PEPÍN MARTÍN VÁZQUEZ FROM *CURRITO* TO *EL TORERO*: **«**LA ENCARNACIÓN FÍSICA DE UNA VIRTUD NACIONAL?**»**

Steve Cannon[[1]](#footnote-1)

José Martín Vázquez Bazán (Sevilla, 6 de agosto de 1927 – Sevilla, 27 de febrero de 2011), better known as Pepín Martín Vázquez, was a renowned bullfighter of the 1940s and early 1950s: **«**máximo exponente del toreo sevillano**»** (García-Rayo, online), **«**adelantado a su época**» (**Amorós, online). His film acting career is limited to only two films, but he was the title character, central focus and undoubted star of each. The remarkable thing is the huge contrast between the two films, made only five years apart, but each in their own way fascinating objects of study.

*Currito de la Cruz* (Luis Lucia, 1949) is an emblematic film of the early Franco era, a template for many francoist bullfighting films and a huge critical and financial success (Camporesi, 1993: 127). *El Torero[[2]](#footnote-2)* (*Châteaux en Espagne*, René Wheeler, 1954), on the other hand, is an oddity in some ways: a Franco-Spanish co-production by a little-known director, which received a mixed reception despite co-starring a major French star of the post-war period, Danielle Darrieux.

Both use bullfighting as a profession, a milieu, a business through which to explore values, aspirations and forms of masculinity in the evolving society of Franco’s Spain. That Pepín Martín Vázquez could be at the centre of two films offering such varying perceptions of that society will be the source of our key question in this article: to what extent did his persona as a bullfighter permit and make possible these contrasting versions or interpretations of Franco’s Spain?

*CURRITO DE LA CRUZ*: CLASS, CHASTITY AND SAINTLY MASCULINITY

The first title card on screen, even before the film’s title, promises **«**El gran matador de toros de Sevilla, Pepín Martín Vázquez, en...**» indicating the prestige for the film producers of featuring a major contemporary matador and certainly the bullfighting footage in the film is extremely impressive. The nature of those sequences will be discussed shortly.**

The third version of four (to date)[[3]](#footnote-3) of *Currito de la cruz* follows the rise, fall and rise again of a young, orphaned soon-to-be bullfighter and combines the narrative arc of his professional success with the romantic subplot of his rivalry with fellow bullfighter Romerita (Jorge Mistral) for the affections of his patron Don Manuel Carmona’s (Manuel Luna) daughter Rocío (Nati Mistral).

Currito’s humble social origins are emphasised throughout, in his dress, accent and his timidity in social gatherings. He first comes to the attention of Don Manuel in his plaza de tienta, fighting bullocks in his everyday street clothes.

Even as the film charts his material success, his changes in appearance are relatively minor - a white shirt replaces a white scarf, his hair is more neatly combed or oiled and, even so, he is almost always accompanied by his childhood friend, ‘Gazuza’ (Tony Leblanc), whose appearance (somewhat unrealistically given Currito’s new-found wealth) barely alters, so that the symbolic ‘marriage’ sequence in Semana Santa at the film’s end has Currito at his smartest, in suit and tie, while Gazuza stands alongside him as symbolic ‘best man’ but still in his habitual scarf and jacket. Gazuza’s presence, as well as providing comic relief in his slapstick encounters with bulls, therefore consistently underlines the social journey Currito has undertaken: from where he has risen and which point he has reached.

Currito’s social and verbal lack of confidence, however, becomes even more important than his costume in distinguishing him from Romerita, and his accent and verbal hesitancy do not significantly change with his material circumstances. His verbal hesitancy is explicitly contrasted with Romerita’s loquaciousness. In recurring sequences the latter courts and seduces Rocío through the bars of her bedroom window - and through language. But his words are not to be trusted, as he frequently leaves her window to go to flamenco bars, drinking and womanising. Currito, on the other hand, is tongue-tied, stutters, is unable to tell her how he feels, or at least not in time before she elopes with Romerita. As the conflict between them reaches its height towards the end of the film, Romerita openly mocks Currito’s speech patterns and accent as he says goodbye to her: **«**adio’ señ’ita Rosío**»**.

