

Chapter 7

Douglas Coupland's Generation X and its Spanish Counterparts

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1. Douglas Coupland and the Spanish Polysystem

The extent of Douglas Coupland's success as a writer in Spain can be measured according to different parameters. The translation¹⁵⁵ of his books and the number of editions and reprints that have been released is only one of these variables. The number of Spanish web pages devoted to him or which deal with his work is also outstanding (around 3720 at the time this essay is being written).¹⁵⁶ However, his definitive contribution to the Spanish cultural scene cannot be assessed in terms of quantity, but rather based on how his works and their repercussion in the media have helped to change the way literature is conceived and how we perceive contemporary culture.

This chapter deals with the influence of Douglas Coupland's work in Spain, focusing mainly on his fiction. First, it surveys when and how his books have been translated and published and analyses the reviews these works have received in major press publications and specialized journals. Secondly, it focuses on the influence that the term Generation X (popularized by his first novel) has had on Spanish culture and analyzes how the features associated with this cultural movement were assimilated and reworked in the 1990s by some representative Spanish writers who are described as part of this Generation X.

Because of the dialogue of cultures, languages and literatures which has occurred at the transference of Douglas Coupland's works into the Spanish literary system, a theoretical background like the polysystem theory, situated between the disciplines of comparative literature and translation studies, seems appropriate to form the basis of my analysis. Since the seventies, the term "polysystem" has become familiar through the work of scholars Itamar Even-Zohar and Gideon Toury at the Porter Institute of Poetics at Tel Aviv University. According to the polysystem theory, literature is a complex whole of systems –concepts of literature on both a

155 I have retrieved data about the publication of translations of Douglas Coupland's works mainly from two sources: the Index Translationum and the Spanish ISBN Agency database.

156 Even an (in)famous web page where students can download ready-made assignments, "El rincón del vago," has an entry for Douglas Coupland and Generation X.

practical and a theoretical level – which mutually influence each other and which constantly stand in new and changing relations of scales of values (norms) and models that dominate in given circumstances (Tötösy de Zepetnek, 1998). In addition, for this theoretical approach, the principle of historical reception also has a primary importance: all literary texts are historically determined.

Douglas Coupland, a Canadian writer and visual artist born in 1961, who first gained popularity with the extraordinary success of his debut novel, *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* (1991), has been translated into twenty-two languages. A frequent contributor to the *New York Times*, the *New Republic*, *Wired*, and *Art Forum*, he has also written the movie “Everything’s Gone Green” (2006) and collaborated in the adaptation of his novel *JPod* into a TV series. As a writer, Douglas Coupland has published both fiction and non-fiction, but since his books are not easily categorized in terms of genre, I will follow the author’s own classification, as presented in his official website, Coupland.com (<http://www.coupland.com/>). Since the publication of his first novel, *Generation X*, up to the release of his latest novel, *Generation A*, Coupland has written thirteen works of fiction: *Generation A* (2009); *The Gum Thief* (2007); *JPod* (2006); *Eleanor Rigby* (2004); *Hey Nostradamus!* (2003); *All Families Are Psychotic* (2001); *God Hates Japan* (2001); *Miss Wyoming* (1999); *Girlfriend in a Coma* (1997); *Microserfs* (1995); *Life After God* (1993); *Shampoo Planet* (1992); *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* (1991). In addition, he has issued six other non-fiction books *Terry – The Life of Canadian Terry Fox* (2005); *Souvenir of Canada 2* (2004); *School Spirit* (2002); *Souvenir of Canada* (2002); *City of Glass* (2000); *Polaroids from the Dead* (1996). These works would be difficult to classify because they combine pictures, historical facts, characters of video games and fiction in ways that do not adjust to any traditional genre.

In his novels Coupland has explored different themes and delved into recurrent interests ranging from religious or transcendental concerns and extraordinary vital circumstances, to ecological issues and consumerism. The importance of telling stories is also a leitmotif in much of his writing. However, reviewers and critics have focused mostly on his gift for reflecting on and creating contemporary trends, his “fundamentally ironic vision of contemporary culture” (Cullen, 1997) and his ability to engage young readers. Unfortunately, academics have not devoted much attention to his works, and critics remain divided about his literary merit.¹⁵⁷ His

157 There are only thirteen records in the MLA International Bibliography database that make reference to Douglas Coupland. A monograph devoted to Douglas Coupland was published by Andrew Tate of the University of Manchester in 2007. In Spain, some studies from the field of sociology have dealt with Coupland, such as the study by Antonio Gutiérrez Resa, and a dissertation by Isabel Pérez Vega, *Realidad y ficción en la narrativa de los noventa de Douglas Coupland*. As Kegan Doyle points out in Coupland’s entry in the *Encyclopedia of Literature in Canada*, there are critics who consider him a witty critic of contemporary society and those who regard him as hackneyed and repetitive (Doyle, 2002).

works are not usually included in the syllabi of Canadian Literature courses at Spanish universities, with the exceptions of the University of Salamanca and the Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia (Spanish Open University), which have addressed his works occasionally. He has not received major literary awards, except for the 2004 Canadian Authors Association Award for Fiction, which he was awarded for his novel *Hey Nostradamus*.¹⁵⁸ None of the Spanish translations of his books have been funded by the Canada Council International Translation Programme. Coupland is, in fact, very critical of the grant system of this institution, as he has polemically declared that "CanLit" is when the Canadian government pays you money to write about small towns and/or the immigrant experience (Coupland, 2006). However, this lack of institutional support has not hindered his popularity among young people all over the world.

