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Reception of "Mecanoscrit" by secondary school students: a case study

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Manuel de Pedrolo, an emblematic and prolific author of Catalan Literature, marked a milestone in the world of literature for young adult readers for decades, thanks to *Mecanoscrit del segon origen* (1974, English translation *Typescript of the Second Origin*, 2016), one of the most widely read books in Catalan, which remains popular even today. Hailed as a Catalan classic by its many reviewers, and considered a best-seller, *Mecanoscrit* was Pedrolo's most widely sold book.¹ This editorial phenomenon lives on because the book is easy to find in publishers' catalogues, on library and resource centre selections, canons, and lists and collections for young adult readers' classics in Catalan. *Mecanoscrit* has never been out of print, and has even reached young people through different forms of adaptation (comic, theatre, internet, radio, television and cinema).²

This article discusses how today's young adult readers receive the book and make it theirs, and analyses why it draws the attention of adolescents and continues to captivate them. What follows is a case study that focuses on the reception of *Mecanoscrit del segon origen* by a group of students (15-16-years-old) in their final fourth year of E.S.O. (Compulsory Secondary Education) at a secondary school in Barcelona.³ Here I show what 21st century readers are like and how they make the book current and relevant, from three viewpoints: reader profile; comprehension and interpretation of the text and lastly, the readers' involvement and how they identify with the book. First, however, we will look at how the *Mecanoscrit* phenomenon came about.

1. The Phenomenon of *Mecanoscrit* in Secondary Education

At the beginning of the 1970s, enjoying full literary consolidation and maturity, Pedrolo won many awards and had a huge following of readers who awaited his new books. He was 55-years-old when he wrote his science-fiction novel, *Mecanoscrit del segon origen*. The following year he published a collection of stories of the same genre, *Trajecte final* [*Final Trajectory*] (1974). Oddly, even though neither was aimed at teenagers, both were soon considered books for young adult readers.

Josep M. Castellet, chief editor of Edicions 62, chose to publish *Mecanoscrit* in the prestigious young adult reader series, El Trapezi [The Trapeze]. Pedrolo accepted the offer because he was tempted by the young adult reader audience, even though he hadn't even considered the novel's audience, as he confessed to Maurici Serrahima:

I'm pleased you found *Mecanoscrit* interesting. The idea of including the book in the series, El Trapezi, was Castellet's. I wrote to him without really considering the 'target audience'. I only wanted it to appear to have been written, more or less, by a girl. A somewhat special girl, yes, but above all by a young person. By the way, I have already received the first objections; I have been criticized for 'killing' Didac! I think it's a

good sign because it means that the readers identify with the characters.
(in Garcia 724)⁴

Pedrolo said it himself; the book's protagonist was young and the young adult readers could easily identify with the characters, in other words, *Mecanoscrit* fulfilled the basic requirements of juvenile fiction. These characteristics, together with other aspects of the book itself—such as a content that highlights universal and timeless values and the science-fiction genre—and a formal structure making it readable, simple and plausible—such as the repetitive beginning and the title of each notebook/chapter—, led it to becoming a best-seller.

Similarly, a series of circumstantial factors also favored the book's success. The end of Franco's rule was a historic moment and marked a before and after in Catalan society. The Catalan language was introduced in schools and with it the need for books that would be of interest to young people. The first generation to read El Trapezi's edition, who later became teachers, recommended the book and this is how the wheel began to turn at the end of the 1970s. The popularity of the book increased and re-editions began to appear in 1978 and *Mecanoscrit* was indeed received with enormous enthusiasm. This success coincided with the extension of compulsory education by the National Law on Education of 1970. This included a literary education focused on text analysis—based on close reading—and required school libraries to be available. Therefore, compulsory, prescriptive and optional reading was established over the following decades.

The different education reforms since the 1970s have not affected the presence of *Mecanoscrit* in the classroom. Pedrolo's novel has resisted recent contradictory laws well, such as the Organic Act on Education, LOE (2006)⁵ and the controversial, currently blocked, bill by Minister Wert (Act on the Improvement of the Quality of Education, LOMCE, 2013), which aimed to diminish the importance of Literature. In any event, more than forty years after its original publication, *Mecanoscrit* continues to be re-issued and is still extremely popular. During school year 2015-16 it was on the recommended reading list in 160 Catalan schools and 41 schools in Valencia and the Balearic Islands (Geli 8).

If we look at the different editions, we will see that in 1976 *Mecanoscrit* was re-issued in the general pocket series El Cangur [The Kangaroo] and later in others, such as the special edition issued by "laCaixa" and Edicions 62 (1986). *Mecanoscrit* remained in El Cangur as part of the Manuel de Pedrolo Library (until 1996), appearing also in the Basic Library of *El Periódico* (2001). Currently, it can be found in the collection labutxaca [the pocket] by Grup 62 (2002) and in the hardback edition of El Balancí [The Swing] by Edicions 62 (2005). The trilingual limited, non-commercial edition by the Institut d'Estudis Ilerdencs (2016) was published to commemorate Barcelona's Eurocon.

