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Wrinkles, Furrows, and Laughter Lines: Paco Roca in Conversation at the Lakes International Comic Art Festival

In 2016, with the support of Cardiff University's School of Modern Languages and Santander, I co-produced a number of events with a focus on Spain for the fourth iteration of the Lakes International Comic Art Festival (LICAF), in Kendal, England.

From the outset, in 2012, the festival had been something a bit different on the British comics and festival scene in that it was not just open to a European and global perspective on comic art--it has included dedicated strands on Australian and Canadian comics, for example--but actively sought to showcase and interpret national comics cultures outside the Anglophone sphere. LICAF has made significant space, for example for Franco-Belgian comics and graphic novels, for the work of artists from Finland, and from Japan, and, in 2016 for work from Spain.

In 2014 I sent Julie Tait, the festival director, a copy of a drawing by Paco Roca, Spain's greatest living graphic novelist, where he expressed with wry humour his response to the experience of being asked, for the Nth time, 'Draw me a Batman' at festival signings (see Fig. 1). From there a correspondence developed, leading eventually to the Spanish strand in the 2016 edition of LICAF.

The co-produced content included a workshop on how to read graphic novels, led by Spanish comics scholar, Roberto Bartual, from Madrid's Universidad Europea; a sellout screening of the film adaptation of Paco Roca's *Arrugas* (*Wrinkles*); and a meet the author session with Paco Roca. The Spanish focus in the festival programme was emphasised further by the inclusion of several events involving Spanish comics legend Jordi Bernet.

Julie Tait, as the festival director, and Aileen McEvoy, the festival's associate director and producer, were fully behind our shared aim of making better known in Great Britain some of the outstanding work in graphic novels that has been going on in Spain since the mid-2000s, and they were also supportive of my belief that promoting great comics and graphic novels in languages other than English can be an effective way of encouraging second language learning, an area of education that has been marginalised by the policies of successive British governments, Labour and Conservative alike.

The collaboration with the festival developed into a further spin off project called *All is Not Well*, a website I created in collaboration with Jonathan Clode (editor of the Eisner nominated *To End All Wars*), that will eventually lead to a book, and that aims to use comic art to draw attention to the paradoxes around care giving. A premise of *All is Not Well* is that looking after other people is an occupation that is essential to a well-functioning and just society but also one that is poorly recompensed, misunderstood, and too often sensationalised in the mass media for things that go wrong, rather than being celebrated for the thankless work of a forgotten army of underpaid or unpaid social and family care givers. This project originated in Jonathan Clode's experience of working in the care sector, and with my interest in Paco Roca and Miguel Gallardo, and their most celebrated works, *Arrugas* (2007) and *María y yo* (2007) respectively.



Fig. 1 'Draw me a Batman'

Frame from *Emotional World Tour*, by Paco Roca and Miguel Gallardo (2009)

What follows in the main part of this text is a transcript of the conversation that took place on 16th October 2016 between Paco Roca, Roberto Bartual, the author, and audience members. This event followed a screening of *Arrugas* on the previous night and many of the members of the audience for the interview had seen the film, and were able, therefore, to ask well-informed questions about the film, especially with regard to how Roca had managed so effectively to capture in his work both the atmosphere of residential care homes, and the challenges faced by those who work and live in them.

Born in Valencia in 1969, Roca describes himself as belonging to a generation of Spaniards who were taught French, rather than English, as a second language. The conversation took place in Spanish, with consecutive translation by Roberto Bartual. In the transcript I have slightly edited the English versions of Bartual's questions, for clarity, and have translated Roca's answers from my verbatim Spanish transcript of the conversation, rather than from the audio consecutive translation, in order to stick as closely as possible to Roca's own words.

Before the interview took place, I had the opportunity to speak at length with Roca about the adaptation process and the genesis of the film version of *Arrugas*. He told me that the budget for the

film, of about 2.5 million euros, had largely come from grants and from Spanish television, and the Spanish Ministry of Culture. He agreed to the adaptation on condition that the film remain faithful to the graphic novel and was reassured by the serious approach brought to the project by the director, Ignacio Ferreras.