The transference of Douglas Coupland's books into Spain has been based on the affinity of their themes and styles with literary fashions currently prevalent in the target culture. In accordance with Even-Zohar, my main argument is that, through the works of Douglas Coupland (especially *Generation X*) new elements were introduced into the home literature which did not exist before. As I shall show in the next section, the principles of selecting the works to be translated are determined by the situation governing the home (in this case, the Spanish) polysystem: the texts are chosen according to their compatibility with new approaches and the supposedly innovatory role they may assume within the target literature (Even-Zohar, 1978).

2. Spanish Translations and Reviews of Douglas Coupland's Books

Douglas Coupland's popularity and success are reflected in the fact that his books have been widely translated and reprinted many times, as well as reviewed in the press worldwide. Out of his thirteen novels, only five have not yet been translated into Spanish. In this section I will look into the translations of Coupland's works published in Spain in the order in which they have appeared and analyse their context of publication. At the same time, I will also trace the reception of Coupland's works in the Spanish target culture through a selection of some relevant reviews which are rather mixed

158 It should be noted that the Canadian Authors Association Award for Fiction purports to honor "writing that achieves excellence without sacrificing popular appeal" (Canadian Authors' Association website).

in their view of the Canadian writer, ranging from the most disparaging to fervent fan support.¹⁵⁹

Blogs and websites, albeit beyond the scope of the chapter, offer much more enthusiastic reactions to Coupland's works than print reviews because they are usually maintained by the reading public and/or Coupland's fans. To end the chapter, I will briefly discuss the factors that may have led to the disregard of his other books by Spanish publishing houses.

The first novel by Coupland to be translated into Spanish was *Generation X*, whose Spanish publication in 1993 coincided with a time of economic and political unrest. In that year, Spain was undergoing a severe recession which had not prevented the Socialist Party from winning the general elections again, despite the considerable rise in votes for the conservative party Partido Popular which would eventually win the following elections of 1996. In this kind of socio-historical context, it seems natural that Coupland's novel about highly educated young people with an uncertain future would be warmly accepted in Spain. It is significant that the novel was published by Ediciones B during its peak of success importing popular international authors. The choice of the prestigious writer Mariano Antolín Rato¹⁶⁰ as the translator of *Generation X*, *Shampoo Planet* and *Life After God* contributed to the accumulation of its cultural capital. After its first publication in 1993 *Generation X* was reprinted every year until 1999,¹⁶¹ which gives an idea of the wide dissemination of this novel.

This dissemination of Coupland's novel was probably triggered by the article of the same title published by Elizabeth Cabrera published in *Ajoblanco* magazine in January 1994. *Ajoblanco* was a Spanish monthly publication created by José Ribas, which appeared from 1974 to 1980 and from 1987 to 1999. This magazine was one of the first media to spread a counterculture that opposed the Franco regime, but it was also independent of left-wing parties. It brought together philosophers, poets, architects, artists, and comic strip designers from the independent scene in Barcelona. *Ajoblanco* dealt not only with politics but also with social concerns that were new at the time, like environmentalism, collectivism, the gay movement, and sustainable urbanism. During its second period the magazine became more professional and at the same time more critical of the left-wing government of the Spanish Socialist party (PSOE). All in all, *Ajoblanco* was an excellent mouthpiece for different cultural phenomena, including the Generation X hype.

159 Given the impressive number of reviews on Coupland which have appeared in the Spanish press, any attempt of being exhaustive is beyond the scope of this chapter.

160 Mariano Antolín Rato has written over a dozen novels, several essays and has translated into Spanish the works of prestigious writers, such as Jack Kerouac, William Faulkner, Malcolm Lowry, Raymond Carver, and others.

161 The years 1996 and 1997 are an exception.

The general interest aroused by the term probably also caused Justo Navarro¹⁶² to write his review of *Generación X*, a month after the publication of the *Ajoblanco* article. Navarro wrote a lukewarm review of Coupland's first novel for *ABC literario*, in which Coupland is said to belong to a strand of the American literary tradition (Fitzgerald, J. McInerney, B.E. Ellis) obsessed with portraying generations. Navarro praises Coupland's ability to engage the reader by unveiling secrets but criticizes his lack of originality at the same time. The review acknowledges the presence of comic strips as well as a "dictionary of the new time" (Navarro, 1994).

The next book by Douglas Coupland to be translated into Spanish was *Shampoo Planet*, which appeared as *Planeta Shampoo* two years after its original publication in 1992. The novel was received with a rather disparaging review signed by V.V.¹⁶³ in *Babelia*, commenting both on the translation of *Shampoo Planet* and on *Life After God*, which had not yet been translated into Spanish. The critic blatantly claims that the books are not "good literature," insisting further that "they are not even literature in a pre-postmodern sense (the sense of before *the end of history*)" (V.V., 1994). V.V. also refers to the "orality" of the works and to the presence of comic strips but, given the general pejorative and ironical tone of the review, he probably means this as a criticism. He does concede, however, that Coupland's books are humorous and pleasant to read. This kind of criticism illustrates how certain sectors of the Spanish literary system have been extremely reluctant to accept the most innovative aspects of Coupland's fiction.

In 2000 Mariano Antolín Rato, who had translated *Generation X*, *Shampoo Planet* and *Life After God* into Spanish, published what could be considered an opportunistic article for the online version of *El Mundo* dealing with these works and also with *Microserfs*. In the same tone as the previous review by V.V., he is not particularly complimentary about Coupland's production (Antolín Rato, 2000). He claims that *Shampoo Planet* (*Planeta Champú*) deals with the same issues as *Generation X* in a less accomplished way. It seems rather strange that the translator should write a negative review of the very works he had translated. It could be argued that he was seeking to capitalize on the translation's publicity to promote these works, as the article conveniently indicates that the three books are available in Ediciones B, and that "Generation X," in spite of his earlier

162 Justo Navarro is a Spanish writer, translator and journalist and winner of won several prestigious awards for his poetry and fiction. He is an occasional contributor to the newspaper *El País*, and has translated the works of authors such as Paul Auster, Jorge Luis Borges, T. S. Eliot, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Pere Gimferrer, Michael Ondaatjee, Joan Perucho, Ben Rice and Virginia Woolf.

