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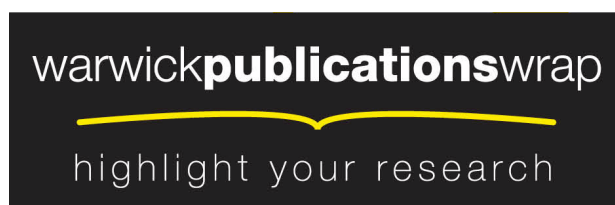
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Consuming Nationalism?

Taste, Language, and the Novel in Constitutional Galicia

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In the summer of 2006, I went into a *quiosco* on the Rúa Nova in Santiago de Compostela. I had spent a long day in the library and was looking for a trashy magazine to flick through over a glass of *albariño*. I passed over the Spanish women's magazines *Woman*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Casa y jardín*, *Hola* and *¿Qué me dices?*, looking instead for something in Galician – maybe an *Olá*, a *Casa e xardín* or a *Que me dis?* – but could find only the current affairs magazine *Tempos novos* and the Galician edition of *O Correo Galego*. I asked the vendor if she could recommend anything a bit lighter, and she stared at me. “¿En gallego?” “Sí, en galego.” “Pues, no. En gallego, no.” And she burst out laughing. The exchange got me thinking. The vendor's complete incredulity at the idea of light reading in Galician was something of a surprise at the time, but with hindsight, I realize that it really should not have been; every time I recounted the story to a Galician friend, what surprised them was not that I could not find a trashy magazine in Galician, but that I would even have thought to ask.

This essay develops my reflections about that incident and its implications, arguing that the absence of Galician-language trashy magazines, while deeply frustrating on an individual level, has a wider significance. It is, I suggest, a symptom of

the stratification of Galician cultural production between “high” cultural forms such as poetry and “low” ones such as folk music and dance. Cultural production on both sides of this stratification, which stems from Galicia’s peculiar socio-political development during the nineteenth and much of the twentieth century, has been characterized by a utilitarian concept of cultural production whose emphasis is less on the reception – or consumption – of culture than on its ideological motor: the national project. The consequence of this stratification is an absence of autochthonous versions of what we might call “middlebrow” or “consumer” cultural products, particularly fiction. The political changes in Galicia since democracy, and especially in the last five years, have inevitably been accompanied by radical changes in the institutional status of (and thus support given to) Galician language and culture that must, I argue, have had an impact also on the end-users or consumers of cultural products in Galicia. In trying to articulate this impact, I draw on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, notably in *Distinction*, his study of the tastes and preferences of the bourgeoisie in 1960s and 1970s France. In particular, I adapt Bourdieu’s proposal that “to the socially recognized hierarchy of the arts . . . corresponds a social hierarchy of the consumers [which] predisposes tastes to function as markers of ‘class’” (*Distinction* 1-2). Where Bourdieu’s concept of “tastes” is conditioned by access to social, economic and educational capital, I consider how the competing criteria for judging cultural production in Galicia – that is, why people watch what they watch and read what they read – have been conditioned by the social, institutional and economic changes of three decades of democracy.

Institutional Galician Culture since 1978

Like the rest of Spain, Galicia has experienced far-reaching changes during the democratic period. In Galicia, the institutional framework set out in the Constitution and

the Statute of Autonomy is now firmly embedded. However, the legislative ambiguity of the Constitution and the Statute, in particular regarding the relationship between State and Autonomous Communities and the status of the different languages operative in Galicia, is still the cause of significant unease. There have recently been two dramatic electoral changes in Galicia: 2004, when Manuel Fraga and the centrist PP lost power after 15 years to a PSOE-BNG coalition, and 2009, when the coalition in turn lost to a revived PP under Alberto Núñez Feijóo. These have been a catalyst for the expression of anxieties on both sides of the table, which have largely been coded through debates about the social and institutional status of the Galician language.¹ This is not a new phenomenon in Galicia: as I have argued elsewhere, the stakes of language choice, and of the relationship between language and identity, must be considered in the context of Galicia's ambiguous status as a *nacionalidade histórica* within Spain ("Festering Wound"). The absence for so many years of political institutions has meant that the cultural sphere, identified primarily with a monolingual national literature, long functioned in Galicia as a *de facto* public sphere, and in many ways, it continues to fulfill this role today. Antón Figueroa, drawing on Bourdieu's work in "Le Champs Littéraire," argues that while the development of Galician political institutions after 1975 has increased the autonomy of the literary field, the residues of past repertoires remain, particularly in the social field (for example, the media), where we still see a tendency towards justification of the "Galicianness" of cultural products or actors. In consequence, he suggests:

The status of Galicia as a "minority" language or culture that "must be defended" serves as a justification for the intervention of politicians (of any party) in the cultural field. The political authorities do not always have the

necessary vision or will to limit themselves, through their decisions, to creating the conditions for the spontaneous development of artistic fields. For their part, the artistic fields are still not used to creative freedom, exempt from planning, and are too dependent on external authorities. (Figueroa)