Roca was closely involved with the making of the film and told me that it was not that strange to see the characters he had drawn for the graphic novel come to life in animation, but that it was curious when they started to speak. The soundtrack, Roca added, is what lends the film adaptation many of its subtleties. The producers' reliability was tested by a request from investors to remove reference in the film to euthanasia pills: they did not make any concessions. Reflecting on the experience of having worked both in film, and in comics, Roca told me that the more modest economics of the comics industry allow authors more creative freedom than filmmaking does. He observed that, on the other hand, the film version of *Arrugas* had brought animated film to new audiences in the same way that *Arrugas* had found new readers for comics both in Spain and abroad.

Roca told me that a challenge in moving the story from the written and the drawn page to the screen, and in finding a register in the first place for the story, in any medium, was that of locating an existing frame of reference, or genre, within comics and animation from which to work. When he found it, this came from the neo-realist style of Spanish comics in the 1950s, and from outside the European filmmaking and comics tradition, in the form of anime and manga, and from their accommodation--more habitual than in European genres--of a visual language that embodies the routines and habits of everyday life. Roca mentioned Osamu Tezaku and Isao Takahata as particularly influential in his discovery of a visual language that would work for *Arrugas*. Interestingly, the French translation of *Arrugas* is introduced by the late Jiro Taniguchi.



Fig. 2 Frames from *Arrugas* (2007)

'My children have abandoned me here and I have to go and call them'

'Will they let her use the phone?'

'Ha ha! She never calls them. By the time she gets to reception she's forgotten what she went there for. She spends all day coming and going.'

Reflecting on the boom in the Spanish graphic novel over the last fifteen years, Roca said that the introduction of self-contained titles to the market in the 2000s widened the readership for comics in Spain since potential readers who were put off by not knowing where to start with serialised formats were more comfortable with single issue auteurist titles. He also stressed the importance of support from Spain's Ministry of Culture, in the shape of the Spanish National Prize for Comics, in creating new readerships for different formats.

Some measure of the seriousness with which the Spanish cultural institutions now take comics can be gleaned from the fact that Roca was asked to accompany José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, the Spanish Prime Minister between 2004 and 2011, as one of four cultural ambassadors, on a state tour of Asia designed to promote cultural exchange and trade. In 2014 Roca's work was the subject of a monographic retrospective exhibition funded by Spanish telecoms giant Telefónica, and hosted in the prestigious galleries of the company's iconic headquarters on Madrid's Gran Vía. The exhibition covered many of the artist's titles (numbering 24 by then), as well as his commercial work, and, most interestingly from a researcher's point of view, his notebooks, diaries, and photographs from the extensive fieldwork that underpins *Arrugas*.

I was curious to know how long it takes to complete a graphic novel and I asked Roca about the way that he works. He told me that on an average day he completes a page of drawings. He added that when the dialogue and scenario are factored in to the work, it probably adds up to about three days' work for each page of a comic like *La casa*.

In the interview transcript, Bartual and Roca talk mainly about *Arrugas* (2007), *Los surcos del azar* (2013), and *La casa* (2015).

RB refers to Roberto Bartual, PR to Paco Roca, RP to Ryan Prout, and AM (1-4) to individual members of the audience for the interview event held at the Brewery Arts Centre, in Kendal.

I have used square brackets to indicate my occasional editorial or translator additions.

Ryan Prout

Conversation transcript

RB Many of you already know Paco Roca, who is one of the finest graphic novelists working in Spain today and we are going to talk mainly about *Arrugas* [*Wrinkles* in English translation], which is one of Paco's graphic novels that has been published here in England, and I think many of you may have read *Wrinkles* or seen the film adaptation when it was shown yesterday, so I don't think Paco needs a long introduction. I would want to start by asking Paco to tell us about the impact of this graphic novel in

Spain, and to put his work in context.

PR As I was saying to you yesterday, the elements of which *Arrugas* is combined are the most non bestseller-ish that you could imagine: illness, boredom, care homes, the elderly. That being the case, I wasn't anticipating that the book would have much commercial success. I thought it might have some *critical* success, but not that it would be a best seller.

Also relevant to the context is the fact that at the time I was working on *Arrugas* I was dividing my time between work on illustrations for advertisers with my own comics work and so I had the freedom to take a risk and to do something that seemed, a priori, to be non-commercial.