At the same time, during the 1990s—coinciding with the education reform that extended compulsory primary schooling to 16 years of age (Organic Act on the General Organization of the Education System, LOGSE, 1990) and promoted compulsory reading—new school and young adult reader editions were published. A prologue and teaching guide by Carme Ballús was included in the edition available from El Cangur Plus, later simply called Plus, as part of the Butxaca/El Cangur collection (2001). *Mecanoscrit* was also published in Odissea d'Empúries by Grup62 (2000), in the current series by Educació 62, Educaula62 (2006)⁶, and in the Clàssics de la Literatura Juvenil series by Edicions 62 (2013) with no teaching resources. The Universitat de Barcelona, in its series Publicacions i Edicions and Eumo Editorial, published a simplified version for the Català Fàcil collection (2008).

With regard to the different editions of the book, we have seen that *Mecanoscrit* was initially published in a young adult readers' collection; over the years, however, there has clearly been a certain disorder, as at the same time Pedrolo's novel has been included in general collections (in other words, for adults). This is the result of different scholarly criteria, specific historical moments in publishing (for years children's editions have been confused with pocket editions) and specific teaching requirements (Díaz-Plaja 138).

2. The “Manuel de Pedrolo, Past and Present” Project: Context and Development

What follows is a description of the details of the project “Manuel de Pedrolo, Past and Present”. The Bernat Metge Institute is a school in Sant Martí de Provençals, in La Verneda (Sant Martí), a metropolitan district of Barcelona. The social fabric is comprised of the working class that took in immigrants from all over Spain during the 1950s and 1960s. Currently, the majority of students at the school are immigrants from South America, followed by Pakistan, China and Eastern European countries. There are approximately 450 scholars, mainly from families with a medium to low sociocultural level; approximately 50% are immigrants or were born in Catalonia to immigrant parents.

During the 2011-2012 school year, a group of fourth year secondary education⁷ or E.S.O. students at Bernat Metge were involved in a broad study regarding the school library: the education innovation project, “puntedu”⁸. The project was developed from two perspectives: 1) that of the school, with a literary exhibition (focusing on the importance of libraries), educational proposals and “Manuel de Pedrolo, past and present” guided tours⁹ (accompanied by a video with the same title), as well as other events; and 2) that of the classroom, as part of the Catalan Language and Literature subject, by actively involving students in the exhibition and video, and at the same time developing projects dedicated to raising awareness about the author and the reception of the science-fiction works by Pedrolo, *Mecanoscrit del segon origen* and *Trajecte final* among young readers. Information was gathered

during the second school term and part of the third, and focused on the opinions and evaluations of the students using open-ended (subjective, with their own perception and short comments) and close-ended (objective, with numbers and percentages) response surveys. The qualitative research only enabled a reduced amount of data to be collected, which was then extrapolated to the group as a whole.

2.1 Reception of *Mecanoscrit* by Secondary School Students

Trying to find out how young students in a specific space and during an established time frame relate to *Mecanoscrit del segon origen*, making it current and relevant to them, is complex. It is even more so if the objective is to analyze the type of reading experience of young people because this is based, as Manresa explains, on “the reader’s self-image of his/her own experience, on the register of reader statements about the activity or on the assessment and/or opinion of specific texts through the reader’s discourse” (*L’univers lector adolescent*, 128). In this regard, we adhere to Manresa. She organizes the assessment discourse and opinions on the readings into categories, which in turn are classified according to the relationship that the arguments have with the text as a literary artifice and the reader (Manresa, *L’univers lector* 131), also assessing the use of literary metalanguage and the abstraction of arguments.

Thus, the study was organized according to two aspects: 1) that of the actual text (comprehension and interpretation) and 2) based on the text (reader interpretation and identification). The categories that Manresa presents in another work, *Els hàbits lectors dels adolescents [Adolescent reading habits]* (515-516), and which are used to analyze the data gathered for the text-based aspect are the following: experiential level, relating to the vital and daily experience of the reader; relational level, implicitly linked to the texts read, and textual level, relating explicitly to the text. It must be said that the assessments and opinions outside the text stem from the personal and social universe of the students and from their experiences (education, personal and reading). As Colomer and Manresa argue in *Lectures adolescents [Adolescent readings]*:

(...) when adolescents talk about what they have read they do not know how to apply a literary metalanguage of a specific entity, criteria of genre or historic period or a hierarchical relationship, therefore the assessment system is based on real or projected criteria (“it seems real” or “is a true story”, “it’s as if it were happening to you”). This ultimately reveals, therefore, a *lack of operability* in literary learning, as the two reading systems are preserved separately and once students have left school, literary practices do not benefit from school years. (131, original emphasis)

Therefore, when adolescents give an opinion about books they base it on their own experience, connected to reality; they remove them from the literary text and assess them based on projection or identification criteria. Similarly, reading habits also involve relationships with the reader's social circle.

