

# A Conversation with Andrew Brown: Mashing Up Latin American Literature, Science, Technology, and the Post-human.

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On Thursday and Friday, February 4-5, 2010, Professor J. Andrew Brown (Washington University in St. Louis) visited the Spanish and Portuguese Department at UCLA. On Thursday he gave a talk titled “Mashups and Digital Aesthetics in Edmundo Paz Soldán and Mike Wilson Reginato,” and on Friday he led the seminar “Cyborgs and Soundtracks: Studying Technology and Underground Culture in Ricardo Piglia’s *La ciudad ausente*.” We took this opportunity to ask Professor Brown about his innovative work on science, literature, and popular culture. As Brown highlights in the interview, despite its current popularity, true interdisciplinary work is rare. This is what Brown has achieved throughout his career, and it makes his research fascinating both in terms of content and methodology.

**Mester:** How did you become interested in the relationship between science and literature, film, and pop culture, particularly in the Argentine context?

Andrew Brown: Mostly through life experiences. As for my interest in Argentina, after high school I lived there for a couple years, mostly in the province of Buenos Aires. So as I came back and started my undergraduate education I had an affinity for all things Argentine and an interest in learning all about what was happening there.

The focus on science and technology actually came at the University of Oklahoma. They have a very strong History of Science program and one of the best History of Science libraries in the country, which is unexpected, but apparently a very rich oil person had a

hobby and donated his rather extensive collection. So as I was moving through my Spanish major, I had a wonderful undergraduate major advisor, Mary Davis, who told me that I needed to take a survey of the history of science. So I did. And it was taught by Pamela Gossin, who has a dual PhD in History of Science and English Literature. I ended up taking a series of courses with her, first from the perspective of history of science but also of thinking about how science and literature interrelate in the development of ideas.

In fact, I ended up as an undergraduate working quite a bit in that area. I think this is where I learned how to be a graduate student. They gave me a carrel in the library and I could poke around a first edition of Newton's *Principia* and all the other things there. I took some graduate courses there with the professors. They let me present a paper on Borges and the scientist. So what I wanted to do was really set as an undergraduate.

And when I got to the University of Virginia, there was not really anyone that worked in science and literature studies, though I had a very good historian of science on my thesis committee. And I just kept at it. Every time I would read, I would notice, especially in Argentine literature, that I was seeing a series of references to different kinds of sciences. And I think that my preparation in the history of science helped me to think about, for example, phrenology as a science in the nineteenth century rather than automatically dismiss it as something that is in the realm of circus performers now. So that is really where that came from.

Moving onto technology, my work has really followed a pattern of working on a large project and then finding a text that points in another direction. Moving into technology and cyborgs, the novel *Rayuela* was really central. I was working on it from the perspective of Cortázar's fascination with his own brand of quantum mechanics, which he didn't understand very well but he thought was clearly the realm of *cronopios*. He also has this whole very anti-cybernetic discourse that he laid out in the novel and that created some tension when you think about how pleased he was with the Rayuel-O-Matic in that article that he published in *La vuelta al día en 80 mundos*. So I started studying that, and it combined with some theoretical readings I had been doing on cybernetics and literature. That kind of set me on the path of looking for and thinking about cyborgs as an expression of the post-human in Latin American texts. In that project there are

more Argentine texts than any others but I also tried to expand to writers from a number of other countries, as well.

**M:** On the subject of cyborgs, do you find that there are real-life or real-world implications of the post-human identity developed in fiction? Or is it a purely imaginary or symbolic identity? It's clear the texts use elements of theory, science and politics from the real world to achieve certain things within the fictional world, but can we talk about it being a two way street in terms of something coming out and impacting the world outside of the text?

**AB:** Well, let's talk about scientific discourse and the post-human in two parts. I think in the Argentine example you can see a situation in which science is certainly informing some of the things people are writing. But especially in the nineteenth century there is a situation in which the people that are writing, such as Rivadavia and Sarmiento, are actually trying to use a literary or a political discourse to shape what is interpreted as science. So, if you look at the popular references to phrenology over the nineteenth century, Rivadavia is writing about phrenology as an authoritative scientific discourse in a series of articles that he's publishing in *La Abeja Argentina*. Sarmiento picks up on it and, again, uses it as a basis for some of his physical descriptions of Facundo Quiroga. And, Lucio Mansilla later on comes into a political and cultural climate in which phrenology has been set up as an authoritative touchstone.

