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Poems and paintings: A virtual mixture¹

Abstract: Over the years the traveling experience has evolved, and as a consequence, poets and painters have worked with visual and poetic images to offer their personal visions with the aim of starting a dialogue and question the convictions and routines of the viewers/readers in a never-ending voyage towards other spaces and cultures. This article puts forward a visual mixture, an in-road into the essence of a representative sample of works of well-known artists from the artistic and literary domains.

Keywords: Art, Cultural Studies, MACVAC, Poetry, Travel

For many centuries poets and painters have invited us to enter their imaginary worlds. This invitation is a challenge that might be interpreted as a journey for the eyes, the memory and the emotions. Poetic and visual images within this journey become an action and therefore, an experience that needs to be decoded. Once this process starts we will be led to an original counterpoint of alienation that will question our convictions and routines in an unvarnished voyage towards new expectations.

Poets and painters are audacious travelers that invite us to discuss their proposals.² Their works are the result of an idealistic shift that entails the intentional receptiveness to the intimacy of experiences. Therefore, let us start our journey quoting some lines, translated by Carles Riba into Catalan, from one of the most-well known poems written by Konstandinos P. Kavafis, *Ítaca*, first published in 1911.

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2 Our research on the topic of poets and painters as travelers granted us an invitation to curate the exhibition *CV-13 En ruta*.

Quan surts per fer el viatge cap a Ítaca,
 has de pregar que el camí sigui llarg,
 ple d'aventures, ple de coneixença
 [...]

Que siguin moltes les matinades d'estiu
 que, amb quina delectança, amb quina joia!
 entraràs en un port que els teus ulls ignoraven;
 [...]

Però no forçis gens la travessia.
 És preferible que duri molts anys,
 i que ja siguis vell quan fondegis a l'illa,
 ric de tot el que hauràs guanyat fent el camí,
 sense esperar que t'hagi de dar riqueses Ítaca

Ítaca t'ha donat el bell viatge.
 Sense ella no hauries pas sortit cap a fer-lo
 Res més no té que et pugui ja donar.

I si la trobes pobra, no és que Ítaca t'hagi enganyat.
 Savi com bé t'has fet, amb tanta experiència,
 Ja hauràs pogut comprendre què volen dir les Ítaques. (Kavafis 1993, 71–72)

The Greek poet employed conversational, everyday language to emphasize the importance of the journey itself. In the poem, the reader/traveler is requested to fully enjoy each moment using all the resources of intellect and senses because once reached the goal it may not fulfill his/her expectations.³

Kavafis' work is but an invitation to focus, first of all, on the topic of the ancestral and nomadic journey. In his painting *Cabras* (1949), Rafael Zabaleta (Jaén, 1907–1960) shows the harshness of nomadic life by depicting a shepherd accompanied by his goat herd (Fig. 1). In the País Valencià, shepherds and their herds used to migrate to the mountains in search of fresh fields with milder temperatures during the summer months. In the rural district of Castelló, for example, they used to pass through Mosquerola's and Real de Barona's glens and the Roman's footpath that started from Vilafranca up to Castellón. *Cabras* holds a prominent position in the collection of the MACVAC (Museu d'Art Contemporani Vicente Aguilera Cerni) and evokes the poetic work of Miguel Hernández. In his poem entitled *Las desiertas abarcas* (1939), the poet from Oriola talks about the journey of necessity and history.

3 The narrator of the poem addresses either Odysseus or an imaginary reader or traveler.



Fig. 1. Rafael Zabaleta, *Cabras*, 1949. Photography: MACVAC

Por el cinco de enero,
 Cada enero ponía
 Mi calzado de cabrero
 A la ventana fría.
 [...]
 Nunca tuve zapatos,
 Ni trajes, ni palabras:
 Siempre tuve regatos,
 Siempre penas y cabras. (Hernández 1982, 435–436)

Zabaleta's work clearly shows the influence of diverse avant-garde movements that he should have gotten when in Paris, from Expressionism to Cubism, with some dips of surreal poetry that altogether thread into a rural world motif. Coming as a transfer from the private collection Valle Ortí, *Cabras* takes us to the interior landscape of the ancient via Augusta that passes through the current CV-13, which is the highway that leads to the airport of Castelló, where we can visit the art gallery 'Sala 30'.