Lastly, it is essential when presenting this case study to provide a picture of the reader, in other words, the reader profile, which focuses on readers' preferences: interest in reading, reader tastes, subject and adaptation preferences; books read over the past year, reading frequency compared to the previous year, influence of surroundings on the selection of a book, parents' reading habits and their relationship with the internet and social networks; as well as their main hobbies.

In what follows, we will detail the analysis of: 1) the reader profile; 2) aspects of the literary text: textual and paratextual analysis (argument or subject, structure, tense, mode, voice, setting, characters, science-fiction elements, titles and sub-headings) and 3) aspects based on the literary text: current and relevant, cultural references, emotions, and preferences and recommendations.

Thanks to the data gathered I was able to profile the reception that the work had among the students and, at the same time, discover their communicative linguistic competence in order to prevent possible problems with the identification of the tense, distance from the mode or viewpoint and narrative voice. I was also able to discover whether they understood the vocabulary and comprehended the text and the argument correctly and find out if they have an intertextual ability (not only literary) for creating connections and constellations between references of any type (video, musical, recreational, literary, encyclopedic...). In addition, I was able to establish whether they have a generic ability to understand if an utterance is fiction or not, and to comprehend the narrative structure of the book, and finally, whether or not they have an ideological competence with basic knowledge and an open and receptive attitude.

2.2 Reader Profile

When asked about their interest in reading, 20% of the students declared that they read habitually, 16% that they do not and 64% were undecided, claiming that they like reading according to the type of book. The number of students against reading is, therefore, high. The data about how many books they had read the previous year, apart from compulsory readings, shows that 52% read between 1 and 2 books, 28% more than 2 and 4% did not read any books at all. The reading frequency of the students with regard to the previous year shows that 52% read the same amount, 12% read more and 20% read even less (the rest did not respond). Among the aspects most highly valued about a book, 20% said that they need to be interested in the subject and 16% value the entertainment factor. However, 44% chose several options,

with entertainment being the most common, followed by the book being interesting and fun.

With regard to the subject or genre of the book most valued by those surveyed, 4% prefer mystery and similarly 4% like reading science fiction, whilst the rest said that they like many different genres. With regard to the adaptation phenomenon and whether or not they watch film adaptations of books, 24% answered that they do, 12% do not and 48% watch them sometimes. Among the films they have seen and value are *The Hunger Games* (32%), *Harry Potter* (8%) and the Spanish teen film *Tengo ganas de ti* [*Hungry for you*] (8%). There is a discernible increase in this trend and those who are undecided base their interest in the book on cinema listings.

With regard to positive reading recommendations, in other words, the specific agents who influence the selection of a book they usually like, it is seemingly likely that the lack of interest in reading is related to the lack of recommendations; among those who read little, books are recommended by friends. A relevant factor is that young students do not value their teachers' opinions with regard to reading recommendations, which is related to the fact that schools tend to promote required readings and rarely reading for pleasure. The same occurs with parents, who are not considered a positive reading influence, a phenomenon that, as we shall see, is closely related to their own reading habits.

Families do in fact have some influence on the acquisition of reading habits and in this regard, 40% of those surveyed stated that their parents read, 36% said that they do not and 8% answered that they do sometimes. This could be linked to whether or not the family has books at home, 40% said they do, which corresponds with 40% of parents who read and 44% said that they do not, a figure that is not far off that from the 36% of parents who do not read.

We also asked students if they have their own book collection. In this regard the majority do (76%), only 8% do not (the rest did not reply). These figures confirm that young students have books but either these are not what they like reading or they have read them in the past but have not changed them because their interest in reading isn't particularly high.

The entire group had access to the internet and therefore to new kinds of digital readings. The majority connect to the internet using their home computer (72%), their mobile (48%) or both (40%). It appears that the connection frequency is not that high¹⁰, 44% of the students use the internet for just 1-2 hours, whilst 16% do so for 2-3 hours and only 8% connect more often and for longer –more than 3 hours.

With regard to the use of social networks, the majority use Facebook (96%), followed by Twitter and others. In this regard, few students (24%) have an e-book or tablet at home; if they do, these are their own in 67% of the cases. Among their hobbies, the students like socializing with their friends and practicing sports, followed by going to the cinema and watching television, being on Facebook or surfing the internet. Therefore, reading is not among

their priorities.

In short, few students from the fourth-year secondary school group read; rather, they socialize on social networks and watch plenty of television. What's more, it can be said that neither the books recommended nor the environment (school and home), have an impact on the priorities of the adolescents surveyed, who have many other interests apart from opening a book.