This essay examines the disjunction in Galicia between institutional culture and what we might call lived or embodied culture, which was revealed in my fruitless search for a little light reading in Galician. By “institutional” culture, I mean the culture that has developed during the democratic period, which is legitimated and supported by both political and cultural institutions, or by institutions that operate at the interface between politics and culture. These include not only the Xunta, the Consello da Cultura, the Consellería da Cultura and the Real Academia Galega, for example, but also the three Galician universities, the publishing sector, the media, or the different archives (Emigración, Audiovisual) that are embedded within, and supported by, the political structure. This culture is legitimized through the resonance of Figueroa’s past repertoires; the abstract systems that Xoán González-Millán so clearly explicated in his theorization of a Galician cultural history based on the twin poles of a politically-motivated “nacionalismo literario” and an aesthetically-driven “literatura nacional” (“Do nacionalismo”). In both cases, the common denominator, building on the now-hegemonic theory of Galician literary history expounded in Ricardo Carballo Calero’s *Historia da literatura galega contemporánea* (1963), is the conflation of “culture” with language and territory. This framework is thus located firmly within the abstract, utilitarian-utopian dimension, so that although elite and popular cultural forms may

appear very different, and appeal to very different audiences, they are brought together by their shared participation in and commitment to the Galician national project.

The question now is how far this utilitarian-utopian-nationalist concept of culture remains viable as the sole or principal framework for giving meaning to cultural products and interactions in Galicia. This essay situates itself as part of the recent move in Galician Cultural Studies, so called to distinguish it as a field from the institutional/ized discipline of *Filoloxía Galega*, which some critics have called the “postnational turn” (Colmeiro; Hooper “Novas Cartografías;” Miguélez-Carballeira and Hooper). This move does not propose doing away with the concept of nation, but argues instead for demythifying and historicizing the universalized and therefore, of course, anything but universal concept of the national, in order to inflect it with positions that have often been considered either tangential or detrimental to it. These might be positions marked by gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, citizenship, or even political affiliation, which, as Helena González Fernández has argued, have tended to be absorbed and subsumed into a dominant nationalist discourse that acts as a “‘paraguas totalizador’ que incorpora los otros discursos que surgen en la comunidad nacional” (Segarra et al., 18).² The turn to a postnational cultural studies that seeks to complicate the abstract discourse of space and nation by peopling it with embodied agents marked by gender, class, race or ethnicity may, I propose, provide a more fitting response to the changing context of cultural consumption in democratic Galicia, for as Douglas J. Goodman and Mirelle Cohen remind us, “[c]onsumer objects are one of the main ways in which we communicate who we are to others . . . the things we consume are expressions of ourselves, and whether or not we consciously intend a message, others will read it as such” (76).

Language Choice and Cultural Consumption

For many Galicians today, the gap between institutional Galician culture, whether “high” or “low,” and lived reality is enormous; they must constantly negotiate between two languages and cultures that are acutely unequal, and this is reflected in their cultural practices. The inequalities shaping the cultural field are clearly demonstrated in the data on language in the media provided by the *Observatorio da Lingua Galega*. The *Observatorio* rather understatedly conclude that “O galego nos medios de comunicación non atopa a correspondencia que sería de esperar dunha sociedade con alta presenza da lingua galega en termos xerais” “Galician is not as present in the media as one would expect in a society where Galicia generally has a strong presence” (*Situación 93*).³ Their statistics for 2008 show that only about 6.5% of content in the Galician print media is in Galician (*Situación 51*), compared with 20% of radio output and 14.5% of television output (*Situación 91*). The primary objective of the *Observatorio* is to “Obter un coñecemento de primeira man sobre a situación da lingua galega na sociedade” “obtain first-hand knowledge of the situation of the Galician language in society” and thus to “Poder orientar e focalizar as medidas a prol da lingua nos ámbitos en que sexa máis necesario e se constate unha maior demanda” “be able to orient and focus pro-language measures in the areas where it is most needed and confirm a greater demand” (“Obxectivos”). To this end, their exceptionally valuable studies focus on the quantity, and to some extent the quality, of Galician language use across different sectors, their objective being to “Posibilitar o seguimento permanente do Plan xeral de normalización da lingua galega” “make possible permanent adherence to the General Plan for Normalization of the Galician Language” (“Obxectivos”). As their studies demonstrate, when it comes to language choice in Galicia, it is often the case that there is no real

choice to be made. A serious issue for many Galicians is that only part of their needs can be met through the Galician language, which means that for the rest they must go to Spanish. As the *Observatorio* point out,

Obsérvase que a presenza do galego na prensa escrita non ten parangón ningún coa situación do galego entre a poboación, de maneira que os falantes habituais de galego non atopan a necesaria correspondencia da súa lingua nun ámbito tan importante na nosa sociedade coma este.