Currito therefore challenges him to a confrontation in the bullring, rather than the social arena, where his masculinity and moral value will be proven to be superior: **«**Te prometo que dentro de un mes nos volveremos a ver en la plaza, y allí pagarás todo el mal que hiciste a ella y a mí…A solas con el toro liquidaremos este asunto**».**

The verbal contrasts are intensified by the physical. It is significant that we meet an adult Pepín Martín Vázquez as the adolescent Currito in the inclusa: no child or youth actor is cast as a younger version of Currito. He thus carries a childlike innocence through his journey in the film and into his conflict with the larger man, Romerita.

Vázquez’s physique and stature and the ways he physically performs on screen are important not only to pass as a believable adolescent. He is small and delicate alongside the larger masculine presence of Mistral. The latter spreads himself across furniture, and the screen. Vázquez as Currito withdraws, stands aside or in the background, sits silently and still while Romerita performs, both verbally (including in song) and physically, drawing the eye of the guests, the women, the tourists and the camera. Romerita’s clear physical superiority is demonstrated when he strikes Currito and knocks him down when eloping, reinforcing his victory as ‘the better man’ in winning Rocío.

The ways in which Currito ultimately triumphs in that conflict and the ways in which that triumph are represented are extremely significant especially as regards its status as an emblematic film of 1940s Francoism.

As the title makes clear, Currito is **«**de la Cruz**». His ‘family’ origins are in an inclusa**, with symbolically religious stand-in parents: a ‘madre’ superior and a (bullfighting aficionado) ‘padre’ cura. That he is a good son to this family is underlined when he returns laden with gifts after his initial success.

We have already mentioned significant, socially meaningful elements of Currito’s costume but the whiteness of his shirt or scarf is intensified by the whiteness of his face, surrounding him frequently with a halo of light and establishing clear visual evidence of his pure, saintly presence.

Richard Dyer has written meaningfully about 20th century Hollywood’s construction of whiteness as an ultimate goal: **«**[it] assumes, privileges and constructs whiteness**»** (1997: 89), and in particular the ways that it drew upon Victorian visual language, especially from painting and book illustration, to establish the pure, angelic white woman as the epitome of beauty: **«The angelically glowing white woman is an extreme representation...an idealisation» (ibid: 127).** The film borrows significantly from Hollywood melodrama in many aspects: the role of chance or fate in its narrative (Currito bumping into Rocío in the street in Madrid after her abandonment) for example but it also incorporates elements of the specific **«lighting for whiteness» (ibid.: 89) technical codes common to the genre but incorporates them in specific ways** into the iconography of national-catholic ideology. The key development is that the glowing halo of light is applied here to the face of a *male* star. Angelic purity of spirit and a saintly, priest-like chastity in matters of sexual desire are important *masculine* values for this film, at this time.

Currito, unlike Romerita, does not ‘soil’ either himself or Rocío with sexual advances, overt or otherwise. Even at the end he will only attempt to be with her after Romerita confirms he will decline his ‘right’. The sexual abstinence of Currito (and many subsequent Franco-era cinematic matadors) could be compared to the *cine de cruzada[[4]](#footnote-4)* and its versions of heroic men who sacrifice their potency for something greater: the war. Jo Labanyi sees this form of cultural representation as part of the post-war processes of domesticating brutal and potentially uncontrollable masculinity, which now **«**requires the ‘castration’ of the nationalist warrior values which brought the nationalists into power**»** (2002: 48).

So Currito’s masculinity is exclusively performed and deployed in the bullring and it is there that his victory is confirmed. While Romerita displays bravery faced with the bull, he lacks finesse, style and the natural, harmonious, graceful attributes of Martín Vázquez’s **«**pura sevillanía**» (**García-Rayo, online)**. Actual footage of the latter’s corridas in 1947 and 48 are edited very carefully by Lucia, including the use of slow motion, to emphasise this aesthetic harmony** (Lucia in Gregori, 2009: 104)**. The voiceover soundtrack of radio commentary, too, underlines the graceful style of Currito and, interestingly, gives it very clear *feminine* overtones: his cape** **«**tiene una gracia alada que el abanico tiene en la mano de una coqueta**»**; his movements during his pases **«**suaves como alas de los ángeles**»**.