2.3 Aspects of the Literary Text: Textual and Paratextual Analysis

Apart from the argument or subject, structure, tense, mode, voice, setting, characters and paratextual elements (titles and sub-headings), I also wanted to discover whether or not the students identified the elements of science fiction.

The readers were able to summarize the argument very well (86%), leaving out anecdotes and circumlocutions, in their open responses. With regard to the structure, I discovered that in general they were able to see a clear, neat and repetitive structure.

The tense, for the majority of the students is lineal (90%) and to a lesser extent, they recognized forward time jumps in the first of Pedrolo's notebooks that comprise the book (12%) and in the second (28%). They understand that in each chapter a year goes by and therefore that there is a synchronic order and linearity. In contrast, there is a considerable amount of confusion with regard to the epilogue, seen by some as a backward time jump (48%) and by others as linear (28%). The students were unable to see that the novel is written in the present tense, that of the editor, who suggests that the book is a text found at a much later time than ours. Here is where the main problem lies in understanding *Mecanoscrit* because the students did not understand the resource of the discovered text, which is so common in other works by Pedrolo and in universal literature.

I wanted to discover if they perceived the mode or viewpoint, taking into consideration the distance (styles), according to the narrative of facts (narration) and the narrative of words (dialogue). The data obtained showed that the readers perceived that the narration or narrative of facts (82.6%) and the dialogue combined with the narrative (3.4%) prevailed, and that there was little description (9%) in the novel.

With regard to the narrative voice, the young students were capable of detecting this by intuition. The majority replied that it is the narrator's voice in all of the notebooks (91.8%), except for the first and the fifth, where 33% believe that it is the voice of Alba. If we look only at the open responses, the students agree that a narrator is recounting the events "because they talk about Dídac and Alba as if they were other people" (Moreno-Bedmar *La literatura juvenil* 308). However, later on the discourse changes and students refer to a third person and omniscient narrator but without justifying their answer on a textual level. With regard to the epilogue, 44% understand that the voice

explaining the text is that of the editor but 24% think it is a narrator or the character named Eli Raures (16%).

The setting of the novel is diverse and the students highlight Benaura (60%), the forest and villages around Barcelona (82%), Barcelona (83%) and in the fourth notebook, places on the Mediterranean coast. I observed that the students were able to delimit and recognize the different settings that are a refuge but were unable to perceive the antagonism between the natural setting (positive, pure, protector, a regenerator of life) and the urban one (negative, impure, unprotected, apocalyptic, desolate and dead). Similarly, they do not detect the feeling of constant insecurity that the main characters perceive nor their nomadism). Considering that the students live in Barcelona, half of the class were struck by the description of the city in ruins but the other half were not, mainly because of the many American post-apocalyptic films they have seen.

The students identified the most important characteristics of the two main characters: Alba has an adult role and is proactive and Dídac is the child who is learning.¹¹ They recognize that the main characters are not normal or typical young people because from the beginning they do everything they possibly can to save humanity; they gather literature to learn and study the legacy of the adults and they even have a child in the new world. The students see them as brighter than normal adolescents, above all Alba, who is Dídac's instructor. She is mature, intelligent and streetwise, and has an enormous instinct for survival and taking the initiative. Practically all the readers identified with the girl because she almost always takes the initiative, she is responsible for their survival and has exceptional values (with no moral, sexual or racial prejudices). She is also incredibly sure of herself and is very interested in learning, bettering herself and surviving. What's more, Alba is resilient to misfortune and has a coping instinct.

The students also considered Dídac to be intelligent, clever and bright (he is sharp and observant) but as he is the younger of the two he is Alba's disciple and receives instruction and knowledge from her. He is also inquisitive, thoughtful, naïve and candid, and has an enormous ability to absorb knowledge and take the initiative.

Finally, with regard to the titles of the different notebooks, almost all of the students (94.2%) found them to be very explicit; they connect them directly to the content of each chapter and found them to be a key to the reading. Therefore, they are able to identify the thematic function of the paratext. The book's title, *Mecanoscrit del segon origen*, is also perceived by the majority of the readers (84%) as a key to understanding the book. As justification of this response, one of the students stated, "Yes, because Alba and Dídac begin a new world from scratch and they set everything up for the next generation." (Moreno-Bedmar *La literatura juvenil* 359)

Another student goes further and includes part of the title in his response, therefore analyzing it from a textual level:

The book's title is related to the contents because it talks of the destruction of the world by aliens and therefore that the majority of people have died. This is why it refers to second origin because from the son that Alba and Dídac have, Alba will continue to have children so that the human race doesn't die out and this creates a new origin. (in Moreno-Bedmar *La literatura juvenil* 359)

Therefore, the young readers' perception of the title is mixed and carries a dual semantic understanding: on the one hand, a new world-era and second origin is born and on the other, the relationship with the biblical text, with a second genesis (connotation). In this sense, regarding their ability to identify genre, the students are able to determine the basic elements of classic science fiction present in *Mecanoscrit* (71%) but miss the vital information provided in the epilogue, where the presence of science fiction in the work is argued, as we will see below.