We observe that the presence of Galician in the print media bears no relation to the situation of Galician in the general population, so that those who normally speak Galician do not find adequate examples of their language in this important area of our society (*Situación 52*).

Xosé Luis Regueira puts it more pithily: “Todo esto hace que sea fácil vivir en español en Galicia, y que el contacto con el gallego se reduzca a algún trámite administrativo. Vivir en gallego no resulta tan cómodo” (196).

There is thus a disconnect, as noted by the *Observatorio*, between people’s ability to read and understand Galician, which is high, and the availability of media by which they can put this into practice, which is low. This is a significant factor in the fear that is always bubbling under in the public sphere, of the apparently inevitable encroachment of Spanish. The drift towards Spanish is widely discussed and debated; a common explanation is the prestige of Spanish as a world language and as the language of the public sector in Galicia for many years, combined with the stigma historically attached to the Galician language. However, there is also the question of what’s in it – and by “it” I

mean Galician cultural production – for the ordinary consumer. In what follows, I ask how far we might complement the *Observatorio's* admittedly startling figures about the presence of Galician in the media through reflection on the question of language choice, which as we have seen is rarely a true choice. We might reflect also on the wider question of why people choose to read what they read, or watch what they watch, and how cultural classifications or distinctions of tastes (*à la* Bourdieu) are constructed. In this way, I hope to contribute in a small way to the *Observatorio's* project.

Bourdieu, writing in *Distinction*, argues that “classificatory schemes . . . can function, by being specified, in fields organized around polar positions” (469). This is particularly telling “in the field of cultural production, which is . . . organized around oppositions which reproduce the structure of the dominant class and are homologous to it” (*Distinction* 469). In the case of the Galician cultural field, I argue, the structuring oppositions are based not only on social and economic capital, but also on what we might call *national* capital. We might thus hypothesize that in the Galician context, cultural capital comes from several sometimes competing directions: on the one hand, as González-Millán showed, Galician-language culture (“high” or “low”) has conventionally been legitimized through its perceived or actual contribution to the national project, while on the other, Spanish-language culture can be legitimized either through its perceived cultural prestige (high culture) or through the pleasure of consumption (low culture) (“Do nacionalismo”). To put it another way, Galician-language culture has been judged *pragmatically* even when, as we shall see, this judgment is cloaked in other terms, while Spanish-language culture has been judged either *aesthetically* or *pleasurably*, though rarely both at once. Of course, this is a very crude distinction, but it begins to help us to consider the more complex judgments of

taste that may underpin an apparently straightforward linguistic choice, and thus provide a way into theorizing the apparent gap between institutional culture, which is monolingual, and lived experience, which is plurilingual, if inequitably so.

In this context, the stratification in Galician cultural production between “high” and “low” cultural forms that are both, nonetheless, legitimized by their contribution to the national project (these days, normally articulated in terms of “cultural normalization”), might be considered the lingering effect of a social structure that is now obsolete. During the democratic period the peculiar socio-economic conditions that gave rise to this cultural stratification have been transformed. Where once Galician society was characterized by its predominantly rural character, with a small oligarchy and little or no urban bourgeoisie, the growth of urban centers and the changing economy mean that Galician now has a growing, economically and socially influential, aspirational, educated urban sector that has no natural equivalent in the traditional hierarchy of Galician cultural forms. According to research by the *Fundación Banco Bilbao Vizcaya Argentaria* (BBVA) and the *Instituto Valenciano de Investigaciones Económicas* (IVIE), the growth in Galicia’s urban population between 1900 and 2007 is staggering: Vigo’s population grew more than fourfold, with one in ten of the provincial population (46,573) living there in 1900, a proportion that by 2001 had grown to one in three (294,772) (Fundación BBVA “Pontevedra” 5); less dramatically, A Coruña was home to some 8% (53,930) of the provincial population in 1900, but more than 21% (244,388) in 2001 (Fundación BBVA “A Coruña” 5). Overall, the proportion of the Galician population living in Galicia’s seven largest cities, A Coruña, Santiago, Ferrol, Vigo, Pontevedra, Ourense and Lugo, grew from 12% to almost 40% during the twentieth century (Pérez).

