curriculum." Eventually I settled on a four semester language requirement for students who wished to enroll in the course, giving "The New Spain" the status as a transitional course within our curriculum. Through such a designation, "The New Spain" did not supplant literature as a major focus of our curriculum. Instead, the course became a logical choice for students interested in a minor in Spanish even as it presented an interesting alternative for both majors and non-majors who wished to deepen their study abroad experience and explore theoretical implications of cultural production.

Yet how does one organize this type of course? How can we organize and present, in the context of one fifteen-week semester, the range and breadth of cultural change that Spain has experienced since 1975? From the end of Francoism to the end of Felipismo, the rate and depth of change has been striking. "The New Spain" ran the risk of attempting to do everything, which could easily result in a course that did nothing. I was forced to ask myself what aspects of history and culture would be necessary background in order for a student to formulate a basic concept of contemporary Spanish culture. More importantly, I had to define how I envisioned students approaching that formulation.

It became imperative to define what I meant by culture. According to the *Diccionario de la Lengua Española*, culture is defined as the "resultado o efecto de cultivar los conocimientos humanos y de afinarse por medio del ejercicio las facultades intelectuales del hombre" and as the "conjunto de modos de vida y cos-

tumbres, conocimientos y grado de desarrollo artístico, científico, industrial, en una época o grupo social" (1: 624). Cultural studies, on the other hand, was certainly more than a review of objects of cultural production. A course which focused on aspects of Spanish life in an essentially uncritical or untheoretical manner would result in little more than a reformulated "civilization" course. This type of course does have a valuable role, and it is very often a staple of undergraduate course work in foreign language departments. What I hoped to do, on the other hand, was to present aspects of Spanish culture in which the struggle for dominance, for definition and for meaning was powerfully evident. By privileging popular culture, I was acknowledging the efficacy of Gramsci's theory of the "national-popular" and privileging the resultant conceptualization of culture as a site of struggle.<sup>5</sup>

The next steps involved the acquisition of appropriate materials and the organization of topics for the semester. To begin I had to address the problem of language. In what language was the best information available? Second, I had to define the scope. What information was required in order to understand basic facts concerning contemporary Spanish culture? I elected to allow readings in both English and Spanish throughout the semester in order to take advantage of the best materials available on Spanish cultural studies. By giving students some background in English and then supplementing that with very contemporary information in Spanish, I expected that the level of student comprehension, investigation and discussion might be somewhat more intellectually rigorous even if there was a greater possibility of linguistic inaccuracy.

What was most important, I reasoned, was to give students the desire to communicate something and then, secondly, to assist them in the proper grammatical expression of their ideas.

The publication in 1995 of Helen Graham's and Jo Labanyi's anthology, *Spanish Cultural Studies, An Introduction*, was a significant advantage in organizing materials. The articles in the book, all relatively short, are written in English with bibliographies in both Spanish and English for further investigation. The book is organized in a roughly chronological fashion, beginning with the period 1898 to 1931 and moving through the Civil War, the Franco years and finally the late twentieth century. In order to use the text most efficiently with the structure that was developing for the course, I altered somewhat the book's historical order of presentation, preferring instead to assign readings on a thematic basis to give historical background to one cultural issue at a time. This way students might read for a given class period two to three short essays which would address historical developments relative to specific topics such as educational policies or the role of women in Spanish society, rather than read an entire section of the text about Spain during a defined historical period. Mainly I focused on the last two sections of the book, which address the periods of 1940-1975 and 1975-1992. Additionally useful was the introduction to the text, entitled "Culture and Modernity: The Case of Spain," which articulated the theoretical structures in the approach to be taken to the course.