In his memoirs, Fellini said that the station is the place of adventure dreams and that is why we continue with the piece *Campesinos saludando al tren* (1954)



Fig. 2. Ricardo Bastid Peris. *Campesinos saludando al tren*, ca. 1954.
Photography: MACVAC

(Fig. 2) by Ricardo Bastid Peris (Valencia 1919–Buenos Aires 1966). In that work the artist shows us post-war Spain, where a train becomes a metaphor for the journey of life, a journey towards hope. Bastid had to flee by train; the French exile was his first stop until he docked in Argentina, where he stayed for the remaining years of his life. He was an intellectual that went against the grain, and pursued his career solitarily while tackling the most important intellectual questions of his time. He could be considered an insightful example of the post-war generations, the ‘rootless generation’ that did so much for the cultural Renaissance of contemporary Spain.

In his book *Un arte valenciano en América*, the author Francisco Agramunt Lacruz singles out about Ricardo Bastid Peris’ great technique dominated by a drawing science, a subdued and sharp composition, with an abundance of darker tones, outlines overloaded with black strokes, sooty, angular and a tendency to plenitude to emphasize the nuclear lines. Ricardo Bastid Peris’ paintings reveal a strong social interest, a dramatic inner anxiety that dismisses all decorative sense and the academic rigidity in order to create a dense, poignant and harrowing atmosphere. In his works it becomes obvious that Ricardo confers an important role to humankind. His paintings leave a mark because they depict the great drama of conflict-riddled humankind with all its realism, bleakness and anguish (Agramunt Lacruz 1992, 183–191).

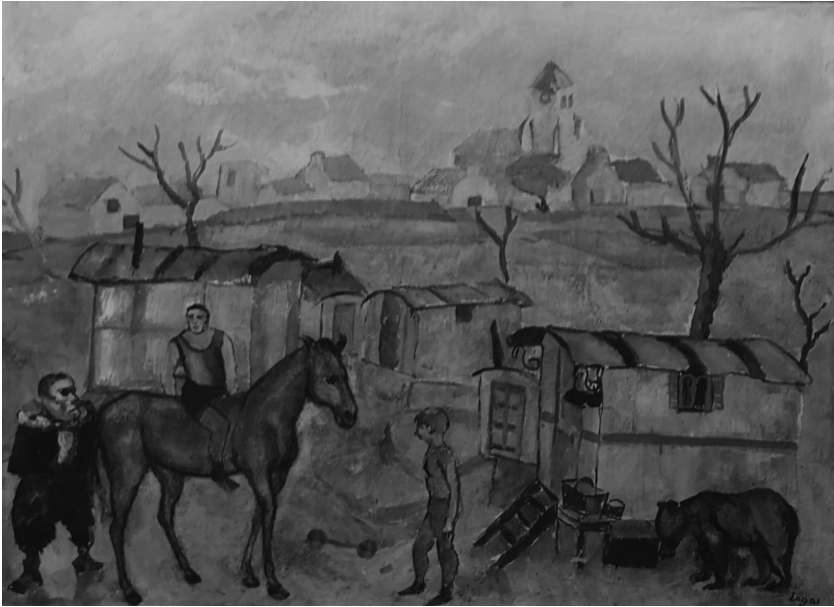


Fig. 3. Celso Lagar Arroyo. *Tarde de circo*, ca. 1930. © Celso Lagar, VEGAP, 2021.