The success of *Arrugas* came as a surprise. With these sorts of projects, you can never tell what will work commercially, and what won't. And I think that, in Spain, at least, what made *Arrugas* seem non-commercial was also precisely what enabled it to break with what *had* been considered commercial up until then. *Arrugas* came out on the Spanish market at just the right time in the sense that there were many elements aligned in such a way as to favour its success. Had it come out five or ten years earlier, or five years later, perhaps it wouldn't have had the success that it has had.

RB Why was this a propitious moment for a comic like *Arrugas* to appear in Spain?

PR Well, it came out in Spain in 2007 and this was also a time when comics were no longer for sale only in specialist shops but were also stocked by big stores, such as FNAC, and by department stores such as El corte inglés, and they were also available in more generalist bookstores, so there was a wider outlet for graphic novels. The Premio Nacional del Cómic [Spanish National Comic Art Prize, awarded by the Spanish Ministry of Culture since 2007] had recently been established and this also created a wider audience for comics, and for a book like *Arrugas*. And the Premio Nacional also made the media, press, and television less reserved about covering comics and gave them a focus around which to do stories on comics.

There had always been press and TV journalists who were comics fans and, until then, whenever it came to writing about comics or reviewing them, it had been a struggle, because that attitude that views comics as being something mainly for children was still there. The subject matter of *Arrugas* made it very easy to justify giving it press coverage. Because it dealt with these apparently serious themes, such as Alzheimer's disease, and old age, finally it gave journalists who had always wanted to write about comics a text that they could write about and *Arrugas* gained coverage across the media.

The coincidence of all these elements, plus the fact that there was the film adaptation, meant that *Arrugas* found a new audience, beside comics fans, and by now more than 65 000 copies of the book have been sold. I think the same constellation of factors has also occurred in other countries too, not necessarily with *Arrugas*, but with other titles. What happened in Spain with *Arrugas* had already happened in France, and is happening in Germany and Italy as well. This effect of comics breaking out into serious themes is a worldwide one.

AM 1 In the film we saw last night, I had the impression that the detail about the everyday routines

of a care home, and some of the humorous situations that can arise, could only have come from someone who worked in that environment. How much of this came from research and how much came from your own experience?

PR The starting point for *Arrugas* was talking about old age, and, in particular, the elderliness of my parents. At the time, my parents were living at home and I didn't want to make my treatment of old age exclusively about them, but to describe old age more generally, and in particular to show the isolation that goes with it. And that's when I decided to situate the story in a care home for the elderly.

Until then, I had never set foot inside a care home. So, I started making visits to see them first hand. I reached out to friends who work as care givers, doctors, or whose family members were living in nursing homes and I spent about six months doing field work in care centres. In the end, I didn't really need to make up anything from scratch. I came across so many real stories that all I needed to do was to put them together around the fictitious characters in the comic for the story to write itself. The research provided a wealth of anecdotes and stories that lent themselves to the narrative.

AM2 Some of the scenes in the film version of *Arrugas* were quite harrowing and difficult. Have you had any pushback from the establishment, from people who are not happy with your portrayal of care homes?

PR Yes. Absolutely. There have been all sorts of reactions and comments. There were comments made by people who complained about the portrayal of care homes in *Arrugas* and how I show things in the comic. And, on the other hand, there have been people who have said that my portrayal of the old folks' home is a sugar-coated one because I don't show more of the darker side of geriatric care: there are themes that I don't go into in the comic, such as the suicides that occur in care homes, or the residents who spend a very long time in a bedridden state. I didn't include those issues because they didn't add to the story that I was telling.

And so I've had contrary reactions, some positive ones from care homes who are supportive of the comic, and other more negative ones from care homes who are critical of the book. Above all, neither the comic nor the film adaptation is judgmental about certain questions. After all, care homes are a social necessity. It wasn't the point of my book, but the story does prompt reflection on what care homes should or could be like. In a way, we are hanging on to a type of care home that doesn't necessarily match what elderly people themselves would wish residential care to be.

Something that's in the film, but not the book is the swimming pool, which comes from *Emotional World Tour* [co-authored with Miguel Gallardo and published in 2009, this graphic novel describes the reception in the media and on the festival circuit of *Arrugas* and of Gallardo's *María y yo*]. The pool was something I came across on one of my on-site visits where I saw that nobody ever used it. The old folks didn't want to go for a swim in it because it meant they needed to be carried up on a crane to get in the pool. But whenever family members would visit a home with a pool they would decide it was the right place for their elderly relative, something that leads you to understand that it's family members to whom the homes are marketing rather than the elderly people themselves.