Romerita is fatally gored, death strikes him down **«**como un castigo bíblico**»** (del Rey Reguillo, 2007: 87[[5]](#footnote-5)) and Currito’s saintly qualities are in evidence as Romerita begs him for forgiveness (and that **«no-one like me» should get near his daughter)** while he receives the last rites. Currito vanquishes the sinful male rival and at the same time **«**returns Rocío...to domesticity**»** (Bentley 2008: 107) and to her father’s affections. We are left with a curious happy ending: the last image of Currito and Rocío finally together replaces Rocío’s daughter, with the bull, Pajarito, **«**sin madre como Currito**»** which they have been raising together.

So Currito proves himself the greater man, both morally and physically, due to his ability to control his appetites and desires. Romerita’s aggressive performance of masculinity brought short-term rewards in the social world, but causes his demise in the arena. Earlier in the film a comment is made on Currito’s physique: **«**Cuerpo pequeño…torero muy grande**». It is his physical self-control, explicitly linked to** Martín Vázquez’s bullfighting style and persona – how he uses his body – that ultimately makes Currito **«**la encarnación física de una virtud nacional**»** (Viadero Carral, 2016: 308).

*EL TORERO*: DISORIENTATION, CORRUPTION AND EXPLOITATION

The first significant difference between the two films is that *El Torero* is a Franco-Spanish coproduction, hence includes a substantial ‘outsider’ perspective. But it is more accurately an insider-outsider, hybrid view, due to the significant contribution to the script by Juan Antonio Bardem (Madrid, 2 de Junio 1922 – Madrid, 30 de Octubre 2002).

Director René Wheeler (Paris, 8 de Febrero, 1912 – 11 de Diciembre, 2000) is better known as a scriptwriter[[6]](#footnote-6), having worked on films as celebrated (and varied in genre terms) as *Jour de fête* (Jacques Tati, 1949) and *Du Rififi chez les hommes* (Jules Dassin, 1955)[[7]](#footnote-7). His directing career extends to only three films, each of which received a mixed reception at best. His debut feature *Les Premières armes* (1950) has some thematic similarities with *El Torero*, being a semi-autobiographical account of the **«**triste existence des apprentis jockeys**»** [miserable existence of apprentice jockeys] (**Bessy and Chirat, 1986: 49) and the climate of jealousy, rivalry and exploitation which reigns at the horse farm where they train.**[[8]](#footnote-8)

*Currito de la cruz* and *El Torero* have in common a rivalry between two matadors over a woman, which is resolved in a confrontation in the arena. But there the similarities end. There is no rags-to-riches positive journey here: Mario Montes (Martín Vázquez) is already at the height of the profession as the film opens and shortly we see the ultramodern décor of his spacious apartment, his silk dressing gown, his cravat and the servants attending to his whims. In addition, Montes, unlike Currito, is presented with a symbolic choice between two women, the French secretary of his exiled brother, Geneviève Dupré (Danielle Darrieux , Bordeaux, 1 de mayo de 1917 - ) and María Cristina (Silvia Morgan), the daughter of a ganadero.

The early sequences of the film bring out the contrasts between the insider view (Bardem’s treatment of bullfighting as corrupt and representative of an exploitative society) and the film’s wider focus on the disorientation of Geneviève, truly a fish out of water in Spain, especially in the manipulative hands of Montes’s apoderado, Don Manuel (Juan Calvo). It is not surprising that the film should give such attention to Darrieux’s character given her status as the top female star in the immediate post-war French cinema[[9]](#footnote-9) and the desire to reach a French, perhaps even global, audience.

The opening sequence is very intriguing: Montes’s brother has died on board an aeroplane landing at a Spanish airport and his secretary waits nervously on board alongside his corpse, interrogated coldly by blank-faced, plain clothes policemen. The mood is genuinely dark, worthy of a paranoid Cold War thriller: we are clearly being shown that she has crossed a border into an ‘other’ place, that España es diferente. Once clear of customs control, she makes her way to a bar where Montes is celebrating after performing in the Plaza Monumental that day.