Bastid Peris presents the train journey in comparison with the seed of illusion. In *Campos de Castilla* (1912) by Antonio Machado, we find a description of the trains used by Bastid on his way to his exile: rundown wooden trains where daydreaming nurtured the passengers. The following is a fragment of his poem *En tren*.

Yo, para todo viaje
 –siempre sobre la madera
 de mi vagón de tercera–,
 voy ligero de equipaje.

¡Este placer de alejarse!
 Londres, Madrid, Ponferrada,
 tan lindos... para marcharse.
 Lo molesto es la llegada.
 Luego, el tren, al caminar,
 siempre nos hace soñar;
 y casi, casi olvidamos
 el jamelgo que montamos. (Machado 1974, 67)

The motif of a journey as a necessity invokes the work of Celso Lagar called *Tarde de circo* (Ca. 1920) (Fig. 3). The circus artists traveled in old horse carts from village to village, following trails and crossing stone paths. Performing from square to square, gifting dreams while hiding their own misfortunes. Juan Ramón Jiménez dedicated some lines to these circus tumblers in a poem by the name *Los saltimbanquis*:

Alegra titiritero,
 la noche con tu tambor.
 ¡El sendero
 tiene las ramas en flor!
 [...]
 ¡Campos verdes, noches bellas,
 para el llanto y para el velo!
 Las estrellas
 tiemblan también en el cielo. (Gómez Bravo 1942, 231)

Celso Lagar Arroyo was a Spanish expressionist painter from the first generation of the School of Paris, where he lived most of his life. He was influenced by avant-garde movements of all kinds. Both in his abode in Paris and in his stays in Normandy, he would develop an artistic production with a very specific theme: still lives, Spanish reminiscences, landscapes and his celebrated circus scenes. His paintings can be found in numerous museums across Europe: La Rochelle, Goya museum in Castres, Honfleur (Francia), Petit-Palais from Geneva, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, la Casa Lis from Salamanca, Museo Carmen Thyssen (Malaga) and in collections as prestigious as Crane Kallman's (London) or Zborowski's (Paris).

We move on from mandatory nomadism to contemporary journeys. Javier Lorenzo Miralles (Alicante 1950) places emphasis in the comfort of our home, the starting point for the traveler of today. Travelling means liberating oneself from the monotony of everyday life, leaving behind responsibilities and trying to reach the destination we are dreaming of. In his work *Aunque es tu habitación. Pues es de donde partes* (1985) (Fig. 4) we find two levels of composition that overlap. On the one hand, we have a fragment of someone sitting in front of a window and the poetry book *Les Chambres. Poème du temps qui ne passé pas* (1969) by Luis Aragon at his feet. And, in the upper part of the work, a feminine figure walks off while strolling along the beach. The key to the meaning of the painting is found in the verses of the poem *Toutes les chambres de ma vie* in which Luis Aragon tells us that there are rooms more 'beautiful than wounds', rooms 'for requests', rooms of 'low light' and rooms 'ready for everything except happiness':



Fig. 4. Javier Lorenzo Miralles. *Aunque es tu habitación. Pues es de donde partes*, 1985. Photography: MACVAC

Toutes les chambres de ma vie
 M'auront étranglé de leurs murs
 Ici les murmures s'étouffent
 Les cris se cassent

Celles où j'ai vécu seul
 À grands pas vides
 Celles
 Qui gardaient leurs spectres anciens
 Les chambres d'indifférence

[...]
 Ici je connais ma mesure et le miroir
 Ne me pardonne pas

Toutes les chambres quand enfin je m'endormis
 Ont jeté sur moi la punition des rêves

Car je ne sais des deux le pis rêver ou vivre. (Aragon 1982, 20–21)

The poetic voice of Lorenzo Miralles invites us to learn about the world without leaving the comfort of our rooms and to behold through the window the fragmentation of a disturbing personal world: of a human creator committed to the nature of a man able to search inside himself and reveal the beats of memories, nostalgia and melancholy. His pictorial production, greatly linked to his own

biography, constitutes a lucid contribution to the feelings that overwhelm the nature of the contemporary human being.