Fig. 3 Still from the film adaptation of *Arrugas* (2011), directed by Ignacio Ferreras

AM3 There's a lot of humour in the film and there's a fine line, isn't there, between laughing *at* old people's difficulties and laughing *with* them. Obviously the humour was a very important part of the book. How did you approach the humorous content, and how did you go about negotiating that fine line?

PR For a story like this one, humour was essential. In a way, the story is a drama, but I wanted to tell it in such a manner that it could be positive. And, curiously, when you talk to relatives of people with Alzheimer's, they tell you about their experiences with a sense of humour and so I told the story in *Arrugas* from a humorous perspective; if family members could look at the subject with a sense of humour, I reasoned that the comic could do so as well, using humour as a pressure valve in the storytelling.

RB I would like to ask you some questions about some of your other work, besides *Arrugas*. Memory is obviously a key theme in *Arrugas*, because of its focus on Alzheimer's but I think memory is more generally a primary topic across your work. Could you tell us about memory as a theme in your work?

PR Memory as a consistent theme in my work wasn't something I became conscious of until I started giving talks and looking retrospectively at my books. And that's when I saw that memory was there as a recurring theme. It doesn't come about from any sort of nostalgia or sense that things were better in the past. My interest in memory as a theme has more to do with the search for identity, for self-recognition, either of the individual or of a society. In *Arrugas*, for example, the loss of memory is closely linked to the loss of identity, of knowing who you were. To talk about Alzheimer's was to broach perhaps the worst disease imaginable, one that takes away your own identity.

RB I would like to link this topic to another one of your graphic novels, *Los surcos del azar* [*The Furrows of Chance*], that hasn't been published in English. The title of the book comes from a poem by the Spanish poet, Antonio Machado, and that particular verse is usually translated as 'The furrows of chance'. [The poem is section IV of 'Proverbios y cantares', in Machado's *Campos de Castilla*, published in 1912.] Your book with that title is a story about a fictional character, based on a real person, who fought on the Republican side during the Civil War, and then fought with the French during WWII. He was on the winning side with the French, but also lost again, just as in the Civil War, because he had fought with the French on the basis of de Gaulle's promise of going into Spain to defeat Franco after victory in WWII. But de Gaulle didn't make good on that promise and so the character is on the losing side twice in a row.

The story begins in the form of a fictional interview between you and this man who narrates his memories to your fictional avatar (see Fig. 4). This person doesn't have Alzheimer's but there is a very interesting scene when your fictional character asks him questions about his past, and his experiences of war and you apologize to him for making him go back to those times. His reaction is not what the reader expects, though. Could you tell us about this scene?



Fig. 4 Frames from *Los surcos del azar* (2013) showing a veteran of La Nueva and Roca's fictional avatar

'We couldn't lose this war too. No way! Fascism had to be defeated one way or another.'

PR Here what's at stake is collective memory, and memory as a form of understanding someone's role as a person who forms part of a country, Spain in this case. And in that sense, Spain is a peculiar country. Shifting from a past of dictatorship, and of fascism, to a democratic present was done on the basis of a collective amnesia and this entailed a kind of manipulation on the part of one section of society, and on the part of the other. As Orwell said, in *1984*, I think, 'Who controls the past controls the

present. And who controls the present controls the future.'

Amnesia about a certain part of our history makes it easy for the Spanish people to be manipulated, in the sense of leading them to believe certain things. Where Spain is concerned a vision of history hatched under Franco persists and we go on believing it, and this is exploited by political parties. So, the idea behind *Los surcos del azar* was to reconstruct a part of that history in order better to understand a present that can sometimes be quite surrealistic. I also wanted to put some context around that history and to see that for some other countries at that time, --France and Great Britain, for instance--, a fascist government in Spain was preferable to the possibility of a communist one.

RB There is another thread that connects *Los surcos del azar* and *Arrugas*. In *Los surcos del azar*, when finally the protagonist has re-told his war stories, of battles fought and lost, he is made happy by the opportunity of having been able, for the first time, to tell his whole story. Similarly, in *Arrugas*, there is a character, Modesto, who also reacts with happiness when something his wife says to him restores some of his memory and he becomes himself again.