163 V.V. probably stands for Vicente Verdú, since this writer and journalist frequently writes for *El País*.

comments, is still an interesting phenomenon. In the same article, Antolín Rato disdained *Microserfs* as merely a disparagement of computer fanatics. Triggered by the success of the earlier novels and by its innovative technological content, *Microserfs* (Ediciones B, 1996) had appeared in 1996 translated by Juan Gabriel López Guix and Carmen Francí Ventosa and with a foreword by Vicente Verdú. They explained in a note to the first edition how difficult it was for them to find suitable words in Spanish for all the references to technology and vocabulary related to computers. Juan Marín (1996) in his review published in *Babelia* also refers to the difficulties that the translation probably entailed, praising the translators for their success in transmitting Coupland's direct and light style.

A second edition, published as a pocket book, included corrections and suggestions made by readers, acknowledged by the translators in another note (López Guix and Francí, 1998). The translation of *Microserfs* was reviewed both in *ABC literario* and in *El País*. José Antonio Gurpegui (1996), writing for *ABC literario*, was still sparing in his compliments for Coupland, although he praised the philosophical questions raised by *Microserfs*. In contrast, Juan Marín (1996) wrote a completely favourable review. Asserting that this was Coupland's best book up to that point, he valued both the content and the style. He emphasized how Coupland reflected the rift of a generation that moves between a digital universe and timeless feelings. Read through the lens of the polysystem theory, the appreciative tone of the review is not surprising, since the novel was dealing with "the innovatory repertoire" (Even-Zohar, 1978) of the new computer era which was only just beginning in Spain at the time.¹⁶⁴ A most interesting effect of the publication of *Microserfs* was the creation of one of the most visited blogs in Spain, named Microsiervos. The blog explains on its homepage that Douglas Coupland is its Patron Saint because he wrote the novel of the same title, which the four author-bloggers venerate. The blog is devoted, among other things, to technology, science, computers, astronomy, aviation, games, urban legends, gadgets and puzzles, as well as book and film reviews.

Ediciones B also entrusted one of the translators of *Microserfs*, Juan Gabriel López Guix, with the translation of Coupland's *Polaroids from the Dead* (1996). This is the only non-fiction work that has been published in Spain so far. It appeared as *Polaroids* in 1999 and received positive reviews, like the one by Félix Romero in *ABC Cultural* which describes Coupland as a spy from "Shampoo Planet" who perceives the world from its corners, and through its noises,

164 Carmen Francí, one of the translators of the novel explains that they had to make a decision on how to translate the term "e-mail", as there was no officially accepted term in Spanish at the time. It turned out that the phrase they chose ("correo electrónico") became the accepted translation some years after (Response to Pilar Somacarrera's questionnaire to Spanish translators of English Canadian literature).

disdaining complex theories (Romero, 2009). However, the favourable reception of the book in the Spanish press did not prompt the translation of other non-fiction books by Coupland, which can be interpreted in the light of the general reluctance on the part of Spanish publishers to venture to release non-fictional works by Canadian authors.

Girlfriend in a Coma (originally published in 1997) was translated into Spanish with the contentious title of *La segunda oportunidad* (Ediciones B, 2001). Critics and readers alike rejected the title of this novel (it means "second chance" in Spanish) because it completely differed from the original: it also gave away the plot and erased the reference to the song by The Smiths. The choice of a poet translator for this novel, Daniel Aguirre Oteiza,¹⁶⁵ who had translated several English-language canonical authors stands, once again, for the symbolic capital which the publisher conferred on Coupland's book. In fact, by the time *La segunda oportunidad* appeared, Coupland had achieved a certain status in Spain and José Antonio Gurpegui (2001b) had more positive comments about the Canadian writer's work. He concluded his review for *El Cultural* by admitting that Douglas Coupland had improved his characterization a great deal and that he was becoming a much more solid narrator.

Between 1999 and 2004, Coupland continued to publish prolifically, producing one novel a year, but only *All Families Are Psychotic* was translated and published in Spain in 2002. The publishing house was no longer Ediciones B, but Ediciones Destino (by then already an imprint of the publishing corporation Planeta). Although different marketing strategies and more complex issues may be at stake in the decision taken by Ediciones B to stop publishing Coupland's works, probably the fact that the Generation X phenomenon was waning in Spain by the end of the century was a decisive factor. In addition, the socio-political context of early twenty-first century Spain - with the conservative party Partido Popular in power - was very different from the one that had provoked the success of Generation X.

There was not only a Spanish translation of *All Families Are Psychotic* but a Catalan one as well (*Totes les famílies són psicòtiques*). The simultaneous translation into two peninsular languages illustrates the commercial expectations that Destino had for this title. However, the actual sales must not have lived up to the expectations because this moving and extremely funny novel, which would make for an excellent road movie, was the only work by Coupland published by Ediciones Destino.

165 Daniel Aguirre Oteiza is a Spanish poet and translator. He has translated into Spanish works by Samuel Beckett, Wallace Stevens, W.B. Yeats and John Ashbery, to name but a few. among many other poets writing in English.