A counterpoint to the vision of Lorenzo Miralles is the plastic work *Camí Santiago* [2016] by MADE IN MARTÍLLOPIS (Isabel Martí, Juan LuíS Llopis and Vicent Salvador). This work is part of the PODOSEMIA ENVOLVENTE project that reflects on the human footprint, both the one that we imprint on the world and the one that the same world causes on the footwear itself (understanding the term footwear here as the link between the human being and the world). The shoe is a specific element, distinctive of the human species, unique not only because of the different time periods it relates, but also because of the different individuals. Therefrom lays the interest of artists in the used shoe as an object carrying both sociological and artistic information. Thus, their choice is a commitment to the concept, to the idea, also to the ephemeral and, as something ready-made, their art questions the notion of aura because responses to art-objects are increasingly collective.

Camí Santiago (Fig. 5) is a project that merges art and life. Artistically, it goes for the transfer of both the photography and the previously spilled pigments on cellophane that will be transferred to the board. It is an attempt to omit the mark and gesture, in order to avoid any influence on the observer. It intends to demystify the idea of artist-genius and commits to the process and the collective. It is team work that avoids individuality and singularity. The photography is a result of it: on the one hand, it is the realization that something was there and therefore it tells us about the past, also about the time after, and perhaps even of VANITAS. On the other hand, it allows for repetition and, as a consequence, questions the idea of the uniqueness of an *objet d'art*.

Poetically, *Camí Santiago* wants us to delve into the personal level provided by the used shoe. The memories of a whole journey of reflection and silence towards the cultural world that entails the road to Santiago invokes the experiences of the viewer. On the other hand, the connotations of the different senses (smell, touch, and taste), the color and the rhythm of its wearer certainly allow for different readings, just as much as there are viewers. These tenets of repetition, series, process, of transferred image give the work a conceptual homogeneity.

The viewer is invited to participate, to imagine, since he will be the one that gives value to the act of walking. Stanzas from *He andado muchos caminos* help us identify with the meaning of their work:

He andado muchos caminos,
he abierto muchas veredas;

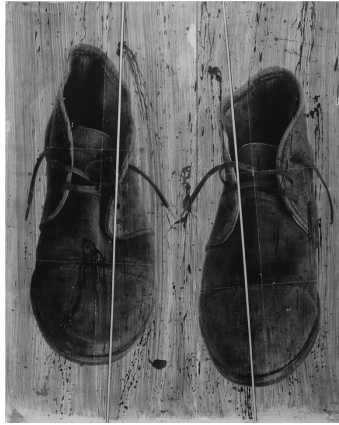


Fig. 5. MARTÍLLOPIS. *Camí Santiago*, 2016. Photography: Vicent Salvador

he navegado en cien mares
y atracado en cien riberas.

[...]

Y en todas partes he visto
gentes que danzan o juegan,
cuando pueden, y laboran
sus cuatro palmos de tierra.

Nunca, si llegan a un sitio,
preguntan a dónde llegan.
Cuando caminan, cabalgan
a lomos de mula vieja.

Y no conocen la prisa
ni aun en los días de fiesta.
Donde hay vino, beben vino;
donde no hay vino, agua fresca.

Son buenas gentes que viven,
laboran, pasan y sueñan,
y en un día como tantos
descansan bajo la tierra. (Machado 1983, 84–85)

Our tour continues and it is the artist Santi Tena (Valencia 1970) who wants to join him in the cabin of a plane and meet part of the crew. In his work, the first thing that catches our attention is that both pilots are chefs whose mission is to give us culinary experiences by maximizing creativity.