PR Yes. That's how it is for Spanish war veterans and especially so for those who had technically won a war--those who fought for the Allies in WWII, and yet at the same time had lost a war. Although they had won WWII and had brought an end to the fascism of Hitler and Mussolini, they had lost the battle that really mattered to them, the one to be able to return to their country, a country that continued to be dominated by a government that had been an ally of fascism. Those people had both won, and lost, and they were forced to keep quiet and to exist in silence for a long period of time.

RB The final triumph for those Spaniards who fought in WWII was very ironic because they were used by General de Gaulle as propaganda in a way. He decided that he was not going to help them to defeat Franco. But he had them be present when his forces entered occupied Paris, creating an image like the allegedly fictional one taken on Iwo Jima.

PR It's complicated to talk about this. The Republican soldiers who fought in the French army had a certain kind of recognition...well, we should say to begin with that the role of France in WWII, considered alongside the role of Great Britain, the USA, or the USSR, is a minor one. And in that context what the Spaniards in La Nueve [the ninth company of the Deuxième division blindée--the Second Armoured Division of the French army, also known as the Division Leclerc] could contribute to the effort of the Allies was fairly minimal. And for La Nueve, with its mostly Spanish contingent, to be the first to enter Paris [on 24 August 1944] was a symbolic act first and foremost. Then the rest of the allied forces entered Paris the following day, which was more significant. The role of La Nueve was really just to say 'Take it easy. We're here now. The army is coming tomorrow.'

That said, they didn't know what to expect when they went into this city occupied by the Nazis and it was almost a suicide mission. The French army trusted the Spanish soldiers who had by then been fighting for almost ten years, first in the Spanish Civil War, then in the war in Africa, and then on the front lines of WWII. The Spanish division was a sort of elite inside the French army. That symbolic act is what leads us to what is, for me, the most important part of the story. Having been the first unit to enter occupied Paris, La Nueve enjoyed the honour of being at the head of the victory parade that followed

two days later. They marched alongside de Gaulle, Leclerc, and the other French dignitaries. And because of that La Nueve figured in the news reports about that event and in the declarations that went with it. And this is what has made memories of that unit durable.

RB It was only from reading *Los surcos del azar* that I learned about the existence in the French army of this unit made up of Spanish Republicans.

PR The collective amnesia that we have suffered from in Spain is what has been responsible for the fact that we had forgotten episodes like the one we're talking about now. It's logical that the French wouldn't lend it much importance because La Nueve wasn't made up of Frenchmen. And in Spain, during the Franco period, it wasn't possible to talk about Republican soldiers who fought against the Fascist axis and defeated Hitler and Mussolini. And so the story of that episode continued to be forgotten until the 2010s when the role of those Spanish Republican soldiers began to be recognized, in the first instance by the French government, and by Anne Hidalgo [who became the first woman to be mayor of Paris in 2014], who is of Spanish descent. She, perhaps, was the first person to try to reclaim the memory of that unit of Spanish Republicans.

RB The episode had until then been all but forgotten about in Spain, because of our collective amnesia. It's almost as if France were the mirror image of Spain because in France you have all these stories about the Resistance, and about people who fought for the Resistance, and some of those stories have proven to be false and to be based on the creation of fake memory, whereas in Spain we have by contrast this collective amnesia.

PR The French had to reconstruct their history because the role of France during WWII is a very ambiguous one. First they were on one side signing an amnesty, and then they were on the other side, and then there were collaborators; they had to rewrite their history and it was hard for them to explain that many of the French casualties during WWII came about from friendly fire, from Allied bombing. And all of that makes for a situation where it is hard to maintain national pride and so they re-wrote their history following this logic that sees everyone as having turned out to have been fighting for the Resistance.

RB In the time we have left I would like to ask you about your most recent work, *La casa*, another book that addresses memory, in this case personalized, fictional memory.

PR Yes. Memory is a topic here as well. Whereas in *Los surcos del azar* it was about discovering a civic identity--what it means today to be part of a country like Spain with a fascist past--in *La casa* it's more about discovering who we are as individuals. How much of what makes you who you are comes from genetics, and how much comes from your family upbringing? Part of *La casa* is about understanding the origins of an individual's identity.