If the text "Is Alba the mother of humanity today?" is analyzed, we find that it is an epilogue written by the novel's editor in which key events of the past are narrated, when a scholar discovers *Mecanoscrit* but does not publish it and considers it to be a work of science fiction. Years later, a second copy ends up in the hands of an antique dealer who believes that the book is real. Finally, the work is published as a science-fiction novel and is re-issued. The editor explains in the present tense that over a year ago a planet was discovered where evidence of an evolved humanoid civilization that experienced an epidemic and had explored other planets to live on was found. Vestiges described in *Mecanoscrit* (flying saucers, weapons and the procedure used to annihilate humans) were also discovered. Finally the editor sets out two hypotheses as to why the aliens didn't occupy Earth—they died out or chose a different planet—and considers that the text is most likely real.

The survey reveals that there is an understanding of the reflexive purpose and by extension the educational purpose of the work, as the students explain that the book is thought provoking, they accept the change in the rules (for instance the order of Mar's surnames) and that the characters learn and teach. Therefore, by extension, young readers understand that the reader is treated also as a disciple, or learner. Pedrolo himself said so in a letter to eighth year students (13-14 year olds in the former primary school system) at the Escola Bosc Forestier in Barcelona:

So you can see that it wasn't a case of me exactly writing an adventure novel but of making use of an adventure to 'preach' a different model of human society where, if the 'teachings' of Alba prospered, men and women would be more fair. You need not admire us. In each writer, in each novelist, there is a person concerned about the world in which we live and it is no surprise that often he or she is dissenting because the truth, my friends, is that our world does not work and it would be really wonderful if, without the need of a catastrophe, one generation, who

knows maybe yours, should decide to make it properly habitable. (in Garcia 825)

Finally, when asked about the plausibility of the facts (the alternative to the real world), in other words the existence of other possible worlds, there is a certain amount of doubt or denial in some of the responses. However, later on, when they discuss the possibility of Alba actually being the mother of humanity, the students state that if *Mecanoscrit* were real it would not be “just another book” (Moreno-Bedmar *La literatura juvenil* 361) but a text similar to that of the Bible. Therefore, at times the readers doubt as to whether it is a plausible or implausible fiction and in this case base their opinions in relation to their experiential and vital level.¹²

2.4 Aspects Based on the Literary Text

According to a reader’s involvement and identification with the books that s/he reads, we can understand how the students argue and relate with a series of aspects based on their personal experience:¹³ 1) making the texts current; 2) connecting them to cultural references (audio)visual, media, etc, adaptations...; 3) generating emotion transmitted by the texts and characters; 4) other reflections: situation of characters, opinions and epilogue and 5) preferences and recommendations.

With regard to how they make the texts more current, I was interested in discovering the student’s opinion about specific aspects and whether or not these would be considered plausible nowadays. Specifically, they were asked about the chapters *Quadern de la destrucció i de la salvació* [*Notebook on Destruction and Salvation*] and *Quadern de la por i de l’estrany* [*Notebook on Fear and the Unknown*] and whether or not what happened would be possible nowadays. The responses either doubted or rejected the possibility because the readers denied the existence of aliens or doubted that they could exist. Therefore, the argument was based on the experiential level.

The description of the alien in the second chapter was a key idea to discovering if the portrayal coincided with that of aliens in films, video games or other more modern books. Everyone denied it from an experiential level because their idea of aliens is that they are grey or green with huge heads or shaped like spiders.

Regarding the author and the writing style, the students were asked if they thought the author would write the same book today. The majority said no (60%) and the changes they suggested to bring the novel up to date were related to elements from their life experience as digital natives and which are essential nowadays: the world of technology, computers and video games. One of the responses stated, based on their opinion of reality and their experience: “No. Everything would be much harder for them (Alba and Dídac), because nowadays so many things are computerized, when the aliens arrive there is no power, so there would be lots of things they wouldn’t be able to use. If the

book were updated that would be an important point.” Another said, “I think that if Pedrolo were alive, he would write it differently because now there is so much technology and he could include a Game Boy for entertainment. Also, I think he’d add in more action because in the book there isn’t much science fiction.” (in Moreno-Bedmar *La literatura juvenil* 324)