The relationship of Galicia's new urban sector with institutional Galician culture, and thus the hierarchies of taste conditioning their reading, viewing and listening choices, is complex. What is not in doubt, however, is that this group tends strongly toward use of Spanish as a default language. As Gabriel Rei-Doval shows in his study *A lingua galega na cidade no século XX*, the use of Galician as a "lingua habitual" in Galicia's seven principal cities ranges from a high of 29.5% in Santiago de Compostela to a low of 4.4% in Vigo (506). This does not mean that Galician urbanites do not know or understand Galician: Rei-Doval finds that some 94.5% claim to understand it, while 75.6% claim to speak it well (475-76).⁴ Nevertheless, this tendency towards use of Spanish in daily life is reflected in cultural choices. The report on Spanish reading habits published annually by the *Federación de Gremios de Editores de España* (FGEE) reveals that in 2008, only 6.3% of self-described readers located in Galicia "habitually" read in Galician (FGEE, *Hábitos* 50). When asked "Además, ¿lee usted en otras lenguas?," 59.2% of readers located in Galicia said that they sometimes read in Galician (FGEE, *Hábitos* 51).⁵ This transfers to purchasing too: when asked for more information about the most recent book bought, just 7.3% of readers located in Galicia said their last purchase was a Galician-language book (FGEE, *Hábitos* 86).⁶

My interest is in what lies behind these figures. For if we look at the kinds of books being produced and those being read in Galicia and in Spain as a whole, there is a clear disconnect. According to the FGEE's report on Spain's internal publishing market for 2007, "literature" comprised 37.2% of titles produced, disregarding textbooks, of which 76.9% was narrative (FGEE *Comercio* 32). In Galicia, the proportion of literature published was broadly similar (31.6%, again disregarding textbooks), but only 51.1% of that was narrative (AGE *Informe* 20). Instead, fully 25% of literature published in Galicia

was poetry (AGE *Informe* 20), compared with just 6% of literature published in Spain overall (FGEE *Comercio* 32). The relatively low proportion of novels published in Galician, together with the relatively high proportion of poetry, sit uneasily with the FGEE's survey on Spanish reading habits. According to the FGEE's data on the last book bought by self-confessed readers in Spain (disregarding textbooks), 76.6% were classified as "literature," and 93.5% of this was narrative (FGEE *Hábitos* 84). These figures imply that the novel's popularity with readers in Spain is proportionately greater than its share of the publication market might suggest: in other words, people are more likely to buy *and to read* novels than other literary genres. This suggests that we might connect the lack of regular readers in Galician with the absence of a wide enough variety of the kinds of books people actually want to read.

In the following section, I look more closely at the connection between the evidence regarding novel reading in Spain and the hierarchies of taste in operation in Galicia, in particular with regard to the question of the "middlebrow" novel. The novel is a key component of middlebrow culture: as Cecilia Konchar Farr writes, "[w]ithout novels, it would be hard to imagine a middlebrow literature at all" (35). How far then, I wonder, might the concept of "middlebrow" provide a bridge between the utopian-utilitarian model of Galician cultural production and the consumer-led model of Spanish cultural production, and thus provide a means of reconnecting cultural production in Galicia to the lives of real, embodied consumers.

The Middlebrow Novel

In terms of fiction, a "middlebrow" novel, as Farr suggests, is "not what you usually read in English classes or find on Great Books lists. But it is also not what you hide under

your bed and replace with Michael Ondaatje on your nightstand when your smart friends visit" (34-35). For Farr, as for Janice Radway writing on book-of-the-month clubs, or Nicola Humble on the feminine middlebrow novel in mid-century America, the key is in the balance these books strike between the extremes of "high" and "low" culture. As Humble writes, "the middlebrow novel is one that straddles the divide between the trashy romance or thriller on the one hand, and the philosophically or formally challenging novel on the other: offering narrative excitement without guilt, and intellectual stimulation without undue effort" (11). The "middlebrow" is very much a twentieth-century phenomenon: while "highbrow" and "lowbrow" were both in use during the nineteenth century and have their origins in the pseudoscience of phrenology, "middlebrow," according to the *OED*, was first recorded only in the 1920s. *Punch* magazine, while not the first recorded user of the term, is perhaps the most pithy: "The B.B.C. claim to have discovered a new type, the 'middlebrow'. It consists of people who are hoping that some day they will get used to the stuff they ought to like" ("Middlebrow"). "Middlebrow" culture in this sense has a difficult relationship with established hierarchies of taste - it is derided by both highbrow and lowbrow, by the former for aspiring to be like them, and by the latter, for abandoning its roots. What lies at the source of this derision, for many scholars, is a fear of the threat to cultural authority emanating from the middlebrow, since its central characteristic is the innate blurring or absorption of the boundaries between high and low. Furthermore, like consumer culture, middlebrow culture has long been identified with the feminine; for QD Leavis, writing in the 1930s, it was connected with the growth of the public library and the related growth in female readership. In modern consumer terms we might consider it alongside the plethora of home, food, garden, health and fitness magazines

like the one I was looking for that day in Santiago, all aimed at largely female self-improvement.