The last three novels by Coupland that have appeared in Spain, *JPod* (2006), *The Gum Thief* (2007) and *Generation A* have been published by El Aleph Editores.¹⁶⁶ *JPod*, whose content echoes that of *Microserfs*, maintains the same title of the original and was published in the same year. *JPod* was, in fact, greeted in Spain as an update of *Microserfs*. While Gabi Martínez wrote an enthusiastic review for *La Razón*, *El País* was not so favourable. According to Martínez, the motto behind Coupland's work could well be "what's important is having fun," a goal he successfully achieves with his readers. This review also describes Coupland as a bridge between the 20th and 21st centuries, between the literary and the graphic worlds (Martínez, 2006). In contrast, Iury Lech (2006), writing for *El País*, was wary of what he deemed an irregular book, combining funny bits with uninteresting parts. He regarded it as a meditation on the current times, similar to *South Park*. Rodrigo Fresán (2008), in his review of *The Gum Thief*, bluntly calls *JPod* "a slip."

Following up with the translation of the books Coupland had published in the twenty-first century, El Aleph published *The Gum Thief* (2007) as *El ladrón de chicles* in 2008. Rodrigo Fresán's piece about this novel, published in the literary supplement of ABC (2008), is one of the most complimentary reviews Coupland has received in Spain so far. He argues that *The Gum Thief* shows the author at his most brilliant, especially because of his aphoristic style. In the review, Fresán attributes very distinguished forebears to Coupland, such as J.D. Salinger, Kurt Vonnegut and Marcel Proust. But, most importantly, the critic alludes to Marshall McLuhan as Coupland's countryman and inventor of the term "global village," thus situating him in a Canadian context for the first time.

An article titled "La 'Generación X' se hace mayor" ("Generation X becomes older") authored by Paula Corroto (2008) briefly reviews *The Gum Thief*, concluding that the novel shows that Coupland has left behind his pessimistic and resigned conception of life. However, the main point of the article is to trace the evolution of the writers classified under this term – both Spanish and international. As she announces in her title, Corroto (2008) concludes that these writers "have evolved and grown older." She quotes Ismael Grasa (born in 1968), one of the Spanish writers grouped under the label, remarking that he considers the evolution positive because their reflection is more conscious.

166 El Aleph Editores was founded in 1973 by Mario Muchnik and since then it has kept its original policy of being particularly demanding in its choice of writers. It combines tradition and modernity, and is mainly devoted to fiction. It publishes the works of Nobel Prize Winters, such as Elfriede Jelinek, as well relevant Spanish writers, such as Juan Goytisolo and Ray Loriga, who is a member of what has been called the Spanish Generation X of writers.

To end this section, I would like to briefly speculate on why some of Coupland's works have not been selected for translation, beyond what I have already suggested about the trends which have governed the publication of his works in Spain. Given that, as Lawrence Venuti (1998) observes, most translations are initiated in the domestic culture where a foreign text is selected for the tastes of that target culture, it seems that when Coupland's fiction moved away from the theme of unsatisfied young people, Spanish publishers were not interested in translating his books between 1999 and 2006. *Miss Wyoming* (2000), *Hey Nostradamus!* (2003) and *Eleanor Rigby* (2004) have not had their Spanish versions. It could also appear at first sight that publishers in Spain have not been too interested in works by Coupland that exhibit a more traditional or conventional style or form of narration -and this includes the non-fiction titles. In any case, the failure to translate them does not seem to be related to the literary or aesthetic quality of the works, because they have received very positive reviews internationally and in Spain, where Rodrigo Fresán (2008) regretted that neither *Hey Nostradamus!* nor *Eleanor Rigby* had been translated. The explanation for this gap in the list of the Spanish versions of Coupland's works should rather be attributed to the vagaries of commercial speculation among Spanish publishers. Another example of these vagaries can be found in the fact that, as I am writing the final version of this chapter, *Generation A* has just been published in Spanish by El Aleph (2011), possibly on the grounds that it shares some of the features – beyond the similar titles - which made *Generation X* successful in Spain, as well as some new fashionable elements, such as ecological concerns. However, no publisher has so far shown an interest in publishing Coupland's biography of Marshall McLuhan, which appeared in Canada in 2010.

3. Generation X and its Impact on the Spanish Literary System

As illustrated in the previous section, although all the books published by Douglas Coupland have received considerable attention from the media in Spain, *Generation X* is undoubtedly his best-known and most influential work. Since its first publication in 1993 by Ediciones B, it has seen numerous reprints and editions, all using Mariano Antolín Rato's translation. Even the book club *Círculo de Lectores*, which has sold over four hundred million books to its members since it was established in 1962, edited its own version in 1994. As late as 2000, a new edition of Coupland's first novel was issued by the imprint *Suma de Letras*, owned by publisher Santillana of the *Prisa* group, which attests to the popularity of his fictional debut.

Most readers are probably familiar with the term Generation X, but some may not know exactly where it comes from or what it defines. The connotations that come to mind are those of an undetermined or unidentified generation, any generation, or also a generation that has been crossed out. Douglas Coupland first used it in a 1987 article for *Vancouver* magazine to define the generation that came after the Baby Boomers. He then worked with illustrator Paul Rivoche on a comic strip created for *Vista* magazine in Toronto with the title "The Young and Restless Workforce Following the Baby Boom: Generation X" (Coupland and Rivoche). He was subsequently asked to write a guide to Generation X by St. Martin's Press in New York City, but he decided to move to Palm Springs, California where he wrote his first novel, *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* (1991), instead. Apparently, the book was rejected by several publishing houses in Canada and the United States, before being published by St Martin's Press. In spite of having a very small initial printing, no publicity, and few reviews, it soon became an international bestseller and a cult hit. The novel is about three characters of the same age, born in the sixties like Coupland himself. The three take low-paying jobs and retire to a small town – which recalls Palm Springs at the time Coupland lived there- reacting against the society of their time. They reject consumerism and suffer from a lack of motivation, since society does not have much to offer to young people who are better trained than their predecessors, but will have to wait until their elders have abandoned their positions of power to have the chance to develop their own ideas. At the same time, a serious crisis in their system of beliefs seems to affect these young people. The only apparent palliative is to tell stories, or, according to Coupland, the act of narration.