This, then, suggests a situation in which not only is popular science serving as a source for cultural authority in writings, but these cultural and political writings are also propping up the authority of phrenology. For that reason, by the time we arrive at Lucio Mansilla in 1870 there aren't very many people that are actually thinking that phrenology is a good way to think about physiology (although there were certainly those who stayed behind).

Going further, take for example Cortázar, we have an Argentine writer whose experience with science is basically what he's reading in the pages of *Le Monde*. He's looking at the science section and thinking, "Oh, some new particle has been found that seems to travel backwards in time or shows that reality is not as balanced as we would think it was." He was especially excited about the *eta* meson particle that was discovered in the 1960s and that suggested

that matter and antimatter are not exactly in balance (*La vuelta al día en ochenta mundos*, 18). That, then, became a basis for thinking about a world out of balance and the kinds of irrationality that he and his group of *cronopios* were especially fond of. The dynamic there is interesting in that at this point in history, science is going on and accomplishing things, producing culturally significant knowledge. And then there is the filter of popular reporting between the science and what Cortázar reads, Cortázar then serving as another filter as he writes his essay. But next come the Cortázar fans who are now seeing and appropriating a certain kind of science as justification for their own kind of personal philosophies. In that sense, for these people, science is not so much what's occurring in the laboratory or in the brain of the physicist, but it's what's in the pages of the newspaper, what's happening as they consume it. And then that helps them justify certain modes of thinking, certain behavior. With all this, then, we arrive at these moments in which literature certainly is, at least on a popular level, shaping the way that science is thought about.

With the post-human it's a different situation. There are texts that identify themselves as science fiction. In these the post-human becomes a metaphor for a whole series of different things, such as the fears of dehumanization that appear in the 1950s and 1960s, especially from a Marxist point of view that capital and technology are wed and that they pose a significant threat to humanists. In those types of narratives the robot or cyborg appears as a menacing, threatening figure. Certainly in the US many of the 1950s science fiction films are all about humans beating robots as an expression of the hope that the humans will, in fact, beat the robots. So in those kinds of texts it works mostly on a metaphorical level, either in the sense of being scared of technology, or of a more cyber-punk approach to things in which science is good and we should move toward that.

What happens, though, is that humanity certainly has always adapted itself to the different kinds of tools and prosthetics we use. The way your fingers shape themselves around pencils and pens, and the way you think when you write, are already kinds of prosthetic situations that change the way the body works. But nowadays with the ubiquitous nature of technology and the different kinds of technology that directly affect the way we think, the way we remember, the way we write—and even in situations in which we're not talking about prosthetic arms or pacemakers or whatever—we're living in a

situation in which human identity is constantly mediated by technology. And that, then, creates a situation in which a number of texts that are not science fiction at all but are trying to be realistic have to include post-human elements if they are going to get to a sense of what makes identity function. I've been very interested in how Latin American texts that do not necessarily present themselves as science fiction think through that melding of the organic and the mechanical, but in a Latin American context where the mechanical is mainly coded as foreign. So in these situations the omnipresence of technology is conditioning certain kinds of human identity. But they are never able to completely get away from the metaphor either, so your two-way street is quite clear there. Think about cell phones, computers, and other things that have changed the way you interact with the world. But at the same time you still have this sense that there is a metaphorical relationship: you think about the human as the organic victim of the mechanical dictatorship, or the human as the Latin American organic responding to being threatened by the technology that comes because of neo-liberalism and different manifestations of globalist policies. And so both things are happening at the same time in those kinds of texts.

**M:** This is something I wanted to ask you more about because I've been fascinated by your book *Test Tube Envy* and your articles on Piglia.<sup>1</sup> I wonder how this post-human identity works in contexts other than Argentina. Perhaps you could also touch on the works that you talked about yesterday.<sup>2</sup> Do these references to technology, these mash-ups, dialogue with the context in a way that shades how text is read overall like the way that Piglia's cyborgs do?