The survey of Spanish reading habits carried out by the FGEE show that many of the top ten most-read novelists in 2008 might broadly be described as “middlebrow.” Of these, five are read in translation from English (Ken Follett, John Boyne, Dan Brown, JK Rowling, Noah Gordon) and the remainder write originally in Spanish (Carlos Ruiz Zafón, Ildefonso Falcones, Arturo Pérez-Reverte, Isabel Allende, Matilde Asensi). Interestingly, only six of these writers also appear on the “most bought” list, where Brown, Gordon, Allende and Asensi are replaced by Stephenie Meyer, Stieg Larsson, Eduardo Mendoza, and Rhonda Byrne, of whom all but Mendoza are translated (FGEE, *Hábitos* 152). Many of these writers operate at the boundaries of what we might call “genre fiction,” whether this is the historical adventure of Falcones, Gordon, Pérez-Reverte, Asensi and Allende, the thrillers of Follett and Larson, the fantasy of Rowling and Meyer, or the mysticism of Brown and Ruiz Zafón. The only non-fiction entry is Australian Byrne’s self-help book, *The Secret*. A similar survey was carried out for Catalonia in 2007, and while the top ten “most read” and “most bought” lists appear to be entirely comprised of books in Spanish (GEC, *Hábitos* 152), this is not the whole story. In fact, a separate question asked those who claimed their most recently finished book was in Catalan to name that book: of the top ten, seven are by authors who also appear in the Spanish lists (Falcones, Follett, Brown [2], Ruiz Zafón, Rowling, Boyne). In other words, seven of the novels most widely read in Spain are also available in Catalan. Of the translated authors appearing on the 2008 Spanish lists, works by Larsson, Gordon, Byrne and Meyer are also available in Catalan, but Galician has only the Harry

Potter books; Boyne's *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, and Dan Brown's *Da Vinci Code* and *Angels and Demons*.⁷

Information about the bestselling books in Galicia, and in Galician, is more difficult to obtain. What is clear, however, is that the profile of books and especially novels published in Galicia differs from that in Spain more generally. The AGE report on the publication of books in Galician for 2007 divides the novel into five subcategories: "clásica" (i.e. re-editions of classic texts), which comprises 9.6% of the total number of published novels for 2007, "contemporánea" (70.6%), "policíaca ou de espionaxe" (5.1%), "Ciencia ficción ou terror" (5.1%) and "outras" (8.9%) (*AGE Informe 20*). These categories make plain the relatively limited proportion of works formally classified as genre fiction: whereas on the Spanish and Catalan list, the novel is divided into multiple categories, including (in descending order of popularity) "histórica," "intriga," "aventuras," "románticas," these are all subsumed for the Galician market into the broad category of "contemporánea." This is by no means new information: in an interview he gave in 2002, Manuel Bragado, director of Edicións Xerais (one of Galicia's two principal publishing houses) suggests that "o fenómeno dos 'best sellers' dáse no noso país pero restrinxido ás obras escritas en español" "the 'best-seller' phenomenon does occur in our country, but limited to works written in Spanish," suggesting this is because "a nosa literatura carece de obras de ficción histórica, literatura romántica ou biografías, xéneros nos que habitualmente se poden incluír moitos dos best sellers internacionais" "our literature lacks works of historical fiction, romantic literature or biographies, genres in which many of the international best-sellers can usually be included" ("Libros galegos"). It is Bragado's explanation for this that I find most interesting: he suggests that Galician literature is characterized not by "bestsellers," but by "longsellers," by

which he means “libros que manteñen unhas cifras de vendas continuadas ó longo do tempo” “books that maintain continuous sales figures throughout time,” that is, classics such as Xosé Neira Vilas’s *Memorias dun neno labrego*, first published in 1961 (“Libros galegos”). Interestingly, the distinction he draws between “bestsellers” and “longsellers” is predicated on aesthetic quality: “os ‘long sellers’ teñen asociado un nivel de calidade literaria do que carecen os ‘best sellers’ habituais” “‘long seller’ are associated with a level of literary quality that the usual ‘best sellers’ lack,” he says, adding that “é a calidade da obra a que determina fundamentalmente o seu éxito” “it is the quality of the work that fundamentally determines its success” (“Libros galegos”).

Bragado’s quality-based distinction between Galician-language “long sellers” and international or Spanish-language “best sellers” is slightly disingenuous, in its flattering suggestion that Galician-language readers are particularly discriminating in their reading choices, but in fact it reflects one of the key strategic maneuvers in Galician cultural discourse. The Galician novel, always a relatively weak genre, compared with poetry, has occupied an unstable position in the Galician literary canon from the earliest days, partly because of its ambiguous cultural and, sometimes, linguistic position between “Spanish” and “Galician.” Galicia’s first literary historian Augusto Besada refused to discuss the Galician novel because he claimed it was not distinct enough from Spanish (114-115), while even the novel generally considered the first Galician-language novel, Marcial Valladares’s *Maxina* (1880), is in fact subtitled “Conto gallego-castellano.” Anxiety about this cultural and linguistic ambiguity has often been translated into an appeal to an unarticulated notion of “quality,” which permits works perceived as too commercial, populist, or not “authentic” enough to be quietly edged out of the picture. As late as the 1990s, Galician literary critics still dismissed the earliest

Galician novels, by authors such as Heraclio Pérez Placer, Manuel Amor Meilán and Francisca Herrera Garrido, as “costumismo rural” “rural local-interest” (Tarrío Varela 199), although this judgment is now beginning to receive proper scrutiny.