In relation to the readers’ cultural references, they were asked if they could think of any films, video games, books or songs in which similar events took place to those in the novel—young people who appear to be the only survivors of an alien attack that virtually wipes out life on Earth and who take on the mission to repopulate it. The majority of replies were affirmative, except for the first and fifth chapters. In short, the majority of readers were reminded of films (60%), followed by series (20%), books (13%) and video games (7%). Among references to films, the most prominent was *The War of the Worlds* (89%) followed by *ET* (11%); regarding series, an episode of *The Walking Dead*, the cartoon series *The Simpsons*, and *Lost*. Finally, references to books included, *Lord of the Flies* and a Pedrolo reference: the short story “Urn de Djln” from *Trajecte final*. Other references were made to the films *The Hunger Games*, *I Am Legend*, *Signs*, *Independence Day*, *The Island and Battle: Los Angeles*, the video game *Metro 2033* and the novel, *Robinson Crusoe*. It is interesting to note that the majority of references are from the English-speaking world, revealing how young people of today live in a global and interconnected environment. They have immediate communication at a global level, with an unlimited storage and distribution of information. This is a world in which their cultural models stem from the entertainment products they consume and from the market providing them, in this case mainly English speaking, as shown by the data.

One of the students, who had compared the book with *The War of the Worlds*, justified it by saying that it was “because aliens arrive and destroy the world and also the film *Independence Day*” (in Moreno-Bedmar *La literatura juvenil* 326). Another mentioned the reality show on Telecinco, *Supervivientes* (Survivor), because “the participants on the show have to survive just like Dídac and Alba” and also the series *The Walking Dead* because “It’s about zombies and a group of people who try to survive and look for others who have survived the disease and it reminds us of the fact that they are trying to survive” (in Moreno-Bedmar *La literatura juvenil* 327). One student claimed that,

Mecanoscrit del segon origen is a bit like the story of Robinson Crusoe, who ends up alone on an island with his dog and searches for other life, builds a home and hunts for food. One day his dog dies and an island inhabitant appears and starts living with him and they become friends and live on the island (...).

It’s also a bit like the film *I Am Legend* where the main character is alone in the world with his dog and has to survive on what he finds and fights the strange monsters that appear, he finds two other people and

discovers that there is more life in the world. (in Moreno-Bedmar *La literatura juvenil* 327)

As to whether or not the book was as good as other books or films such as *The War of the Worlds*, *I Am Legend* and *Robinson Crusoe*, among others, a large majority (72%) said that it was. One of the students referred to the argument and structure in a clear reference to the post-apocalyptic scenario and to reconstruction and survival, “Because in the end all of them follow the same pattern, the world ends, humanity tries to recover and, as usual, the main character dies. They all have the same structure.” (in Moreno-Bedmar *La literatura juvenil* 329)

If we look now at the open responses about emotions and identification with the characters, we can see how the students perceive the text. Regarding the emotions they feel during the first chapter, their replies are based on their own experience and they mention their “Concern, because maybe, if this happened to us we wouldn’t be calm enough to meet the basic needs so quickly.” Another student reiterated this, from a relational level, “It made me worry because it makes you want to know what would happen and it made me sad because they find all of their family dead” (in Moreno-Bedmar *La literatura juvenil* 329). Regarding both the second and the third chapter, again concern is expressed, together with other emotions such as sadness, fear and affection. The fourth notebook reveals perceptions ranging from happiness, worry and disbelief to affection and curiosity about the love and sex scenes. The last chapter receives important responses because sadness and anger, affection and surprise appear as a result of the impact of the death of Dídac on the reader. Some students made value judgments because they found what happened to the boy to be ridiculous or unfair and they argue this from a relational level.

Another issue relating to perceptions and emotions is the image of the city of Barcelona destroyed and in ruins in the third notebook. This had an impact on some students but not on others. Those who were most affected felt that it was because it is where they live, a place they know, in other words, the impact is related to the experiential level of the young person (daily life).

The students were also asked about the relationship between the characters, if they were surprised or not by it and why, among other questions. The responses were varied, some were justified from a relational level: “No, because they try more than once and also it’s what they want. You could tell they were going to end up making love. It was not really a big thing. She got pregnant and the creation of humanity begins and then they won’t be alone.” Other students judged the relationship from an experiential level, “Alba and Dídac had sex for the first time on the beach. Yes, because Dídac is still really young. We were stunned.” (in Moreno-Bedmar *La literatura juvenil* 331)

Finally, with regard to identification with the characters, I wanted to find out whom they identified with and Alba was the clear winner, above all because she takes the initiative, is confident and wants to learn how to survive.

Along a new line of other reflections, knowing that one of the reasons for the success of young adult literature is the readers' identification with the characters, I asked the students to imagine they were Alba and asked them what they would do in a similar situation to the novel and why. One of the responses was that "I would try and save everything I could, although a lot of the time I wouldn't be able to cope or continue. The thought that everything you had no longer exists would probably be too much for me because you lose absolutely everything" (in Moreno-Bedmar *La literatura juvenil* 332). One of the female students was opposed to the eventual incest with Mar and the age of the characters involved but claimed that, for the good of humanity, she would sleep with her own son.