Along with the Labanyi/Graham anthology, I chose to include three others which would help address various topics: one as a basic introduction to contempo-



rary Spain for language learners, another which was a much more linguistically sophisticated book yet nonetheless laid down some basic facts concerning the transition from Francoism to democracy and finally a third that addressed topics in contemporary Spanish culture. The first, *La España que sobrevive*, written by the well-known Spanish historian Fernando Díaz-Plaja and edited by William W. Cressey, has been designed specifically for foreign language across the curriculum and language through content. A somewhat subjective book which takes as its fundamental theme the established idea of Spain as a country unique in its contemporary move from dictatorship to democracy, the book is a reasonably good introduction to some of the major institutions in Spain and their most relevant recent history. Because it is an introductory text, and one which offers the development of vocabulary and linguistic skills, I relied on this text more in the first weeks of the semester. The autonomous regions, the army, the church, and the monarchy all warrant individual chapters. The second text, filled with relevant photographs, is Javier Tusell's contribution to the *Diario 16* series, *Historia de España*, entitled *La transición española: La recuperación de las libertades*. This slim volume, though unedited for use in the foreign language classroom, offered an opportunity for students to read Spanish at a relatively sophisticated level. By comparing information gathered in the Graham/Labanyi anthology and the Díaz-Plaja/Cressey reader, students would have the chance to glean more from Tusell while they came face to face with university-level Spanish language. Toward the end of the semester I included short readings from John Hooper's *The New Spaniards*, selecting

chapters which analyzed the role of mass media, the role of women in Spanish society and changing attitudes toward sexuality in a post-Franco environment. Thus within the context of a single course, students worked with English and with Spanish at intermediate and advanced levels.

Obviously, the choice of Tusell reveals my own belief that no course on contemporary Spain could get far without a good deal of emphasis being placed on the transition from dictatorship to constitutional monarchy. Though it has not always been the case in Spanish history, it is true that contemporary Spanish culture is difficult to comprehend and analyze without some basic knowledge of the last years of Francoism and the national concerns surrounding the tumultuous events of the transition. How, I wondered, could my students understand the references in the films of Saura or Almodóvar without having some idea of the extremely rapid pace of cultural change after 1975, the consequent exuberance and anxiety of that period, and in turn the sense of disappointment and alienation which now resonates through much of Spain's popular culture? My students also needed to know something about Felipe González, the early struggles to establish a new governmental system and the extremely problematic issues of regional differences and the establishment of autonomous regions which reflect profound differences in cultural identity.

In terms of the structure of topics in the course, I began the semester with political and historical background information and slowly moved the course toward a closer examination of cultural production. The first three weeks of the semester were devoted to information relative to the

Franco period, the first steps of the transition, the rise of the socialists with Felipe González and the recent electoral triumph of José María Aznar and the Partido Popular. The fourth week addressed the institutions of the monarchy and the church, examining their importance in Spanish cultural identity. I also included information on the educational system (particularly the changes relative to LOGSE), to give students some idea of what their Spanish counterparts experienced in their formal education. Weeks six and seven addressed issues of national and regional identity, and this is the stage in the semester in which the focus on cultural studies became more pronounced. As Graham and Labanyi note in their introduction, cultural studies as a discipline grew out of "the nineteenth-century concern with the role of culture in nation formation" (2), and this is of particular importance in Spain today. What I intended to do in these weeks was to point out not just the facts surrounding the increased interest in regionalism and regional identity in Spain but more importantly how the perception of cultural differences drives these regional interests. We discussed the new "ley de catalán" and the relationship between linguistic pride and political positioning, both in Barcelona and in Madrid. We examined how the waning popularity of the PSOE in the early nineties and the electoral victories for the PP have been closely connected to the resurgence of strong yet competing notions of identity, both regional and national. We touched on the impact of necessary coalition building for political parties without a clear majority to govern, most notably seen in the increased political power of the CiU. We also addressed the problem of political independence, as seen by the state as

domestic terrorism and by groups such as ETA, as a necessary struggle for independence. The massive demonstrations in protest against the assassination of Miguel Ángel Blanco Garrido were of particular interest. I had students read in succession the front pages of Spanish newspapers from July 11th to July 15th of 1997, as the drama of the young man's kidnapping by ETA was played out in the media. It was a powerful example of the political role of media coverage and of how political and cultural struggles have an intensely personal effect on individuals, which in turn can develop into mass demonstrations and changes in political will.