Santi Tena considers that excessive technology leads us to mindlessness and therefrom his work *Preparados para el impacto* (2018) (Fig. 6) is born. Gastronomy and science are thematic references that make the artist ponder over the socio-cultural context in which he feels immersed: a world in which the superficial and the technological seem to permeate everything. When we interviewed Tena in his workshop, he used 'I feel immersed' in a single tone, not as an individualistic or egocentric gesture, but as an act of humility, because at this point in life he does not dare to include others in his way of thinking and feeling.

He told us that he experiences his course of life in the following terms: 'I feel that I live in a maelstrom in which everything goes very fast, in which the most precious treasure is stolen from us ... time'; and that on many occasions he feels himself 'passenger of a low-cost flight', that he is missing out on the best, 'what really matters.' In his reflection on the essence of things and on the path that others do not want to follow, where appearances are more important than the person, he used irony when referring to the *nouvelle cuisine* as another example of the continual path taken today by any discipline or trade towards pretentiousness.

The study of Lipovetsky, Bauman, or Calabrese, among others, has suggested the translation of these authors' concepts to the pictorial field. Actually, Tena presents us with a picture in which the pastiche and the paradox meet in order to ironize about the contemporary world. We detect the influence of cinema and comic in its production, being one of its references *Blade Runner* by Ridley Scott, a film in which we see the technological apocalypse.

His idea of painting comprehends the three aspects of the human being: body, intellect and emotion. He confesses to having been in the cabin of an airplane and that such experience left a mark in him; therefore, he fathoms what pleasure the spectator must experience when flying in a cabin. He asks us to look at the contrast between perspective and color as well as the slight inclination of the plane. Finally, he insists on his view that he has the feeling of wasting time and that this is the inception of the title *Preparados para el impacto*, which is the catch word given by the commander of an aircraft before the accident, or when the accident is imminent. In his mind is the monologue by the replicant Batty with which the film *Blade Runner* ends: 'I've seen things you people wouldn't believe. Attack ships on fire off the shoulder of Orion. I watched C-beams glitter in the dark near the Tannhäuser Gate. All those moments will be lost in time, like tears in rain. Time to die'.

Santi Tena shares his apocalyptic vision in which the world is like a falling plane piloted by chefs leading us straight to disaster, while delighting himself



Fig. 6. Santi Tena. *Preparados para el impacto*. 2018. Photography provided by the artist

with the decadence that goes along with the catastrophe. The following lines from the poem *I was Born into a World* written by James Franco illustrate Tena's thinking.

I was born into a world
 Before recycling was a thing,
 Before oil wars,
 When the biggest world
 Threat was nuclear.
 [...]
 We consumed and junked.
 Then we were told about
 Droughts, and disappearing
 Rainforests.
 [...]
 We send out loud messages
 To ourselves,
 That our world is dying:
 1984, Blade Runner,
 Armageddon, The Road.
 I've yet to read a book,



Fig. 7. Amparo Domínguez. *UNITED*, 2015. Photography: Joan Callergues

Or watch a film about a future
 I'd like to live in.
 Fortunately for me,
 I'll die before the Earth,
 But I'd like a place for my
 Computer chip self
 To click and beep
 In bright, clean happiness. (Franco 2015)

Through the use of color, we approach *UNITED* (2015) (Fig. 7) one of the works of Amparo Domínguez (Valencia 1961), belonging to her series of portraits *Carteles rasgados*. As a little girl, her father told her: 'paint billboards', but she opted for a continuous apprenticeship in the fields of paintings, engravings and sculptures. Her project starts off from the billboards on the city walls, which, over time, are slowly torn away, piece by piece, and in this way messages are formed in a game of memory and possibilities. She asserts that 'what attracts me the most about American culture is that they live it all as a celebration,' while talking about film noir, pop art – which she defines as wonderful – or the attraction she feels for the 50s aesthetics in regards for color and designs.