The young adult readers perceive that the characters are unique, not at all normal or typical "because unlike most adolescents they are really bright, above all Alba." Or, "Alba is mature and intelligent." In addition, "At the beginning Alba decides to go and live with Dídac in the woods because she knows that the city isn't a nice place to live with all the dead bodies, which smell" (in Moreno-Bedmar *La literatura juvenil* 333). With regard to the changes in socially acceptable rules, such as the order of Mar's surnames, with the mother's first, I asked if they understood and accepted it and the answers were affirmative.

To conclude we asked the students about the epilogue "Is Alba the mother of humanity today?", referring to the possibility that the text is real and tells us of the creation of a second humanity. Among the students 64% said no, they do not believe in the possibility of Alba being the origin of a new world. One of the students answered from an assumptions and predictions stance and also referred to the sacred scriptures (textual level), to a second origin and to the existence of an Alba-Eve:

No. Because if that were the case we would all have the same surnames. And also, eventually Alba would run out of food and would have to travel to other, far off places to find more. Also, everything would eventually be out of date or rotten and they wouldn't be able to eat it. Also, If the story were true it wouldn't be just another book but more like a Bible in a way. (in Moreno-Bedmar *La literatura juvenil* 333-334)

With regard to preferences and recommendations, in general the students really enjoyed the book (40%) or quite enjoyed it (24%). No one disliked it and only one student did not like it much (4%). Among the responses of note, they found it original, entertaining, and thought provoking. The entertainment factor is, as mentioned, important for them to judge whether they like a book. The fact that the novel is thought provoking connects with the thorough reading it requires, an important objective of any book used in education, and also one that Pedrolo considered essential. Among the negative aspects, they mentioned that specific chapters were boring because they lacked action.

The majority of the students would recommend the book (88%) to friends. One student referred to Pedrolo in his answer, using metaliterary arguments from a relational and textual level: the student would recommend the book because “it’s not a bad book and also it’s an important book in the history of the Catalan language. You have nothing to lose reading and also you can see how Manuel de Pedrolo wrote and you learn new vocabulary” (in Moreno-Bedmar *La literatura juvenil* 336). In contrast, one unfavorable comment referred, on a textual level, to difficulties with the vocabulary and the structural or thematic repetition.

They were explicitly asked “If I compare other science-fiction works I have read with *Mecanoscrit del segon origen*, the book is:” and were offered a series of answers such as: more boring because of the description, more outdated because of the vocabulary, harder to read because it is very long or more interesting because I like the fact that the characters are adolescents, more interesting because I can identify with the characters or more exciting because it includes sexual content, among others. Some students mentioned either that it was outdated because of the vocabulary or more interesting thanks to the identification with the characters. Among the responses gathered, in addition to the proposed topics, one student stated that it is, “more enjoyable because interesting things happen. (...) because not every single thing is described and there is a time jump between chapters” (in Moreno-Bedmar *La literatura juvenil* 337). It appears, therefore, that in this case, the time structure and the events are considered positively. Other answers stated that the story does not engage, that the vocabulary is complex—something that, as we have seen, is the reason behind not recommending the book—and that there is little action, these being the aspects that make the students value the book negatively.

Conclusions

I believe that the reception of *Mecanoscrit* in secondary schools, specifically in the case study presented, leaves no doubt as to the fact that the book is liked and of interest to the young digital natives included in the study, despite them not being particularly interested in reading and having hobbies that have nothing to do with it. We have seen throughout the article that *Mecanoscrit del segon origen* remains an attractive and readable book among young people, thanks to a series of internal aspects, specifically four, which are decisive in its success: science-fiction, universal and timeless subjects, identification with the characters and a structure that is easily identifiable by the reader, as we have seen.

Catastrophes, action, adventure and surprising events in science fiction engage young adult readers. In fact, the presence of a post-apocalyptic reality helps make the book even more current, thanks to the unconventional reality suggested by Pedrolo and to the relationships that the young adult readers can establish with many of their own cultural references. The universality of the book lies in the subjects that young adult readers recognize as current: life,

love (uninhibited and without taboos),¹⁴ the passage to adulthood, death and the unexpected and tragic. By describing the passage to adulthood the readers are seduced by the existential journey (the novel is certainly a *bildungsroman*) and identify with the characters, specifically with Alba. They value the life adventure as a learning and personal growth that Pedrolo suggested and they are captivated by Alba as the mother of humanity. The structure, more typical of texts from other traditions, partly because of the numbered notebooks and passages, has literary-biblical echoes, whereas the initial repetition of ‘and’ evokes the chorus of a song or some classic texts.