At this point in the semester students had enough of a foundation to begin the work of examining cultural production itself. Consequently, in the next seven weeks of the semester we began to focus attention on mass media (including the then-raging debate on Telefónica's purchase of substantial amounts of stock in one of Spain's few independent television stations), even as we began to examine journalistic practice in Spain's national and regional media. We would, for example, discuss the differences in news coverage between newspapers, teasing out if not the implicit agendas of the media at least the types of questions we would need to ask in order to determine the positions of reporters, editors and owners of media outlets. We spent a week discussing the role of sports in Spain's sense of national and regional identity and its importance in the distinctions between high and low culture. One week was spent on examining the role of women in Spanish society, another on music and finally one week exclusively focused on film. In the unit devoted to music, we focused upon the development of flamenco as a once popu-

lar art form which has now achieved elite status even as it has been used by successive political movements to identify both a national and a counter-hegemonic identity. With the unit on film, we screened now classic films by Almodóvar, as representative of distinctly post-Franco Spain and the *movida*, as well as new films by Iciar Bollain and Alejandro Amenábar, noting their relevance to the current state of the industry. Throughout this stage of the semester, students were better able to recognize references to individuals and events because of the initial grounding in the historical facts of the period. They felt more confident discussing aspects of culture. They found it easier to contextualize contemporary events and to theorize about their larger meaning. For example, after having watched the film *Tesis*, students discussed the degree of Hollywood influence on Spanish film production, dissecting the genre of the thriller and debating to what degree this particular film even evidenced a uniquely Spanish context.

During the last half of the semester, I included a greater number of contemporary newspaper articles, from *El Mundo*, *Diario 16*, *ABC* and *El País*. I had begun collecting some of these materials specifically for the course during the previous year. Having had the good fortune to spend the entire summer in Spain before the course was offered, I was able to accumulate not only a number of relevant articles on a variety of subjects but also some useful videos as well, contemporary films as well as tapes of television commercials, popular situation comedies (*El médico de la familia*), political satires (*La semana de guiñol*) and news documentaries. These materials proved to be particularly useful during the semester. I do not wish to imply that such advanced collection of ma-

terials is absolutely necessary. In fact, I am convinced that with just the availability of materials through websites, it is possible to bring useful information to the classroom. Throughout the semester, for example, we would often read articles that had been published only the day before in Madrid newspapers, thus making classroom discussions powerfully connected to contemporary events in Spanish society. But the inclusion of advertising, television and film was truly beneficial. Watching a 1997 episode of *La semana de guiñol*, for example, the Canal+ show which satires Spanish society and politics through the use of latex rubber puppets resembling key figures in Spanish politics, media and society, my students were inspired to learn more about contemporary events as a key for unlocking the references contained in the show. For example, once they understood who Cristina Almeida was and read about her relationship to the Izquierda Unida, they appreciated the humor of the skit in which she is portrayed as Sancho Panza imploring the dying Don Quijote (in this case a graying, goateed Julio Anguita) not to abandon their once glorious quest.

I imagine that some readers at this point will be asking about the degree to which students were able to access materials, both in their theoretical assumptions and/or in their linguistic complexity. Did my students understand what they were reading? How well did they comprehend the cultural issues at stake in our analyses? In order to assess students' ability to understand the materials they were reading, I organized the class around an extensive series of short oral presentations. This methodology also promoted the language goals for the course, requiring students to prepare and to use Spanish in

the classroom. Though assessment required a great deal of attention on my part, I was able to gauge students' language skills, to introduce vocabulary and the proper use of grammar even as I determined what information they had successfully understood and what needed to be reviewed, presented again or newly introduced in order to facilitate student learning. All readings, whether in English or Spanish, had to be summarized in Spanish (the only language spoken in the classroom). Students attempted to identify and highlight the most important facts in their readings through these short reports.

On average, students were required to give three short reports during the semester and one longer, more formal report on the final project in the last weeks of instruction. Instead of exams, which I felt would be counterproductive, I also required weekly written analyses of the material. Students on occasion would be required to write for twenty minutes in class on a given question but more often were able to take the question home, with instructions to write for no longer than twenty minutes. None of these analyses were expected to be investigative. They were meant to prove that students had indeed read the materials assigned and had given some thought to their cultural relevance. These short weekly essays also helped me to respond to students on an individual basis both in terms of their understanding of the material and in identifying and correcting recurring grammatical errors.