**AB:** With Piglia, if *Rayuela* was the bridge text between *Test Tube Envy* and cyborgs in Latin America, *La ciudad ausente* becomes the bridge text between the cyborgs and my thinking about digital aesthetics and underground music in narrative. So with the cyborgs part, I think each country is developing it in similar and different ways. But more than with countries, I'm working with particular artists, so it's hard to generalize from any single individual. I think that one of the stronger cases I have—at least in a series of different Argentine texts—is the idea of what I call the cyborg as a scarred survivor. That is, a cyborg that is subversive, much like a Haraway cyborg, but that

is subversive for reasons that are very different from why Haraway celebrates the possibility of the cyborg in her *A Cyborg Manifesto* and some of her other writings. That is, for Haraway a cyborg becomes powerful in the way that it erases its origins, creates hybridities, and destroys boundaries, which becomes very useful in her brand of feminist questioning of hierarchies. And I think many of the cyborgs that have appeared in certain elements of cyberpunk and in other cultural expressions work really well with Haraway. However, in the Latin American context and specifically in Piglia, there is a cyborg—even a female cyborg—that is subversive and powerful in this way. But it is precisely because she doesn't erase her origins that she has strength. She is powerful and threatens the government because she constantly reminds and remembers the origin. Her origin, and I wrote about this in one of the Piglia articles, becomes the site of procreation of the Argentine cyborg when the victim is tortured by the cattle prod, by the *picana*. And so the paternalistic, mechanical state is engendering a cyborg on the victim's body. At the same time, the victim's body survives. And it survives in part because of the mechanical prostheses whose need is occasioned by the torture the victim experiences. In that sense, there is a traumatized body that does not go away, and it doesn't go away because it is able to continue living through its prosthesis. This can be seen in *La ciudad ausente*, in which Elena appears both as the psychiatric patient in "Los nudos blancos" and as Elena the wife of Macedonio, who experiences a kind of trauma and is then able to continue because of the mechanical elements that are there.

This can be seen in other places as well. In *Pubis Angelical* by Manuel Puig, and especially in the film adaptation of it that Raúl De La Torre did later, again there is a woman who is traumatized psychologically by her experiences leading up to the coup. At the beginning of the film she is shown very clearly receiving this mechanical heart that at once keeps her living but also testifies to the absence of the real heart that is taken from her by the experience. In another film, which is not science-fiction at all, *Tiempo de revancha* by Adolfo Aristarain, a guy fakes the trauma of not being able to speak. He carries around a speak-and-spell and a little chalkboard that he uses to communicate, which become for him prosthetic tongues that allow him to speak, but that also create a visual image of the human who has been traumatized by, in this case, a multi-national corporation (which is a very thinly veiled reference to the dictatorship). This comes

up again in a novel like *Las islas* by Carlos Gamerro, in which there is a woman described as a kind of a battery that emanates electricity to a guy who is a hacker and who has metal in his head from a wound that he received in the Malvinas War. When he encounters her sexually, the lights are all out and he can feel the energy coming off of her. As he turns the lights on, he realizes that the energy is coming out of the scars that she has from the *picana* torture, which has converted her into a kind of a battery. She remains, and her body continues to testify to what happened to her. This ultimately subverts the desire to forget and the desire to move on.

And that's something that you see principally in Argentina. If you move to other countries it happens in different ways and in different authors. In a text like *Tajos* by the Uruguayan poet and novelist Rafael Courtoisie, expressions of the post-human are based more on the experience of the human in a neo-liberal culture. A man who is already mentally unstable goes all the way around the bend with the death of his grandmother, and he ends up on a killing spree that starts with fruits and vegetables in a supermarket and goes on to Mickey Mouse and then to a couple of actual humans. But he is limited by his inability to understand the ways that we fuse with media technology. There are scenes with telephones, scenes with cable television, scenes in which he is not able to parse news reports from commercials. There are moments of creation of a national subjectivity that's based on us using television culture as part of the collective unconscious. So that's, again, post-human, but in a very different situation, even though there is still a wariness of the implications of technological identity. In Edmundo Paz-Soldán's work elements of that combine with the fact that in Bolivia you can more quickly understand the links between neo-liberalism and dictatorship because Hugo Banzer serves as a bridge having participated directly in both eras. And Paz Soldán has incorporated elements of the post-human that actually deal with it a little bit differently, but he's still thinking about dictatorship. In his work, though, the cyborg mostly appears as the result of the human being getting too close to dictatorship. Rather than the victim turning into cyborg, the citizen becomes an accomplice of the dictatorship and is then turned into a kind of cyborg because of their too-close proximity to the machine of power. And that's something then that happens both in a dictatorship and in neo-liberalism.

And then there are other authors who are really just interested in expressing human identity in the 1990s and 2000s. An author like Alberto Fuguet, for example, doesn't really set out to write anything about post-humans, but his characters and even the very discourse that he uses in his narrative are based on thinking about human identity as a mixture of technology, media, and organic subjectivity. So on the plot level, characters think about brains as hard disks or think about eyes and memory as cameras and VCRs. "*Por favor rebobinar*" becomes, then, the invitation to rewind the cassette and to remember. But there are also moments in which the narrative voice talks about characters who walk in and scan the room, or "*escanean la sala.*" Even as he conceives of how people act, he uses verbs that lead to that kind of thinking. And there it's not that this is good or bad; it just is. And that's an important element, as well.