He sits calmly and rather passively at the centre of festivities, indicating his dominant position amongst his entourage but also the boredom and disaffection he feels towards his apparently flourishing career. His fellow bullfighter and social hanger-on, Miguel (Maurice Ronet) voices the cynicism the script feels about corrupt practices (**«**toreo arreglado**»)** and manipulation of the media in the fiestas in which Montes has triumphed while he struggles, **«**heredor de sus camisas…y de sus mujeres.**»**

The pretext of Geneviève needing to break the news to Montes of his brother’s death draws her into his orbit and his evident attraction to her is exploited by Don Manuel, who pays her to keep Montes in line, ready to continue performing, which he describes as well worth paying for: **«**una inversión magnifica**»**. Frequently caught in situations where the language barrier[[10]](#footnote-10) leaves her perplexed and clearly understanding little or nothing about the world of bullfighting, Darrieux ends up performing as a somewhat unthreatening femme fatale: disoriented, manipulated rather than manipulating.

This comes across, in particular, in a crucial location sequence in Alicante **(López García, 2013: 276) which positions her on a tourist bus attempting to cut a path through a huge throng of local people, participating in street fiestas. Firstly, the parade stops to be photographed through the windows of the bus, indicating a certain self-consciousness on the part of the film makers about this highly choreographed sequence as staged spectacle. Then, as she makes her way on foot, symbolically against the tide, seeking to reach the bull ring in time to meet Montes before he performs, she is buffeted and shoved by the crowd, forced to dance by an apparently drunk older man and to duck as fireworks begin to explode around her head. Her disorientation is additionally and effectively conveyed to the film spectators by the clashing music (military bands, folkloric musicians) mixed on the soundtrack. Her ordeal ends as she reaches the wall of the bull ring and draws breath, posed against the poster advertising Montes’s appearance at the fiesta: too late to meet the flesh and blood man, left with the two-dimensional publicity version.**

**This would have been an extremely complex sequence to film, and one gets the sense of Wheeler attempting to prove his craft, now that he has a budget for such crowd scenes. But despite its power and effective staging it is difficult not to get the sense of** the focus on Geneviève’s lack of comprehension and disorientation becoming somewhat orientalist in its exoticising of local culture and rituals (the film’s version of the fiesta seems to throw together elements of the fallas, moros y cristianos and more) that she cannot comprehend.

This is despite the pre-publicity in *Primer Plano* (of which there was a great deal, indicating the prestige of a co-production starring France’s top female performer) boldly claiming **«***El Torero* no es una españolada…no es de pandereta**»** (*Primer Plano*, no. 735, 14/11/1954, p. 22). In fact that publication’s earlier piece on the production, in July of the same year, was perhaps a little more accurate, in stating **«***El Torero* es obra típicamente española, y al mismo tiempo con el gusto francés por lo hispánico racial y de original colorido**» (*ibidem*,** no. 716, 04/07/1954, p.23), **although it is doubtful whether Wheeler (or Bardem) are quite so positive about «**lo hispánico racial**».**

**This brings us to the question of reception and censorship, unavoidable in discussing any socially critical representation of Franco’s Spain. *Primer Plano*, again, offers a glimpse of the disquiet the film’s representation of bullfighting may have provoked. Silvia Caramella (2015: 12) describes it as follows:**

Al estrenarse la película el 24 de noviembre en los cines Pompeya y Palace de Madrid, y al desvelar la trama tan social y políticamente comprometida…el crítico de Primer Plano se llevó un disgusto incontenible...Barreira, el redactor de la sección de crítica de los estrenos, no pudo contener su indignación…por el hecho de que una película presentara al Mundillo taurino como “criminal”, tachando al filme de “repugnante” (no. 746, 30/01/1955, p.23).

The key socially critical elements in the film’s plot involve Don Manuel’s exploitation and manipulation of Montes’s career, including the buying of Geneviève’s services to further that aim: this is a business which exploits the bullfighter’s performances and personal relationships without scruple. The bullfighter’s position as manipulated plaything in the hands of powerful men is symbolically underlined by recurring images of dolls, puppets, scarecrows and dummies, including the one Miguel uses to train a bull to twist its head and exact his revenge.