Beyond the need to address both language skills and content, perhaps the most useful and yet most problematic aspect of the course as I organized it was the idea of technology as an important

aspect of contemporary culture, both in Spain and in the United States. At the beginning of the semester, I created a course website on the Pomona College server. Having a course website is becoming much more frequent in universities today, though this was my first experience with creating a site and working with the World Wide Web within the context of the classroom in a day-to-day fashion. The website offered basic information on the course: syllabus, course description, etc. But its home page served primarily as a link to other websites in Spain, most notably sites for various media outlets: regional and national newspapers, radio, television, etc. I also included links to governmental institutions, political parties, and sites reflecting elite and popular culture (the Prado museum and Canal+'s top forty musical hits, for example). The choice of links was certainly somewhat arbitrary and informed by simple technological presence. It is unlikely that the web currently represents many aspects of subaltern culture. But even during the course of the semester, students discovered an increasing number of unusual and relevant sites.

It is impossible to avoid the impact of the Web on contemporary culture or to ignore its increasing importance in the dissemination of information. What is available varies widely in its pedagogical utility, but its very presence is culturally important in itself. The inclusion of technology into the course was, therefore, a very deliberate decision on my part. I felt that if I was going to introduce students to contemporary culture, technology would have to be a necessary component. By logging onto the site and using it as a port of entry to other useful websites in and about Spain, students would be re-



quired, to some degree, to become more aware of the impact of technology on contemporary culture even as they became more comfortable with its use. Students not only had to read materials off the web with frequency, they were also expected to learn some of the technology involved in order to produce a research project which would appear on the course's website at the end of the semester. This required that students learn the rudiments of hypertext mark-up language (html) and think about the way in which they wanted to organize the information in their final projects.

This part of the course was both the most useful and the most difficult for reasons that may be obvious. To begin, the ability to bring current events into the classroom was immensely stimulating. Students felt connected to learning in a way that was not always possible with a textbook. Not to know the outcome of an event, to look each day for developments, and to try to assess meaning was a very real challenge. For this very reason, the act of teaching was more difficult. I had to abandon many of the notions of control and authority that instructors generally wield in the classroom. I would not always be able to determine in advance the direction the discussion would take as an event unfolded in unexpected ways. For example, during the week in which the class discussed the various struggles for increased autonomy and independence, most notably in the Basque region, ETA stepped up its campaign against the Partido Popular by assassinating several local party officials in Andalusia. The information, graphically played out on the front pages of Spanish newspapers on the Internet, brought the issue home to the students in a way which could not have

been orchestrated in advance. The advantage was that the information gained relevance in its very immediacy and students' desire to understand grew dramatically. The disadvantage was that it required on occasion a substantial reworking of class plans in order to accommodate new information. The other important issue of the inclusion of this technology became more evident when students began work on their final projects, which counted for nearly a third of the course grade (oral reports counting for 40% and weekly essays for another 30%).

When it came time for students to select a topic for these projects, I encouraged them to be creative and independent, building on already existing disciplinary interests or on aspects of the course which most appealed to them. The resulting diversity of projects was extremely gratifying. Although the course had not addressed literature specifically, at least one student chose to research the writer Montserrat Roig as an exponent of "literatura femenina" and analyze her work as an important representation of the position of women in Spanish society. Another student chose to examine newspaper coverage of women in politics to determine the degree to which subtle sexual stereotyping might still be evident. One project focused on the cultural institution of the monarchy, noting its important role in contemporary politics and analyzing the various kinds of media coverage the royal family receives. Projects generally were divided into two groups, those specifically dealing with cultural production and those focused more on politics and history. Among those which addressed cultural production were analyses of the development of a home-grown versus imported pop music scene in Spain, the cul-



tural legacy of Spain's early twentieth-century composers, surrealist art, the art of Equipo 57, the films of Almodóvar and Saura, sports and nationalism, and the cultivation of national and regional identity through mass media. The more politically oriented projects included research into the history of the Spanish socialist party, the cultural claims of ETA, and attitudes of Basque youth toward independence and cultural identity. Some projects were specifically comparative. One examined Spanish flamenco and American blues music as popular expressions of culture while another compared American and Spanish attitudes toward pornography and the female body as a marketing tool.