The author himself explains what inspired this title in an article he wrote for *Details* magazine in 1995:

The book's title came not from Billy Idol's band, as many supposed, but from the final chapter of a funny sociological book on American class structure titled *Class*, by Paul Fussell. In his final chapter, Fussell named an "X" category of people who wanted to hop off the merry-go-round of status, money, and social climbing that so often frames modern existence. The citizens of X had much in common with my own socially disengaged characters; hence the title. The book's title also allowed Claire, Andy, and Dag to remain enigmatic individuals while at the same time making them feel a part of the larger whole (Coupland, 1995).

It may be true that Coupland took the term "Generation X" from Paul Fussell's book, but if the public related it to Billy Idol's group it was probably because Coupland himself made a reference to this band in his 1987 *Vancouver* article in a section called "Generation X: The Term." This section began with the following statement: "Generation X was the name of Billy Idol's band before he became just Billy Idol" (Coupland, 1987). No reference to Fussell is to be found there.

Before going deeper into the significance of this novel in Spain, I will provide an overview of the opinions expressed by the author himself in the article from *Details*. These views offer an excellent insight into what he wanted to convey, the circumstances surrounding its publication, and its subsequent effect in the cultural panorama of the 1990s. Coupland explains how his novel was published in March and later that year, Richard Linklater's movie *Slacker* was released. The characters in this film were similar to those in *Generation X* in that they were overeducated and underemployed. At the same time, what came to be known as grunge music, which originated in Seattle and also implied an attitude of withdrawal and marginality, was becoming popular. From then on, according to Coupland (1995), "the most abused buzzwords of the early 90s" were born: "generation X", slacker, and grunge."

Coupland (1995) goes on to describe how the term was appropriated by marketers. He concedes that other cultural movements stemming from youth were also marketed: "the 20s expats in Paris, the 50s Beats, 60s Hippies, 70s Punks - all got marketed in the end, but X got hypermarketed right from the start, which was harsh." Tulgan (1996) gives details of how by 1993 many publications, such as *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Business Week* and *Fortune* were using the term "Generation X. Laura Slattery clarifies that "the impact of the Xer culture on America in the early nineties was not (...) an unaided rebellion, but a media-assisted, media-sanctioned event" ("Generation X to Generation Next"). As early as 1994, historian Jason Cohen and journalist Michael Krugman elaborated a thorough and irony-laden survey of the X hype, in which they were extremely critical of writers such as Douglas Coupland, Jay McInerney, and Bret Easton Ellis in their book *Generation Ecch! The Backlash Starts Here*.

Douglas Coupland has reacted in many ways and on many occasions against this marketing of the term Generation X. He purports to have declined invitations to take part in campaigns aimed at that section of the population. In fact, he denies the existence of such a thing as Generation X and he does not like the fact that some traits of his characters have been used to define a whole generation. In a recent video clip filmed for the promotion of his latest novel, *Generation A*, he claims that neither of his novels *Generation X* and *Generation A* are about "a generation per se, as they are more tombstones to the notion of generation" (CRUSH, 2010). It is ironic, however, that what started as a little game to avoid being called a baby boomer –as expressed in Coupland's article for *Vancouver* magazine in 1987 — pigeonholed a whole generation, including the author himself. In spite of all his protests, he made things easy for the press and marketers, because he put in a nutshell what he regarded as Generation X. Next to the big X of the title "Generation X" the article explains: "They are better educated than those before them, but the jobs are mundane. They are excellent conversationalists, but no one wants to listen to them. They have taste, but those in the power positions have German cars. They wore black, but trend-hungry

baby boomers drove them to colour. They didn't march for peace, and they don't remember the Jack Kennedy assassination" (Coupland, 1987). The product was ready to be sold and Coupland's sentences started to be quoted almost as aphorisms that defined a whole generation, a cultural movement, and an epoch.

In Spain the media did not wait very long to start looking for a Spanish Generation X, which they soon found, and the market started addressing them. An example that many Spanish readers may remember is the advertisement campaign for the Renault Clio car model that had "JASPs" as their protagonists (JASPS is an acronym for "Jovenes Aunque Sobradamente Preparados"), which means young but extremely well-educated. Young people with the characteristics described by Coupland had become the target of advertising campaigns such as that of Renault in Spain.

Naturally, the phenomenon also had an impact on the cultural realm. A piece authored by Elizabeth Cabrero with the same title as Coupland's 1987 "Generation X" article appeared in the January 1994 issue of the aforementioned *Ajoblanco* magazine, a great supporter and promoter of the Generation X trend. Cabrero's article provides the following description of the phenomenon of Generation X: "They are 30-something and have entered the grown-up world for good. They seem asleep, mute, but they are afraid of weariness and are terrified of routine. They seem cynical and disillusioned but they combine scepticism and idealism to improve the world today, not tomorrow. They seem to be conformists but they are pragmatic and, in a discreet way, they are codifying inherited freedoms. They are united by a profound vocation to go unnoticed avoiding any label, although without even having imagined it, they have already been assigned one: they are Generation X" (Cabrero, 1994). Cabrero's article and Coupland's are similar in that they deal with the same generation, but they also present some differences. Cabrero's features photographs of young people representative of Spanish Xers and the tone of her article varies slightly from Coupland's in that it does not actually affirm and vindicate an X culture in contrast to the Baby Boomers, but rather praises this new generation in spite of what appearances might indicate at first sight. In addition to a specialized magazine like *Ajoblanco*, national newspapers like *El País* (in its Sunday magazine *El País Semanal*, which dedicated its cover page to the Generation X phenomenon) also echoed the Generation X, referring to these young people as the best-educated and trained youth of Spanish history and, at the same time, the futureless children of development (Rodríguez, 1994). The articles from *Ajoblanco* and *El País Semanal* feature a considerable number of simplifications and generalizations that readers seem to enjoy and feel the need to identify with. This use of stereotypes allows, in fact, for what Coupland described (see above) as hypermarketing of the term.