You also have elements from post-human theory in the US and Europe. You have an important part of gender and, with Donna Haraway, the feminist possibilities of the cyborg. And then in Latin America there are a series of novels that think about gender and the post-human from a series of different perspectives. Although surprisingly many of those novels, even those written by women who have a very clear agenda in that regard, are very suspicious of the post-human. In a novel like *Cielos de la tierra* by Carmen Bullosa or *Lóbulo* by Eugenia Prado, there is a distinct wariness about the implications of becoming post-human or mixing with that. Alicia Borinsky is a good counter example where the cyborg is embraced as a way to strengthen feminine power.

Thinking about digital aesthetics and underground music, Piglia loves to turn the reader into a detective, and in *La ciudad ausente* he presents a kind of hidden sound track that consists sometimes of references to a particular band, sometimes references to a fictitious band, but a fictitious band that is made up of references that get you to real bands. And this is what that article about cyborgs, the neo-baroque, and the post-punk was, where a series of music references begin with the main character listening to Crime and the City Solution, the Australian band, as he goes out of the city toward the museum. And then there's an encounter with this Irish band called The Hunger that's singing a song called "The Reptile Enclosure." The lead singer is Molly Malone, which is clearly fictitious, and it's a moment when Piglia is pouring in *Ulysses* and a whole series of other

things. But given the kind of genre of the soundtrack introduced with *Crime and the City Solution* you arrive at the post-punk proto-goth group Bauhaus through the name *The Hunger* (an early '80s vampire film that features Bauhaus prominently), which takes you to a series of different post-punk groups that were big fans of JG Ballard ("The Reptile Enclosure" is the name of a JG Ballard story). This kind of hidden chorus surfaces and strengthens the explicit reference at the beginning. So what I was struck by in this is that these Argentine texts present the idea of these *nudos blancos* that are not only an image but also a structuring element in the novel. You get to a moment and work through the *nudo*, and then suddenly it expands to a whole larger memory. And these *nudos blancos*, then—and this I need to credit to Lois Parkinson Zamora—are actually quite similar to Alejo Carpentier's ideas of the *núcleos proliferantes* and the neo-baroque. These moments that are there and suddenly flower and expand in the neo-baroque text. I think what's surprising there is the fact that Argentina is not a country that ever participated in the neo-baroque in ways that Mexico or the Caribbean did. But here this text can certainly be read that way. And that offers up as a structuring device something that is really quite similar to some of the work that earlier writers were doing on the Baroque.

And so I'm interested, then, in the function of how those references work, what they're doing on a cultural level, how to understand them within global culture and the way that different authors participate in that. It's also something that is just near and dear: these post-punk references are all music that I did and still do listen to. They're the music of my adolescence, and they have become an important reference in Piglia, Fresán, Edmundo Paz Soldán, Mike Wilson Reginato, and indeed that whole group of young Chilean writers that Wilson is a part of.

**M:** What are the implications in terms of authority when they use these references? Today everyone has access to pop culture if they want it through the internet, and there is not such a large division in terms of social class. But, when Fuguet and others look back at the 80s, are they exercising a sort of class authority by making those references? I feel that there could be a class reference there, which is quite different in Latin America than in the US. It occurs to me this could

**be linked with the way that the Argentine authors gain authority as they relate to science.**

AB: The music project is still very early on in its development. I think certainly in Fuguet, even when he is writing even in the 90s and even though he talks about the internet and all of those things, his idea of musical connoisseurship is still very based in the 80s. If you were going to know about that stuff you had to be “in the know,” you had to know who to talk to, you had to know where to look, you had to be connected to the different underground distribution channels. In his narrative he certainly wears that as a definition of cool, and then becomes, I think, in certain contexts a source of cool in the sense that you read Fuguet, you figure out he is authoritative, and then if you can get to understand his references then you can get to be like him. There is a whole cult of personality that’s going on there, as well. I don’t know that he does it on purpose, but it’s certainly there, and I think it’s a credit to him. And that’s really how it was in the 80s.