The wide variety of projects led to some problems, however. Students often found it difficult to find appropriate materials. Faced with an end-of-the-semester due date, they did not often have the time to order materials through inter-library loan. I found myself having to provide not only strategies for finding information but also information itself, using my own borrowing privileges at research institutions and my own library of materials. Such diversity also meant that I needed to be willing to address topics and assess research outside my own field of expertise. It was a challenging and time-consuming process, but one which I believe ultimately expanded my own horizons considerably.

Technology also posed a significant challenge for me and the students. For their final projects, students had the option of either writing a traditional essay or creating a multimedia website. Eventually even traditional essays were translated into html and established as a site. Each student project was then to be linked with the course website so that long

after the semester students could examine the final projects for the course. I expected that only a few students with real interest in technology might take advantage of the opportunity to work with it, but I was surprised that more than three quarters of the class opted for multimedia projects on the web, many of which involved the use of informational links, graphics, photos and music. Some of the pages were extremely ambitious. To facilitate this aspect of the course, I arranged for a series of sessions apart from the regular classroom hours in order to instruct students on how to create web pages. One student commented to me later that his final project was the most demanding and interesting of projects he had yet faced in college, one which challenged his linear thinking processes in order to conceptualize a more fluid and interactive presentation of information. Other students, since their introduction to html in the course, have gone on to more involved uses of technology and have even found jobs building or maintaining sites at the college's computer center.

## Problems and Solutions

I do not want to give the impression that "The New Spain" was unproblematic or that I do not have some reservations about its structure. There certainly were problems and difficulties with this course. The next time I offer this course I will certainly make some fundamental changes. To that end, I would like to address my perceptions of the problems and discuss ways in which I hope to address them. Certainly there were problems relative to time and labor-intensity, mostly involving the use of technology and the gathering and evaluation of materials. But the

more serious problems involved the inclusion of theory into the undergraduate classroom and the failure to address directly the political nature of the course.

For me personally, the use of technology was just one aspect of the labor-intensive nature of the course. Learning how to create websites myself, and to assist students in their acquisition of that knowledge was a great demand on my time and energies. For those individuals already well-versed in these skills, such an addition into the structure of a course should pose no substantive problems. Indeed, I expect that the next time I teach "The New Spain" this aspect of its structure will be much easier. My experience with analyzing and assessing these types of projects will also lead to changes in my approach. Like my students, I have begun to rethink the linear exposition of ideas which is the heart of the college essay. In addition, the various kinds of information which can be gleaned from websites and their accuracy and legitimacy constitutes an important issue. While I do not yet feel comfortable addressing this problem, I recognize some of the inherent problems and dangers in relying too much on technology. This problem actually leads to another level of cultural analysis, a kind of cyber cultural studies, which, no doubt, will become a subject for important future discussions.

Also important in terms of time and energy were the accumulation and selection of materials to be used in class. Unfortunately I know of no solution to this problem. This type of course simply demands a high level of commitment to searching for relevant materials. The key word here, of course, is relevant, because the process of selection is one which is inextricably bound up with the political

and the ideological. Yet this problem does have a solution, and that is one which is related more closely to the presentation of theory. I mentioned earlier that I did not incorporate cultural studies theory directly into the structure of "The New Spain" other than to assign the important introductory essay in the Graham/Labanyi anthology. I focused more energy on presenting historical material in the beginning of class and less time on making the class's theoretical underpinnings visible to student analysis. As a result, I think some of the students understood cultural studies as a somewhat cloudy constellation of ideas and opinions without grasping its own contemporary context.