Although by the end of the 1990s references to Generation X grew scarcer, they tend to reappear from time to time, as evidence of the lasting impact of this cultural phenomenon. For example, less than two years ago, journalists

such as Anna Grau (2008) in her article “Generación X al poder” (“Generation X takes power”) were still evoking Douglas Coupland’s first novel, this time referring to Barack Obama and his supporters and concluding that Generation X was accessing power with much more creative and eclectic agendas than their predecessors.

One of the most important effects on the Spanish literary system of the cultural trend triggered by Douglas Coupland’s book has been the emergence of a Spanish literary Generation X. Suddenly, publishing houses in Spain started accepting manuscripts written by young people and promoting them. This is exactly what Slattery was referring to when she said that Generation X was a cultural movement sanctioned by the media (“Generation X to Generation Next”). In Spain, its literary version was created by publishing firms. In 1994 José Ángel Mañas, twenty-three at the time, was shortlisted for the Premio Nadal¹⁶⁷ for his first novel *Historias del Kronen*. The publication of this novel had a very strong social impact because it bluntly portrayed the lifestyle and opinions of a segment of the Spanish youth, opening up a new path in Spanish literature.

The list of other authors included in this generation X, apart from Mañas, is not clearly established. The idea of this literary generation has been contested by academics. Sabas Martín (1997) in his anthology of contemporary fiction *Páginas Amarillas*, which includes most of the writers who have been labelled as Generation X, shuns the term altogether and sees it as a mistaken attempt to equate the Spanish literary panorama to those of the United States of America or Italy. He does not see a common background to compare the characters described in Coupland’s novel with the Spanish situation. Likewise, in her comprehensive study of the novels of young Spanish writers of the 1990s entitled *La novela de la Generación X* (2008), Eva Navarro Martínez (2008) concluded that it was not appropriate to talk about a “generation or a group X” in Spanish literature, because this group of young writers was not homogeneous enough to be given such a name. In her opinion, what they shared was a common idea of writing and literature and that they assumed the risk of introducing a new kind of writing in Spain (Martínez, 2008). It seems, nevertheless, ironic that Navarro Martínez should title her book with an allusion to Generation X only to conclude that there is not one in Spain. The use of a Generation X label which is, at the same time rejected, could be interpreted as a marketing ploy.

On the other hand, Germán Gullón (2005), one of the academics who has dealt most extensively with the Generation X literary phenomenon, limits

167 The Nadal Award for fiction is the oldest literary prize awarded in Spain. It was created by the publishing house Ediciones Destino in 1945, and the list of winners is representative of the development of Spanish literature during the second half of the twentieth century.

the range of writers that could be placed under that label, and provides a list including José Ángel Mañas, Gabriela Bustelo, Cuca Canals, Lucía Etxebarria, Ismael Grasa, Ray Loriga, Pedro Maestre, José Machado, Care Santos and Roger Wolfe. Gullón (2005) uses the adjective "*neorrealista*" (new-realist) first, and then the term "*hiperrealista*" (hyper-realist) to refer to these writers. He praises their achievements in essays such as "Cómo se lee una novela de la última generación (apartado X)"/"How to read a novel of the last generation (section X)" (Gullón, 1996), or "La novela multimediática/ the multimedia novel: *Ciudad rayada* de José Ángel Mañas" (Gullón, 1999), in contrast to those who questioned the quality or the literariness of their works. In their textbook about contemporary Spanish literature, Ángel L. Prieto and Mar Langa (2007) avoid the term Generation X to refer to this group and use the term "Realismo sucio" ("Dirty Realism"), but do affirm that their novels are connected to those by Douglas Coupland.

As far as the writers themselves are concerned, just as Coupland himself did, those who were labelled with the famous X in the Spanish literary milieu tried hard to escape that brand name, although these young writers benefitted from the situation at the same time by having their works, sometimes first books, published when in other circumstances they would not have had that opportunity. For example, Roger Wolfe (quoted in Navarro Martínez, 2008) expressed in an interview his belief that there is a need to label things, to gather cattle, he called it, and to classify. He thought that it is obvious that if a group of people live in the same society and are of similar age, they share things which are somehow reflected in their work, but when it comes to writing, they take different perspectives (quoted in Navarro Martínez, 2008).

Indeed, these young Spanish writers deploy different styles and ways of writing as well as common features, which may partly be related to their literary models and to the cultural background they stem from. However, we have to be aware of the fact that to determine literary influences has always been a tricky business and since the 1950s, comparative literature has searched for new paths to move away from this practice. Many critics, such as René Wellek, have previously reflected on the fact that searching and re-searching for direct influences is usually pointless, vain and almost impossible. This is even more so in an era of globalization. From my point of view, it would be more appropriate to talk about common features shared by Coupland's novels and Spanish novels written by young writers in the nineties. Therefore, I will not regard the characteristics that I mention below as the result of a direct influence from Coupland or any other North American writer, especially since most of the literary devices that these writers share are not new. They have been used at other times by other authors, perhaps not predominantly, but certainly occasionally. In addition, given the vast resources at hand for everybody in our time, Spanish authors may have been inspired by many sources.