With the expansion of the Galician publishing sector in the 1980s, the emergence of genre fiction in Galician, such as the *novela negra* or detective novel, reignited debates about the “quality” and “authenticity” of Galician-language fiction. Carlos Reigosa’s detective novel *Crime en Compostela* (1984) won the first-ever edition of the prestigious Premio Xerais (Galicia’s equivalent of the Booker Prize) and became the first Galician-language bestseller; fourteen editions have been printed to date, and by 2002 the book had sold over 35,000 copies and been translated into Spanish (“Libros galegos”). Despite its obvious attraction to readers, Reigosa’s novel did not please everybody. In a move that evokes Besada’s rejection of the new narrative genre a century before, nationalist cultural critics during the 1980s, such as Francisco Rodríguez, dismissed genre fiction, identified most strongly with Reigosa’s detective novels, as derivative of other (particularly Spanish) literature, and thus not authentic enough to be considered part of Galician literature (63). In consequence, Galician fiction today remains restricted to a limited range of genres. Perhaps most noticeable is that while genres conventionally defined as “masculine” (thrillers; science fiction; horror) are present in the AEG categorization, albeit on a relatively small scale, those traditionally associated with a female readership (historical or romantic fiction, self-help) are nowhere to be seen, subsumed, where they exist, under the “Contemporary” category.⁸

Taste, Consumption, Enjoyment: La Voz de Galicia’s Biblioteca 120 (2002)

As Bourdieu famously put it: “Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier” (*Distinction* 6). Furthermore, he reminds us, this classification is not simply a question of economics, for “a class is defined as much by its *being-perceived* as by its *being*, by its consumption – which need not be conspicuous in order to be symbolic – as much as by its position in the relations of production” (*Distinction* 483, emphasis Bourdieu’s). The ceramicist Grayson Perry puts it more pithily: “Taste is what defines the classes now, not economics” (Turner). Bourdieu’s concern in *Distinction*, which I share in this essay, is how to reconnect “high” culture with the lived experience of cultural consumption. He writes: “The science of taste and of cultural consumption begins with a transgression that is in no way aesthetic: it has to abolish the sacred frontier which makes legitimate culture a separate universe” (*Distinction* 6). This move, which Bourdieu calls the “barbarous reintegration of aesthetic consumption into the world of ordinary consumption” aims to return “lower, coarse, vulgar, venal, servile – in a word, natural – enjoyment” to the equation (*Distinction* 6, 7).

In 2002, a cultural initiative was rolled out which appeared to have the potential to close the gap between “legitimate” and “consumer” culture in Galicia, and which reveals the porous boundaries between “taste,” “consumption,” and enjoyment. *La Voz de Galicia*, a Spanish-language regional daily newspaper and media conglomerate, sponsored the publication of a book series to commemorate its 120th birthday: the *Biblioteca 120*. The idea was to publish 120 Galician classics and “contemporary classics,” one for each year of the newspaper’s existence, and each for the symbolic price of 1 euro. The announcement drew attention not only to the collection’s purpose as a complete survey of Galician literature, but also to its appearance and its utility, so that it was marketed simultaneously as something symbolic, useful and beautiful:

A partir do 6 de xaneiro de 2002, data de lanzamento da colección, deica o remate do ano, os galegos poderán facerse xunto co seu xornal con obras de preto de douscentos autores que escribiron na nosa lingua, desde a lírica medieval ós escritores máis novos, a través de obras da súa autoría e de varias antoloxías que contribúen a trazar a panorámica máis completa que se teña feito no país. Lecturas imprescindibles, seleccionadas entre as máis populares despois de escoitar moitos pareceres, que pola calidade das edicións elixidas son válidas tanto para os estudiosos como para o seu emprego no ensino. (“Biblioteca 120”)

From January 6th 2002, the date of the collection’s launch, until the end of the year, Galician will be able to collect along with their newspaper the works of almost two hundred authors who have written in our language, from medieval lyric to the newest writers, through single-authored works and various anthologies that contribute to tracing the most complete panorama the country has ever seen. Unmissable readings, which the quality of the chosen editions means will be as valuable for scholars as for educational use.