The young students, in general, understand the argument, structure, setting and the characters but have some doubts as to the tense, narrative voice and distance of the mode or point of view. They identify the purpose of the title and can establish intertextual relationships. In addition, they use their genre competence and understand the author’s educational aim, and partially that of the reader; a disciple reader, who questions things and reflects on them. The students then update the text to make it current, above all by imagining how they would include technological elements and digital devices. They also relate it to their cultural references. In general, they justify the emotions from an experiential or relational level, which ranges from concern to affection and happiness. The majority of the students really enjoyed the book and would recommend it to friends, despite a certain degree of difficulty above all regarding the often-rich vocabulary. With regard to other science-fiction books, they consider the novel to measure up to other modern-day books.

In conclusion, I can say that *Mecanoscrit del segon origen* has a long life ahead of it in the classrooms of 21st-century secondary schools, despite young adult readers of today having little in common with those of the end of the 20th century. The book mainly has a significant future because it contains a series of characteristics –it is memorable (because of its universal subject), it involves a literal and metaphorical journey of initiation, and it is still relevant today thanks to the epitext (the cultural elements beyond the book and the adaptations), which make it a classic in young adult readers’ literature.

Notes

¹ The author always dissociated himself from the book’s success; in his opinion, this was a minor novel within his list of science-fiction works. Pedrolo considered *Aquesta matinada i potser per sempre* [*Early This Morning and Maybe Forever*] (1976) his most successful sf work.

² *Mecanoscrit* was published as a comic by L’Atzar Edicions in two volumes (1984-1985), with illustrations by Isidre Monés. The television series was directed by Ricard Reguant and broadcast on TV3 (December 1985-February 1986). The radio drama was broadcast by Catalunya Ràdio in 1985. And finally, the film *Second Origin* (2015) was begun by Bigas Luna and following his death, continued under the direction of Carles Porta.

³ The Compulsory Secondary Education (ESO) system includes four levels for students aged from 12 to 16, after which they can either study baccalaureate (two years) or an intermediate

or advanced vocational training course (one or two years respectively). The data presented here are part of the author's PhD dissertation Anna M. Moreno-Bedmar, *La literatura juvenil de ciència-ficció de Manuel de Pedrolo*. Universitat de Barcelona, 2016. All citations refer to this text available online. The main objectives of the thesis were: to explain why the science-fiction works *Mecanoscrit del segon origen* and *Trajecte final* [Final Trajectory] are considered literature for young people, and to present the characteristics of a model reader from the established corpus comparing him/her with real readers from a class of fourth year secondary school students (15-16 year olds), so as to understand how they update the books through their own references and make them relevant to life today. This article focuses on this process.

⁴ All translations from secondary sources are by the author.

⁵ This bill promoted the creation of reader's guidelines in which the teacher-mediator, the reader and reading habits were important factors. In other words, it attached importance to literacy skills, school libraries and to striking a balance between the young adult readers' literary canon (selective and with a level of excellence) and self-selected literature or that chosen by the students (according to the interests of young adult readers).

⁶ In 2015 both the school edition by Educació 62 and the general La Butxaca edition used images from the film *Second Origin* on their covers.

⁷ The student sample comprised 25 scholars, 14 girls and 11 boys.

⁸ The project aims to ensure that the library is considered a space for acquiring knowledge, encouraging and consolidating its use and purpose as a basic learning tool, promoting reading habits and research and the handling and use of information, among other objectives.

⁹ Information in Catalan regarding the experience, the exhibition guide, teaching ideas and the video *Manuel de Pedrolo, abans i ara* can be accessed here:

<http://www.xtec.cat/alfresco/d/d/workspace/SpacesStore/37d12331-305f-40ef-8a26-7a23c7ea9177/pedrolo_bernat_metge_barcelona.pdf>

¹⁰ This is low if we consider the Fundació Bofill report *Competències lectora i èxit escolar* [Reading skills and school success] 2012, in which connecting to the internet is listed third among student preferences.

¹¹ Pedrolo loaded the names of the characters in his book with symbolism, providing us with valuable information. Alba comes from the Latin, *albus* and means dawn, the start of the day. In this sense, it could mean that the girl represents the mother-creator of new humanity. It also refers to the color white, symbolizing the virginity and innocence of the young girl. The name Dídac comes from the Greek *didachos* and is related to instructing, learning.

¹² To classify the opinions, we follow Albadalejo and his possible world models: type I (the rules are the same as ours), type II (plausibly fictional) and type III (implausibly fictional) (Albadalejo, *Teoría de los mundos* 58-59).

¹³ It is important to note that when young adults give their opinion of the literature they read, they do so based on their own experience connected to reality and removed from the literary texts, in other words, based on projection and identification criteria. To classify the assessment discourse about books by readers, Manresa uses categories. I adapted these for my thesis: experiential level (relating to the vital and daily experience of the reader), relational level (implicitly linked to the texts) (Manresa, *Els hàbits lectors*).

¹⁴ At that time, *Mecanoscrit* filled a gap in education centres, as it approached the issue of sexuality in an uninhibited and liberal way (it was often read as a book on sentimental education).

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