Bardem developed further many aspects of his script for Wheeler’s film in directing *A las cinco de la tarde* (1961). Its much more overt depiction of a corrupt industry is represented in a heavily censored sequence of cash being stuffed into envelopes in a hotel room, ready to be distributed to journalists.[[11]](#footnote-11) We also see discussions of what kinds of stories they should write in closed-door or backseat meetings, things that are present only by implication in *El Torero*. Also implied in the latter (we do not see where Montes has come from, only where he has arrived) but explicitly conveyed in Bardem’s later film is the class dimension of such exploitation[[12]](#footnote-12): **«**[u]n mundo real, el del toreo…que el realizador pretende extrapolar a una sociedad asentada sobre la explotación del hombre por el hombre**»** (Castro, 2013: 278). Cerón Gómez (1995: 170) goes further, given the film’s ending with exploited killing exploiter, describing its theme as **«**toros y lucha de clases**».**[[13]](#footnote-13)

Both *El Torero* and *A las cinco de la tarde* are preceded by a title card, extremely similar in wording, informing the spectator that these are not real people, that there are no real problems like this in el mundo taurino: **«**Personas imaginarias…Mera coincidencia**». In the case of Bardem’s film this title’s insertion appears to** stem directly from one of the Francoist censor’s reading of the script (Cerón Gómez, 1995: 174).

Despite *Primer Plano*’s repugnance, *El Torero* nevertheless was released uncut. This may have been due to the film’s status as international co-production and an associated desire to appear to be a country opening up to some forms of artistic freedom and internal critique. On the other hand, the film’s conclusion and the way that it seeks to resolve the narrative conflicts could easily be seen to fit relatively comfortably with Francoist norms. The face-to-face confrontation in the arena, which Miguel has rigged with the (mis)trained bull also represents a face-off between Geneviève and María Cristina: their tense expressions and anxious posture are juxtaposed in shots of them as spectators, separated by a barrier.

When Montes is gored and Miguel exposed, leading to both ridicule and arrest, it is María Cristina who rushes to his bedside and he awakens to her kiss in a fairytale happy ending. His choice of the honest, hardworking, local María Cristina (simple, authentic, honourable, true) over the exotic, fancy, French Geneviève (manipulated, false, ultimately untrustworthy) represents a return to honourable bullfighting practices as opposed to **«**cosas de publicidad**» but also a potentially nationalistic resolution that one imagines to have been rather more acceptable to the Francoist critics and censors.**

**That** María Cristina is a working woman in her family’s ganadero (at least while unmarried...) compounds the sense that this film offers substantially more to women in the world of bullfighting: contrast their presence in the bullring and full-on engagement with the conflict unfolding before them with the total exclusion of Rocío and her mother in *Currito de la cruz*: left at home, or in a chapel, to pray and light candles for the safe return of their men.

So we might see a direct connection, to notions of **«**virtud nacional**», in comparing the endings of the two films. But in *El Torero***, it is Silvia Morgan who represents and becomes its physical incarnation. Pepín Martín Vázquez, this time, plays someone who has strayed from the righteous path, who has sinned and explicitly lost his way. Because he is disaffected, bored, allowing his career to be organised for him and around him, his performance in this film is less symbolic and indeed less active, less central. Both the Romantic focus on a choice of two women to represent salvation, and, of course, the presence of a huge female star in Darrieux make his performance to some extent secondary.

The exception, of course, is in the bull ring. A series of Pepín Martín Vázquez’s performances in provincial arenas was used to put together the sequences of Montes’s bullfighting: less carefully constructed than in *Currito*, but nevertheless a significant element in establishing that we are in the presence of a master performer.

In the end, a key aspect of Martín Vázquez’s casting in this film, and hence of the meanings we construct out of these performances, is one that is essential in considering any star, any star performance, any star vehicle. The power of intertextuality has been clearly established by Richard Dyer (1979; 1986) and others; that the meanings of a star’s appearances and performances accumulates, layering each subsequent film or performance with the totality of his or her persona (or personae) from all of the preceding ones.