UNITED is a painting open for interpretation, with which she wants to invite us, as viewers, to shape our own message that will be conditioned by our experiences and emotions. She wants us to experience simultaneity, what we see in the foreground and what lies behind, an exotic combination of present, past

and future. Amparo Domínguez offers us two portraits of Rita Hayworth: on the one hand, she presents her to us in her role as Gilda, who turned her into one of Hollywood's greatest divas; and a second portrait of the same actress on the cover of LIFE magazine in which she drinks a milkshake. The contrast between both portraits and the background formed by fragments of billboards by North American airlines (Pan American, TWA and United Air Lines) is an invitation to travel, to cross the Atlantic Ocean, to visit New York and the Statue of Liberty.

The layout is presented as *horror vacui*, although ordered by the compositional diagonals, where the domain of color and grammar is shown as self-evident. Amparo Domínguez provides us with a meditation on the American dream: 'I work with 20th century waste: billboards, travel ads, American airlines ads, examples of pop culture, all of them are like time remnants, fragments of desire [. . .] the desire to travel, to fulfill our dreams. But our dreams often collide with reality. Today we have to be united more than ever'. Perhaps the artist wanted to title her work *UNITED* as a response to the policies of the president of the United States, who wishes to secure the southern border of the USA by means of a wall. Mexican writer Jorge Méndez wrote an emotive poem in 2017 that was shared on social networking sites and from which we retrieve a few verses:

Del otro lado del muro hay paisajes,
bosques, mares y pequeños rincones donde hay magia.

Del otro lado del muro hay gente apasionada,
[. . .]

Del otro lado del muro hay murales,
edificios, colores, cultura, talento, arte, letras.
[. . .]

Del otro lado del muro hay billones de sabores,
millones de platillos, miles de texturas,
cientos de creaciones.
[. . .]

Del otro lado del muro hay gente que corre
como si estuviera loca y todos los días persigue la felicidad.

And we must not forget that Rita Hayworth was the daughter of emigrants, her father came from Spain and her mother was of Irish and English descent.

Moving on from the attractive and cheerful remnants of the past we turn to the work of Jesús Llopis (Valencia 1961) named *American Bikes* (2017) (Fig. 8) which is a part of his *Bicycles* series. This work is the result of his concern about the increasingly extreme weather events and their devastating effects. When

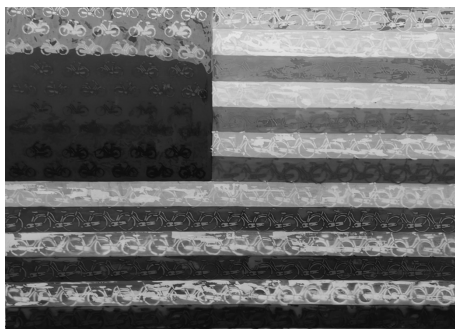


Fig. 8. Jesús Llopis. *American Bikes*, 2017. Photography: Joan Callergues

we interviewed him, Jesús Llopis told us: ‘We have had three summers in a row of extreme heat; this had not happened before. Scientists say that the only way to mitigate the consequences of global warming is to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.’ However, the alarms went off when the painter heard the statements of Republican President Donald Trump, who talked ironically about the environmental effects of climate change. He wondered how it could be possible that there were people who still denied this threat. His reaction was to paint bikes in series because he considers them ‘ecological’, in the sense that they are one of the most economical ways of traveling and also as the perfect excuse to show the viewer the apotheosis of color.

Jesús Llopis also invites us to participate in his particular trip to the Promised Land through the paradox of the American flag, a symbol of pop culture, on which he adds sustainable bicycles. Do they really lead us to a new Eden? Artist and viewers share the same dream: a world where the environment and nature are not threatened by pollution and where they are the true God in which we trust. To achieve this dream, a profound change in the socio-economic system is required, in which the dollar with its motto ‘In God We Trust’ also symbolizes the dream of those fleeing from poverty and struggling to reach a paradise of opportunities. A journey, that makes wetbacks all across the world dream of reaching the welfare society.