Nowadays it’s more whether you decide to do it or not. Now you don’t have to do all of the legwork, all of the connection-making that we had to do in that time. Certainly it’s very different in Latin America, but I can understand a little bit because of being a teenager in a very small town in a state that wasn’t terribly well-known for being tapped into popular culture. I can understand the difficulties of trying to be cool, or on the cutting edge, when you don’t have as ready access as you might have had if you were living in New York City, Los Angeles, or London. And I think that still plays a part in the way that Fuguet writes. At the same time, when you get to an author like Mike Wilson in whose novel there is a direct invitation to look this stuff up on the internet, it is a different kind of situation. From a marketing standpoint, it actually suggests a way for certain novels that are quite difficult or depend heavily on references to actually become more accessible for people who are willing to read novels in a different way. Because ultimately you don’t have to walk down to the library or find somebody who actually knows the stuff to explain it to you. You can just look it up and enrich the reading that way. So it becomes a different dynamic there. Alan Liu has a very good book called *The Laws of Cool*, which is good for thinking theoretically about a lot of these ideas. There is an idea of the authority of connoisseurship and the use of pop culture knowledge as a way to create communities that

either include or exclude. I think that maybe the membership dues are cheaper now than they were.

**M:** I think that in Fuguet you can feel that the price of accessing that culture wasn't just the legwork. You also had to have cash at a certain point to get it. The character in *Mala Onda* travels, he goes to Brazil, and that's how he gets some of his access to things, which required a certain level of social status that not everyone had. I agree, it's much different today, it's more of a choice.

**AB:** And it creates a strange dynamic with Fuguet. If it was written under that first paradigm it's now consumed under the second.

**M:** Your groundbreaking work is really opening up new approaches that future scholars can use and apply in different ways. What do you think are some of the major challenges for critics when considering these intersections between technology, literature, and culture?

**AB:** For all of the lip service that we give to interdisciplinarity nowadays, true interdisciplinarity is really hard to achieve. So I think that one of the biggest problems is the boundaries that still exist between different kinds of disciplines. And not just when we talk about departments or schools within a university, but the very ways that we think about how we produce usable knowledge is very different. It's important to be able to situate yourself at the boundary and think about new ways in which knowledge can come to be, either within the literary text or in the kinds of dialogues that happen as you put science and literature into dialogue. But being able to cross those disciplinary lines is difficult.

Another issue comes up with the number of articles there are where somebody independently "discovers" that Borges apparently anticipated Hugh Everett's many-worlds theory. I guess somebody reads a book like *In Search of Schrodinger's Cat* by John Gribbin and thinks, "Hey, this is exactly like 'El jardín de los senderos que se bifurcan,' I'm going to write an article on that." First of all, this kind of repeating article happens either because the whole publishing process sometimes takes a few years and so you have several articles appearing at once that were written independently, or, and hopefully

this second case isn't true, but perhaps people aren't doing as much research as they should. But you get these moments in which they say, "Oh wow, look," that produce a kind of show-and-tell criticism that is ultimately very damaging to people who do interdisciplinary work. And I think the exact same thing happens with cyborgs: people read a very interesting, compelling text like *A Cyborg Manifesto* and then go out on a cyborg hunt. And again in Latin American literature they say, "This is the theory, this is what I found, isn't that cool?" I think that becomes ultimately very destructive because, quite bluntly, it doesn't produce very good criticism. You have to go beyond show-and-tell to thinking about it seriously and to understanding that, as Katherine Hayles says, literature is a unique laboratory for studying how scientific and technological ideas form. Literature is not simply a place where you see scientific and technological ideas replicate themselves. And so it is important to be able to prepare yourself so that you're confident enough to discuss both science and science as it is popularly portrayed; to understand the difference between the two; to understand what literature brings to it; to either think dialectically about literature and science so that you're producing very interesting syntheses or to understand, as well, that this is an important theoretical opportunity. When we put these things into dialectic or dialogue, we're getting a chance to think new things, and ultimately maybe to mash up Latin American literature, theories of science, technology, and the post-human in productive ways that give us something that is new in both fields.

## Notes

1. "Cyborgs, Post-Punk, and the Neobaroque: Ricardo Piglia's *La ciudad ausente*." *Comparative Literature* 61.3 (Summer 2009): 316-326.

"Life Signs: Ricardo Piglia's Cyborgs." *Science, Literature, and Film in the Hispanic World*. Ed. Jerry Hoeg and Kevin Larsen. New York: Palgrave, 2006. 87-107.

2. "Mashups and Digital Aesthetics in Edmundo Paz Soldán and Mike Wilson Reginato." Talk given February 4, 2010, at UCLA.