Although Navarro Martínez (2008) acknowledges that establishing the literary sources from which a given writer has drawn is difficult, she nonetheless points to influences from the Beat Generation and other American writers such as Bret Easton Ellis on the so called Spanish Generation X. She also mentions Coupland as a source of influence, but does not specify exactly how that influence materialises in the works of the writers she analyses. She argues that the influence of *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* can be perceived in the topic and stylistic features of Lucia Etxebarria's first novel (*Amor, curiosidad, prozac y dudas*¹⁶⁸), but not in the other writers she analyses (Navarro Martínez, 2008).

Most young Spanish writers described as Generation X do not acknowledge Douglas Coupland as one of their literary models. When asked about the authors that have influenced them, Pedro Maestre mentions names such as Cela, Céline, Delibes, Carver, Mercè Rodoreda, Peter Handke, Manuel Vicent, Camus (*Ajoblanco*, March 1996, 28), and Ray Loriga makes reference to Camus, Salinger, Kerouac, Auden, Ferlingetti, Bukowski, Carver (Ribas, 1996). On the other hand, writers like Silvia Grijalba, who has not been listed under the Generation X label, openly acknowledges Coupland's influence ("Ha estado con nosotros Silvia Grijalba," 2002).

We can only speculate about why Coupland is absent from these lists of authors mentioned as direct influences. One of the causes may be that Spanish writers, as was reflected above, were trying to escape the label Generation X (Arjona, 2011). Another more complex reason may come to mind: since Coupland had not attained a place among canonical writers, young Spanish writers may not have wanted to have their names associated with him, but with other well-established authors. Finally, many Spanish writers may actually not have read Coupland's works, but received his influence indirectly.

In spite of not recognizing a direct influence from Douglas Coupland, there are a number of common features shared by the Canadian writer and by young Spanish novelists of the 1990s. First of all, they connect with a large number of readers. In the case of Spanish writers, their selling success is supported by the publishing houses and the media who find in them a whole new trend which they can exploit. Douglas Coupland is also a very successful writer whose books sell very well and who often appears in the media. The commercial success of these books has also favoured their adaptation for the screen. Coupland himself worked on the adaptation of *JPod* as a TV series that was launched by the CBC and premiered in January 2008. Some of the Spanish writers' novels have also been made the subject of film adaptations. The most significant was perhaps

168 The translation of the title would be "Love, curiosity, prozac and doubts."

Historias del Kronen, which was adapted by the author himself, José Ángel Mañas, and Montxo Armendáriz. It was awarded the Goya¹⁶⁹ for best adaptation in 1995. Later others, such as *Mensaka* (1998), followed.

The fact that these authors have occasionally worked as script writers and are close to the film industry is quite fitting, since one of their main characteristics is their being marked by a visual culture that both influences and determines their literary production. This is particularly relevant in Coupland's work, where we often find comic strips and layouts that play with visual aspects (images of the contents of a computer screen, graphic design, different types of fonts) that illustrate the preference for the visual in his novels. Some of the Spanish writers of the so-called Generación X, like Ray Loriga, note the importance of visual elements in their creation and complain about the fact that many reviewers ignore the presence of the audiovisual in their work: "En este país se sigue escribiendo como si no existiera la television," which means "in this country people still write as if television did not exist" (Arjona, 2011).

Stylistically speaking, Coupland's novels are characterized by the use of first person narrators and frequent dialogues, which creates an informal register fitting for its young protagonists. In addition, his novels use many neologisms that have often become buzzwords. In *Generation X* some of these words are actually defined at the bottom of the page when they are first used. Terms such as "McJob" (Coupland, 1993) have become so popular that they even have become news items ("McDonald's contra Oxford," 2007).¹⁷⁰ Ismael Grasa (quoted in Corroto, 2008) argues that emerging Spanish writers have much of the spirit of Generation X, especially in their assimilation of language. In fact, Coupland's ability to collect, use and popularize words and concepts such as "generation", "planet" and many others is outstanding.

In contrast, the neologisms that Spanish writers tend to use are adaptations of English words into Spanish and they have not had such an important impact on the language outside the fictional world. Mostly, they have reflected young people's jargon without being particularly creative in that respect. For example, Ray Loriga is criticized by Juan Ángel Juristo (1994) for using expressions such as "ese bastardo cielo azul" ("that bastard blue sky"), because, as he rightly claims, the word "bastard" has not been traditionally used in Spanish except to describe an illegitimate child, but has become popular recently due to the influence of English. Another instance is José Ángel Mañas who very often adapts English

169 The Premio Goya is the Spanish equivalent to the American Oscar Awards.

170 This article, published in *El País* (a translation from a piece from *The Guardian*), which explained that the fast food chain McDonald's was pushing to change the *Oxford English Dictionary's* definition of "McJob," claiming that the term - established in the English language - was insulting to the thousands of staff working in the service sector.

words to show how they sound when used by young people in Spanish, as when he writes “jebi” instead of “heavy”, or Nirvana’s song “Smells Like Teen Spirit”, which becomes “Esmelslaiktinspirit” (Mañas, 1994).

The result of using first-person narrators, the language of young people, as well as places that are familiar to Spanish youth,¹⁷¹ is that young readers can easily identify with the protagonists of the works by these writers. In this sense José Mañas explained that he had in mind the idea of leaving behind a sociological document about the way people his age were and lived at that time (Ribas, 1994). As a consequence of this quasi-documentary intention, we often find references to current events, celebrities, music, films, video games, etc. These popular cultural references are much stronger than the links to the established canonical literary tradition.