Finally, let us consider a representative piece of the creative stage of the 90s, *Porta falsa* (1992) (Fig. 9) by Francesc Torres Monsó (Girona, 1922–2015). In an interview, Torres Monsó defined his 90s creations as ‘removed from classical beauty’ and started using the resources he needed, ‘object(s), photography and text.’ For that purpose, he created the scenery and, with a neither literal nor



Fig. 9. Francesc Torres Monsó. *Porta falsa*, 1992. Photography: MACVAC

obvious story, the artist confronted the viewer with human nature's most miserable part. It is a metaphor-truth of reality and the fate of human beings, with a dose of reality.

[...] l'art, més que decorar i embellir, ha de ser la consciència de la societat i ha de servir per a millorar-nos. El fenomen estètic hi es afegit. L'art ha de ser una arma per poder dir allò que es pensa, i ser radical si convé. Sense mitges tintes ni retalls. (Gil 1990)

In that decade, his work turned more introspective and dived into the reality of the evolution and the transformation of his artistic language, in general, and the sculptural, in particular, while being faithful to the role of a warring artist in the social context.

Porta falsa is influenced by Rosalind E. Krauss, who defined the new category of a sculpture located in the resulting space from the addition of non-landscape and non-architecture. This piece is a good example of this evolution in his work. F. Torres Monsó placed himself in this new framework of representation and used all the resources to organize the narrative: he increased the

use of the installation, the performative activity, the text, the sculpture, photography and any resource that were necessary or that he deemed necessary in order to construct and strengthen his narrative.

Un discurs, sense concessions, conceptualment es va situar en un nihilisme a la manera dels postmoderns i postestructuralistes: Derrida, Lyotard, Baudrillard, és a dir, es va qüestionar els motius pels quals les cultures occidentals han basat les seves 'veritats' al coneixement absolut i en el relat hegemònic de l'acumulació de coneixement, de la necessitat de justificar el progrés històric en certs ideals i pràctiques de l'humanisme i de la il·lustració. Per reflexionar sobre la necessitat de descentralitzar l'autoria i crear l'espai necessari per construir altres discursos des de la mirada subalterna i post colonial de l'altre. Les seves exposicions seran destil·lats i síntesi discursiva d'aquestes preocupacions i fruit del seu, sempre viva, curiositat intel·lectual. (Ortiz Valeri 2016, 192)

Through its physical and affective components, *Porta falsa* leads us to an original counterpoint of alienation. With an ironic and critical attitude, Torres Monsó uses two words, 'NO ENTRY', in order to signal the end of a journey marked by intolerance. The travelers' desire to reach other Ítacas turns into frustration as they encounter borders that are sometimes insurmountable, especially for the weakest and most disadvantaged. Instead of automatic doors and welcome signs, they are met with walls, concertinas and holding centers for foreigners.

Is it possible to envision a world devoid of encounters and diversity? An advocate for human connectedness, award-winning poet Jackie Kay does so in her humorous poem *Extinction*.

We closed the borders, folks, we nailed it.
 No trees, no plants, no immigrants.
 No foreign nurses, no Doctors; we smashed it.
 We took control of our affairs. No fresh air.
 [...]

 No pandas, no polar bears, no ice, no dice.
 No rainforests, no foraging, no France.
 No frogs, no golden toads, no Harlequins.
 No Greens, no Brussels, no vegetarians, no lesbians.
 No carbon curbed emissions, no Co2 questions
 No lions, no tigers, no bears. No BBC picked audience.
 No loony lefties, please. No political correct classes.
 No classes. No Guardian readers. No readers.
 [...]

 No rhinos, no zebras, no burnt bras, no elephants
 We shut it down! No immigrants, no immigrants.

No sniveling-recycling-global-warming nutters.
 Little man, little woman, the world is a dangerous place.
 Now, pour me a pint, dear. Get out of my fracking face. (Kay 2015)

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