The headlines that appeared in subsequent weeks, which quoted some of the publishers participating in the project, made the objectives clear: “A Biblioteca 120 supón popularizar a literatura galega” “Biblioteca 120 will popularize Galician literatura” (“Francisco Pillado”); “A Biblioteca 120 é obra dun empresario que se vencella a un país e unha cultura” “Biblioteca 120 is the work of a businessman committed to a country and a cultura” (García); “Na Biblioteca 120 está o mellor que se escribiu en galego na historia” “The best works ever written in Galicia are in Biblioteca 120” (“Na Biblioteca”).

Tellingly, only eight female-authored works were judged worthy of entering this category.⁹

The *Biblioteca's* function as a placemaker for a universal Galician literature predicated on a mixture of quality and utility is intensified through emphasis on its own genealogy: for the publisher Miguel Anxo Fernán-Vello, the new *Biblioteca* is important, “porque tamén recupera unha tradición da propia empresa, da propia marca de La Voz de Galicia, da propia casa que ten un fito histórico na Biblioteca Galega na que se publicaron libros como *Los precursores*, de Manuel Murguía” “because it also recovers a tradition belonging to the company, the La Voz de Galicia brand, the business that has an historical connection with the Biblioteca Galega, which published works like Manuel Murguía’s *Los precursores*” (“Fernán-Vello”). The advertising for the collection, under the title “Encadernación de luxo para unha gran obra” “Luxury binding for a great work,” neatly brought together the genealogical and consumer dimensions of the project: ‘Unha encadernación de luxo dá forma á Biblioteca 120, que se presenta como un regalo de presente e un prezado legado para os nosos descendentes’ “A luxury binding gives Biblioteca 120 its form, making it a gift in the present and a prized legacy for our descendants’ (“Encadernación”). The result was massive sales of 6m volumes – three times what are normally published each year in Galician, as a column written five years later, on the occasion of *La Voz's* 125th birthday, recalled:

La Biblioteca 120, denominada así para conmemorar el 120 aniversario del diario, fue un esfuerzo sin precedentes por realizar la más completa colección de literatura gallega. Al precio simbólico de un euro por ejemplar, muy inferior al de cualquier edición de bolsillo, esta iniciativa consiguió popularizar la cultura de Galicia. Con más de 6.000.000 de ejemplares

vendidos a lo largo del 2002, ya en el primer tercio del año había superado los 2.000.000 ejemplares, tantos como se editan anualmente en gallego. (“El diario”, my emphasis)¹⁰

As the report shows, the newspaper’s stated objective to produce the most comprehensive collection of Galician literature in existence was widely judged to have popularized Galicia’s culture. Read through a national lens, this is evidently a cause for celebration – the commitment of one of Galicia’s biggest media groups, most of whose production is in Spanish, to the autochthonous culture; massive sales; spreading the word; making Galician literature accessible to the masses. However, if we read it in terms of *being-perceived*, that is, through a social lens, its significance becomes much more complex. The book club or series, perhaps most famously embodied in the “Readers Digest,” is one of the cultural products most commonly identified with “middlebrow” culture. The consumer is sold classy-looking volumes, often of “classic” novels, leather-bound (or at least leather-look) and gold-embossed, with the express purpose of looking good on the bookshelf and signaling that their owner has easy access to high culture. In this light, the *Biblioteca* can be read as a middlebrow initiative par excellence, for clearly, possession of 120, albeit fake, leather-bound volumes is intended to signal something in terms of *being-perceived*.

The key question, which I cannot answer here, is: how many of those volumes were ever actually read, not to mention enjoyed? Without a full sociological survey it is impossible to know for sure. At a minimum, we might hypothesize that the *Biblioteca*’s success signals that even the most authentically high cultural products can be co-opted for the consumer. That is, Galician readers whose habitual reading language is Spanish are, or can be, attracted to Galician cultural products in the right circumstances. To

hypothesize even further, perhaps aspirational consumers who are turned off cultural products whose explicit purpose is to legitimize the national (“utilitarian”) can be attracted to the same products when those products can also be used to legitimize individual/social aspirations. The missing link in all of this, of course, is enjoyment: in other words, such products might legitimize a form of elite, cultural capital (“nationalist” or “social”), but what about the purely pleasurable cultural consumption that Bourdieu sees as the basis of cultural development? Can any normalized cultural system really exist without pleasurable consumption, and thus without its very own middlebrow novel?