All comics give you the chance to reflect on a particular theme and my starting point for *La casa* came about at a moment when, almost simultaneously, I became a father for the first time, and also lost my own father. My father had been suffering from a long illness and I realized that all my memories of him at that time seemed to come from the year leading up to his death when he was ill, and going in and out

of hospital, and bedridden.

It was very hard for me to remember something about him that wasn't tinged with sadness. Writing *La casa* was for me a kind of exercise in memory restoration. My father had just died and my feelings were all mixed up and I wasn't sure how to manage those memories. *La casa* was part of the process of putting those memories in order and working through a kind of internal mourning.

I had the sense that if I were to put off work on *La casa*, let's say until a few years after my father's death, when things had sorted themselves out, it would have turned out to be something quite different and I wanted to do it there and then, at that moment in time when I felt lost inside the turmoil of all those feelings. I did the drawing at the same time as I was putting things in order, having so many thoughts, and remembering what my father had been like, and what I had been like as his son. In that sense I think *La casa* may be the most sincere story that I've done. In a way, making that graphic novel was also my mourning process. Normally, you try not to think too much about who your reader is going to be, but in this case, I did and I realized that the person I was making the graphic novel for was me.



Fig. 5 The opening sequence of Paco Roca's *La casa* (2015)

AM4 Would you say that what was true for you with *La casa* could be true of your work more

generally, in the sense that it's a process of self-discovery?

PR Well, they say that there are authors who are monothematic, and in a way I may be one of them in that I am constantly telling the same story, albeit my focus shifts from society at large to the individual. What all my stories have in common is an effort towards better self-knowledge. I think that the more self-knowledge you have, the more you can understand other people. Disguised in various ways, I do think that is the theme that grounds all my narratives.

RP Which would you say are the books that have had the most influence on you?

PR I think that over time there have been many books that have influenced me. One of the first influences I can think of comes from Franco-Belgian comics. I read a lot of these as a child. I read Asterix, Tintin, Spirou. Later, I read superhero comics like *Spiderman*, *The Fantastic Four*. And later still I discovered other European writers such as Moebius, people like Frank Miller, Alan Moore. And then there was manga and authors like Tono, Tezuka, Taniguchi. And then graphic novelists like David Mazzucchelli, Chris Ware, Seth, Marjane Satrapi. Across that span of time there have been many artists who have influenced me, and not only from the world of comics. I think every author has to be open to everything that's around him and my work has been heavily influenced by cinema, and by literary works. Animated cinema has been a strong influence on me, particularly the films from Studio Ghibli.

I also like to read accounts of other artists' creative processes. Whether you're making a film or writing a literary novel, we all face the same challenge of how to tell a story in an engaging way. We all want to tell stories about something that matters to us, and that makes you think, and you want to involve the reader or the viewer in what it is you are trying to say. And how you do that, when all is said and done, is a professional art. It's very interesting to see how artists working in other media approach the same challenges in storytelling.

RP Did you learn the art of making comics alone, or did you have a mentor?

PR I think most of us graphic novelists and comics authors are autodidacts. Whether your background is in fine art, or design, or something else, the art of storytelling is not something that is taught at university and most of us acquire it through an autodidactic process, and through reading, not only comics, but very widely.

RB Following on from this discussion of your influences, who do you think would win in a show down between Tintin and Asterix?

PR That's a difficult question to answer. At one point in my life, Asterix would have won by a mile, because that was what I read the most, and I loved not only the drawing but also the stories, that I thought were a lot of fun. But with the passage of time I think Tintin would win, though more Hergé than Tintin. For me, he comes closer now to what I think making a comic is really about.

I think you see in Hergé what being an author means: the seriousness with which he approached a project, his ambition for what comics could do, and the research he put in to his work; the fact that he set aside the time that was needed to work properly on a project; that he revised scenes until they were

as close as possible to being perfect; and setting up a team to address the challenges of a new project. When I feel like re-reading something, I prefer to re-read an Asterix volume than a Tintin one, though, because, to tell you the truth, Tintin bores me.

Consecutive interpreting of interview by Roberto Bartual.

Transcription and translation by Ryan Prout.



Fig. 6 Paco Roca (left) and Roberto Bartual (right) at the Brewery Arts Centre, Kendal.

Photo by Ryan Prout