In future courses, I intend to make my own critical assumptions about culture more apparent. I would like to discuss more openly the history and development of cultural studies as a discipline and to place emphasis on the relationship between pedagogy, ideology and culture.<sup>6</sup> I had refrained from making this kind of a direct statement initially, concerned that this type of presentation might in fact confuse students and distract them from focusing on specific facts in Spanish history. I am now convinced that students are ready and able to deal with the intellectual issues involved in cultural studies, be it Adorno's concept of popular culture as an instrument of oppression, Gramsci's rethinking of that argument as a two-directional process of contestation, and contemporary theorists' advancement and development of the field.

More importantly, by not making the theoretical framework for such a course more transparent, there is a great risk of losing the intellectual drive and transformative power which cultural studies offers; it instead becomes converted "from a

form of radical opposition to the avant-garde of bourgeois hegemony" (Beverley 21), a process which seems to echo the concerns voiced earlier by J.E. Elliott. My solution, then, is to include more key essays and discussions of cultural studies into the course syllabus. By presenting cultural studies as a discipline during the course's first weeks and by referencing these issues as we move forward in our analysis of current events, I think it is possible to avoid a situation in which one "formalize[s] out of existence the critical questions of power, history, and politics" (Hall 286).

To conclude, I would briefly like to raise the issue of control and authority. It was not easy to relinquish the degree of control over the direction of this class as I might normally exercise with a course on language or literature. The unpredictability of current events, the challenge to analyze and find ways to relate news reports to their historical and cultural context established within the course was a significant challenge. But the response in the classroom and the resulting interest in Spain and Spanish culture more often than not made up for the investment. Discussions were animated and exciting for me as well as the students. Because the students and I so thoroughly enjoyed this course, and because of its enormous potential, I will offer "The New Spain" again as a regular part of our department's curriculum. What I have discovered in revisiting this experience and analyzing the structure and efficacy of the course is that the tensions which Stuart Hall describes as a necessary part of cultural studies were very much evident in this course's structure, even if they were not overtly identified as such. My reluctance to end our discussions and analyses with a definitive summary reflected the extreme difficulty

and, more to the point, the counterproductive nature of such an act. The refusal to arrive at our own master narrative in our discussion of contemporary Spanish culture was the result of those "shifting interests and methods" mentioned earlier in this essay. I have come to recognize that the course actually reproduced the theoretical tensions of cultural studies onto its pedagogical practices. This was not, I confess, a part of my original plan. It was simply a fortuitous result, one which I will not take for granted in future incarnations of "The New Spain."

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Stuart Hall has written that "the explosion of cultural studies along with other forms of critical theory in the academy represents a moment of extraordinarily profound danger." "Cultural Studies and its Theoretical Legacies" *Cultural Studies* (285).

<sup>2</sup>The issue of motivation is one which can never be satisfactorily addressed. But obviously my decision to offer this course was based both on professional concerns, namely addressing the need for better student preparation for upper division work, and personal ones, most notably enrollment figures and the identification of students who might focus more specifically on peninsular Spain instead of Latin America.

<sup>3</sup>The issue of elite vs. popular culture constitutes an important aspect of cultural studies theory. In specific reference to Spain, Stephanie Sieburth offers a fine overview of the development of the distinctions between popular and elite culture in the introduction to her book, *Inventing High and Low* (1-26).

<sup>4</sup>A senior member of my department, upon hearing of the new course, opined darkly, "It's the death of literature!" a prognosis which I am happy to say proved to be untrue if one considers that a majority of the students in this cultural studies course went on to take upper division literature courses. Of the sixteen students in the course, fully one fourth have gone on to declare majors in Spanish or Romance literatures. In addition, half of the

students enrolled eventually combined this course with a study-abroad experience in Spain.

<sup>5</sup> David Forgacs's essay is a useful presentation of Gramsci's development of the concept.

<sup>6</sup> The issue of teaching theory in the undergraduate classroom has been addressed quite well in several contemporary texts, for example, *Teaching Contemporary Theory to Undergraduates*. For recent essays which address the issue of pedagogy and cultural studies more specifically, see *Class Issues: Pedagogy, Cultural Studies and the Public Sphere*; *Pedagogy is Politics: Literary Theory and Critical Teaching*; and *Theory/Pedagogy/Politics*. To my knowledge there are few, if any, essays which address the incorporation of foreign language pedagogy with cultural studies theory.

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