Conclusions

The rapid changes in Galician institutional culture during the last three decades mean that the question of the competing hierarchies of taste in operation in Galicia, how they are authorized, and the differences between different sectors of society, is a complex one, which needs a great deal more systematic research – perhaps in the form of a sociological survey like the one Bourdieu carried out in 1960s France, which formed the basis for *Distinction*. Such a study, I suggest, might take a post-national approach to the question: that is, one predicated not on an apocalyptic view of the end of the Galician nation, but on recognition that the axis of nation has historically been privileged in discussions and formulations of Galician cultural theory, to the detriment of other axes such as gender, sexuality, race or class. In other words, while we should - must - continue to work on the principle of strengthening the Galician language and its use at all levels of society, we must also ensure that the consumer – the embodied, gendered, sexualized, classed consumer – is an acknowledged part of that process, for a normalized Galician culture must speak to all sectors of society. And that means

providing those consumers with a home within Galician cultural production, so moving beyond the universalizing--and therefore anything but universal--idea of a pure national culture, and into alternative spaces, such as the feminine/feminized space of the middlebrow. In other words, Galicia must have its *bestsellers* as well as its *longsellers*. Ultimately, I believe that a shift in focus from the abstract, universal figure of the Nation to the embodied, gendered consumer is not only inevitable, but will be a vital tool in attracting readers back to Galician writing and thus, perhaps, in answering some of the fears about the future of the Galician language. To put it another way, not only must we make a space for a Galician Bridget Jones (or *Twilight*-loving teenager, or follower of *The Secret*) but we also need to ask her what else she likes: the answer might surprise us.

Notes

¹ The high-profile pressure group *Galicia Bilingüe* emerged as a response to the language policies of the bipartite administration, while the pressure group *ProLingua* has recently emerged in response to the re-election of the PP in Spring 2009, with the aim of promoting full adherence to the *Lei de Normalización Lingüística* (1983) and the *Plan Xeral de Normalización da Lingua Galega* (2004). See Regueira for more detailed discussion.

² González Fernández develops these ideas at length in *Elas e a paraugas totalizador*.

³ Unless otherwise stated, all translations from Galician are my own.

⁴ I am grateful to Helena Miguélez-Carballeira for her help in confirming these references.

⁵ In comparison, 22.2% of Catalan-based readers “habitually” read in Catalan, while 71.8% “sometimes” do. 9.6% of Basque-Country-based readers “habitually” read in Basque, while 38% “sometimes” do (FGEE *Hábitos* 50-51).

⁶ Of course, the lack of readers in Galicia is likely, in part, because there are fewer Galician books to choose from. The Galician publishing sector has grown exponentially during the democratic period: the AEG puts the total of Galician-language books published annually during the 1980s as “pequena, cincocentos títulos ao ano” “small, five hundred titles a year,” while between 2002 and 2007, the yearly average was 1,224 books, some 85.9% of the total published annually by members of the AEG (*Edición*), and some 1.5% of the total published in Spain (FGEE *Comercio* 27). The average print run of a Galician-language book was some 1,600 copies (AGE *Informe* 16); of books in Spain overall, around 5,000 copies (FGEE *Comercio* 27).

⁷ The question of translation is an important one, because the translation marketplace functions as a conduit between internal and external cultural systems. This is especially critical when the translated texts are part of a multimedia cultural phenomenon, such as

Bridget Jones in the 1990s, where the books and films were translated into Catalan, but not Galician, or Harry Potter, where the books were translated into both Catalan and Galician. The translation of all four volumes of Meyer's *Twilight Saga* into Catalan, gives Catalan readers access to the international *Twilight* phenomenon, which also includes music, films, websites, in their own language. For example *A Trenc d'Alba*, the Catalan translation of the tetralogy's final volume *Breaking Dawn*, appeared within two months of the original publication in English. I am grateful to Paul O'Neill for bringing *Twilight*'s Catalan existence to my attention.

⁸ While there is certainly a strong tradition of historical fiction, the same cannot be said of romance or self-help; there is no equivalent in Galician of the English "chick lit" or Portuguese "literatura light." The widely remarked upon historical absence of female Galician-language novelists has recently been read as a function of the desire to create a "universal" literature, uninflected by "biopolitical" markers (Gabilondo "Towards"; Hooper "Girl"), while the fevered reception of the recent, modest increase in female-authored prose narrative in Galician has also, rightly, been critiqued by scholars including González (qtd. in Rozados) and Miguélez-Carballeira ("Inaugurar").

⁹ Those honored include: Marilar Aleixandre, Fina Casalderrey, Rosalía de Castro, Marina Mayoral, María Victoria Moreno, Luz Pozo Garza, María Xosé Queizán, and Xohana Torres.

Their volumes make up 6.7% of "o mellor que se escribiu en galego na historia" ([please provide source info](#)).

¹⁰ The AGE page for *La Voz de Galicia-Biblioteca Gallega* states that Biblioteca 120 has now reached sales of seven million ("La Voz").

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Resumen: Este ensayo aborda la cuestión de la ausencia de la novela "popular" o *middlebrow* de la literatura en gallego, a pesar de la explosión de la industria editorial en la Galicia democrática. Argumentamos que la cultura institucional en gallego aún se caracteriza por una tendencia utilitaria que enfatiza menos la recepción de la cultura y su significado para el público lector que el motor ideológico, o sea, el proyecto nacional.

Keywords: Galicia, novela, *middlebrow*, consumidor/a, posnacional.