In tune with the times, these writers have often blurred the limits between reality and fiction and have used metanarrative techniques. For instance, Douglas Coupland gives his novel *JPod* a postmodern twist when he himself appears in the novel, interacting with his main character and admitting that the whole novel is based on the information he has retrieved from the protagonist’s computer. Similarly, Benjamín Prado in *Nunca le des la mano a un pistolero zurdo* (“Never shake hands with a left-handed gunman”) has his four narrators talk directly to him about the development of the story. However, it has to be noted that this device is not new in Spanish literature, since Miguel de Unamuno already used it in his “nivola” *Niebla*.¹⁷²

Another feature shared by Coupland’s and Spanish writers’ novels is that their protagonists are often young people and, more specifically, groups of friends. It is remarkable, however, that there is an element in Coupland that we do not find in Spanish writers - his young friends often share the need to tell stories in order to escape from or cope with reality. One of the things they need to escape from is an excessive consumerism that Coupland’s work is known to denounce. The Canadian writer often makes reference to particular brands to describe and define certain characters, a device which can also be found in Lucía Etxebarria’s work. Pedro Maestre partook in this criticism when he expressed the opinion that a society whose values are defeated by consumerism causes ephemeral

171 For example, the locations of *Historias del Kronen* were obvious references to places in Madrid for young people at the time.

172 Miguel de Unamuno (1864 – 1936) was a Spanish writer and philosopher, who belonged to the “Generación del 98.” *Niebla* is a work in which he rejects the traditional realist novel of the 19th century. One of the most significant moments of the novel is contained in chapter 31, when the main character, Augusto Pérez, confronts the author, Miguel de Unamuno, attempting to change the course of events in the novel and reflecting on humanity’s struggle to come to terms with mortality..

feelings, indolence and worn-out productions, especially in those who will not access the goods (Ribas, 1996). Furthermore, the lack of a suitable job is another cause of weariness which appears both in Coupland's work and in Ray Loriga's first novel *Lo peor de todo* ("The worst of all"), which describes in its first chapter the pathetic working atmosphere in a fast-food restaurant.

To end this section dealing with the features shared by Douglas Coupland's novels and the works by young Spanish writers of the 1990s ascribed to Generation X, a further characteristic may be mentioned. Navarro Martínez (2008) notes that these Spanish writers display a tendency to literary intimism and a first-person narration that resembles a diary, in which the narrator looks for himself or herself Daniel Múgica's *La ciudad de abajo* ("The city below") is an example of this technique that reminds the reader of Coupland's *Shampoo Planet* and, especially, of *Microserfs*.

As I have tried to demonstrate in this chapter, Douglas Coupland's popularity and influence goes beyond the English-speaking world, reaching even Spain. He is a regular guest in the media giving interviews, attending meetings of reading clubs, publishing his own articles and writing his blog.¹⁷³ His tremendous success is reflected, as we have seen, in the fact that his books have been widely translated and reprinted many times, as well as reviewed in the press worldwide. However, some disclaimers need to be made as far as his presence in Spain is concerned. First of all, his work is only partially known in this country. Secondly, publishing houses have taken a very particular slant on his work. Thirdly, his most substantial influence has been exerted on an overarching cultural and, even linguistic, sphere. Words like "Planet," as in the title of his novel *Shampoo Planet*, or even "microsiervos" are common in the Spanish media and web pages.

Douglas Coupland is only partially known in Spain because his talent as a visual artist still has to be appraised. In addition, only one of his non-fictional writings, *Polaroids from the Dead*, has seen a Spanish version, and not even all his novels have been translated into Spanish. Finally, Coupland's Canadian origins are not always clear to Spanish critics either. For example, Sabas Martín (1997), when discussing the validity of Coupland's term Generation X for Spanish writers, describes him as a US-American, which is very telling of his lack of knowledge about this author. When Spanish critics and reviewers refer to the Douglas Coupland of Generation X, the portrayer of a generation without ideals, he is usually taken for an American –it is not coincidental that two of his most popular novels, *Generation X* and *Microserfs* are set in California.

Publishing houses have contributed to the creation of a certain image of Coupland, since they have basically selected those of his works for translation

173 His *New York Times* blog is called "Time Capsules."

and publishing in Spain that deal with young people struggling to come to terms with today's world and which can be associated with his famous Generation X. In these works, references to popular culture, rather than the literary canon are predominant. This may be one of the reasons why some literary critics did not initially welcome the works either of Douglas Coupland, or of his Spanish counterparts. The appreciation of these writers would probably require a change of paradigm on the part of the Spanish critics and their acceptance of a new horizon of expectations (Jauss, 1982), in which the visual and popular culture elements, which these critics were not ready to accept at the time, come into play. Reading the transference of Coupland's *Generation X* through Even-Zohar's polysystem's theory, it appears to have filled a literary vacuum at a moment when the Spanish literary system was undergoing a turning point (Even-Zohar, 1978).

According to Gideon Toury (2004), translation is a kind of activity which inevitably involves at least two languages and two cultural traditions, in a process in which some aspects of the source text fit in the appropriate slots of the target culture. The traits of Coupland's works that have captured Spanish audiences are his ironical perception of contemporary issues as well as his ability to engage young readers. However, whether these characteristics have made him an explicit model for young Spanish writers is debatable, even if Coupland's stylistic modes and wide readership among young people coincide with those of the Spanish "Generation X." Douglas Coupland's presence in the Spanish literary system is not so much a direct influence on Spanish writers based on a profound knowledge of his work and the wish to imitate it. It should rather be understood as an indirect impact on the emergence of a general avant-garde attitude towards life and literature in Spain, which suited the socio-political context of the times. His relevance to the general cultural background of the nineties, both in Spain and elsewhere, is unquestionable, as a witness to an era, as an extraordinary gatherer of the *Zeitgeist*, and as the populariser (if not creator) of the terms that have helped to describe a time and a conception of life and writing.