

Antônio XERXENESKY

The Blind Don

I'll begin with a personal anecdote that will hopefully illustrate my point. The year was 2006, and I had just abandoned my Physics major, deciding to leave numbers and formulas behind, delving into literature instead. I chose Spanish Literature at Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul and, of course, in the very first semesters you *must* read *Don Quixote*. In fact, an entire semester is dedicated to the novel, since Cervantes is so important to understanding the whole canon of Spanish-written literature.

So, in the first scene that the famous Don mistakes windmills for giants, I asked my teacher, "Teacher, did you consider the fact that maybe Don Quixote has an eyesight issue? Like myopia? And that's why he always sees other stuff instead of the real thing? After all, back in the 17th century, glasses were not popular at all."

My teacher stared at me with a very serious face. And then collapsed in laughter. He said that only a Physics student would even consider such a thing. So for the rest of the semester, I was considered the nerd that tried to find scientific explanations instead of metaphorical ones. Four years later, I worked this theory into a short story.¹ Before writing it, I did some research to discover if anybody had that same interpretation. Apparently not. Of course, my theory was nonsense. And yet, I felt an extreme joy of inventing new interpretations for a novel that is many centuries old.

When it was *my* turn to teach *Don Quixote* to young students, I prepared a class by researching all of the ways that Cervantes's novel can be read. The Marxist way. The psychoanalytical one. The post-structuralist interpretation. Auerbach's close reading. Kafka's parable on Sancho Panza. The list was immense, and I knew that I had only scraped the surface. That is the point I'm trying to illustrate. *Don Quixote* may be one of our most *infinite* novels. The subjects it approaches are sanity and madness, fact and fiction, reality and imagination, the power of literature. And those subjects are far from exhausted.

Also, when preparing that class, I realized how *Quixote* was extremely ahead of its time. It is pure, unfiltered metafiction from the very first sentences. Trying to describe the narrative devices that Cervantes employs feels like describing a postmodernist novel, a Pynchon book. At the beginning of the second volume, the character Quixote reviews and evaluates the first book written about him, i.e., the one we just read, the first volume. Fact and fiction intermingle in a mind-blowing manner, like Cervantes is trying to point out that the world is made of books, of fictions.

¹ You can find the English translation of "Seizing Cervantes" by Antônio Xerxenesky online at <http://www.wordswithoutborders.org/article/seizing-cervantes>

So there I was, trying to figure out an easy way to teach very young students what metafiction—the literary device that makes fiction conscious of itself and basically informs the reader that what he is reading is fiction—was and how *Quixote* was a trendsetter. Then I remembered *Scream*. Yes, the teenage horror movie. The beginning of *Scream 2* takes place inside a movie theater, where the characters watch the movie based on the events of the first movie. Basically, the *exact* same narrative device employed by Cervantes, just a few centuries later. And while *Scream* is considered a postmodernist horror movie, *Don Quixote* has the “classic” stamp that many young students look with derision.

But most of all, I believe *Don Quixote* must be read as a celebration. We are living in times absolutely obsessed with realism, with the re-creation of actual events with little fictional intervention, including in literature—metafiction was overshadowed by autofiction; Karl Ove Knausgaard is the biggest literary sensation—and Cervantes’s work remains as a monument of imagination, a celebration of fiction and lying, of the pleasure of inventing stories and seeing giants when all the other serious people, with their perfect eyesight and their well adjusted glasses, will see only windmills.