So when the makers of *Currito* *de la cruz* announce the presence of **«**El gran matador de toros de Sevilla, Pepín Martín Vázquez...**» they are making quite explicit that they are mobilising the pre-existing meanings of his stardom as a bullfighter (and specifically one from the Seville school). It is not hard to imagine Wheeler and his producers pondering whether to cast an actor or a bullfighter in the title role of their prestigious film and finding the ideal solution in a man by then equally famous for his bullfighting style and the hugely popular performance as Currito. Perhaps the calm, still, unshowy and dignified style of Seville bullfighting is a further intertextual element in our reading of these two films**[[14]](#footnote-14) **and the sharply contrasting versions of Franco’s Spain that they offer: perhaps that very style and its associations** allowed for contrasting values and ideas to be constructed around or even projected onto him.

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2. We will use the Spanish title henceforth in this article. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The four screen adaptations, so far, of Alejandro Pérez Lugín’s novel (1921) of the same name are a silent version, directed by the author (1925); a first sound version by Fernando Delgado (1936) and a new adaptation directed by Rafael Gil (1965). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Cine de cruzada* refers to war films of the post-war period in which the political conflict is given a clearly religious character as seen, for example, in the infamous *Raza* (José Luis Sáenz de Heredia, 1942). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The author’s comment refers to the silent version of the film but is also applicable here. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Colin Crisp (1997: 285) describes him as a figure often frustrated at the dominant production methods in French cinema during the transition between the script-driven post-war *cinéma de qualité* and the auteur cinema of the late 1950s. Jacques Siclier, on the other hand, sees him as an *auteur manqué* referring to him as a **«**talent singulier…trop à part**»** [a peculiar talent...too left-field] (1990: 143), perhaps ahead of his time and obliged by his directorial misfortunes to return to script work and later television directing. Many general histories of French cinema omit him altogether (e.g. Billard, 1995). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. He also co-wrote *La Cage aux rossignols* (Jean Dréville, 1945) with Georges Chaperot, for which they received an Academy Award nomination in 1947and it served as inspiration for the hugely successful film *Les Choristes* (Christophe Barratier, 2004) for which Wheeler received a posthumous script credit. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. **According to Siclier (**ibidem**), it «**rebuta le publique et subit une sorte de malédiction**» [repulsed audiences and suffered a kind of curse] including reservations from the Office Catholique du Cinéma regarding its grim tone and the suggestions of a homosexual attraction between two of the boys. Following *El Torero* which «**reçut un accueil mitigé**» [received a mixed reception] (**ibidem)**, *Vers l’extase* (1960) about a young married woman’s spiritual quest in Morocco, «f**ût un échec**» [was a failure] (**ibidem**).** [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. According to an IFOP (Institut Français de l’Opinion Publique) poll in 1946, cited by Barrot (1979: 97). This was a particularly productive period in her career: two films directed by Max Ophüls *La Ronde* (1950) and *Madame de...* (1953), **«**probably Darrieux’s best performance ever**» (Biggs, 1996: 171) and Claude Autant-Lara’s adaptation of *Le Rouge et le noir* (1954), scripted by Aurenche and Bost, a film in some ways epitomising** *cinéma de qualité*.

   [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The relationship between her and Montes is marked by language and language learning, symbolised by the Assimil ‘Learn French’ disks that Montes buys, as well as the disks of songs in either language to which their relationship progresses. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Bardem: **«**Me forzaron a quitar una escena entera, porque se veía que los críticos taurinos recibían dinero de los maestros, de los toreros…una cosa que todo el mundo sabe, pero me lo hicieron quitar…[n]o quedó más remedio que ceder ante ese chantaje**»** (**Julio Abajo de Pablos**, 1997: 75). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *A las cinco de la tarde* contains some striking sequences in the streets and corrales of the barrio de las Delicias in Madrid, offering a glimpse of the ‘Spanish neorealism’ Bardem had been calling for over many years but also, to this viewer, an echo of the class nostalgia of the contemporaneous British New Wave and its source texts (e.g Stan Barstow): the torero is ‘from’ there but no longer part of it. The fact that it is the matadero district and slaughtering animals the job from which he was ‘saved’ adds a further dimension to the idea that the bullfighters in the film are exploited, in a society built on exploitation. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Marcel Oms’ (1962: 22-28) review in *Positif* saw the film as a **«**Miroir du Franquisme**».** [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. We can only leave to speculation the reasons for Pepín Martín Vázquez’s acting career being limited to these two roles. But perhaps being unshowy and self-contained were also aspects of his personality, not only of his performances in the bullring. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)