

Generation X Rocks

Contemporary Peninsular Fiction,
Film, and Rock Culture

Edited by
Christine Henseler
and Randolph D. Pope



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Christine Henseler

AND

Randolph D. Pope

EDITORS

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Introduction

Generation X and Rock: The Sounds of a New Tradition

Christine Henseler and Randolph D. Pope

While various labels have been used, discussed, and in many cases rejected, it is evident that in the 1990s several Spanish writers, who are significantly different from their predecessors and from many of their contemporaries, became famous and attracted critical attention: among others, Lucía Etxebarria (b. 1966), José Ángel Mañas (b. 1971), and Ray Loriga (b. 1967). The stories they have to tell have been told before. The three sisters of Etxebarria's *Amor, curiosidad, prozac y dudas* (1997), are similar in their choice of very different life paths to those found in Carmen Martín Gaité's (1925–2000) *Entre visillos* (1958); the group of friends rattling away in Mañas' *Historias del Kronen* (1995) as they spend a day of idle revelry that ends in tragedy has reminded many readers of Rafael Sánchez Ferlosio's (b. 1927) *El Jarama* (1955); while Loriga's self-absorbed characters and his criticism of the media in novels such as *Lo peor de todo* (1993) and *Héroes* (1994) have a family resemblance to Juan Goytisolo's (b. 1931) novels. Yet the older writers emerged from the post-Civil War repressive society with their main concern being the still looming presence of a tragic conflict and the strict control of the dictatorship. A dance at the town's social club would at most be accompanied by cigarette smoke and wine; an outing to the countryside took place on bicycles, music was aired from a phonograph; and to live openly as gay and smoke hashish one had to migrate to France or

Africa. In comparison, by the time the younger writers, born in the 1960s and 70s, came to adulthood, society had become permissive, cars zoomed through crowded cities, music was everywhere 24/7, drugs were easily available, and the country was immersed in conflictive projects of national affirmation and fragmentation, as well as in an accelerated blending into Europe. The thrill of a new democracy gave way to the indifference of the young to the posturing and jockeying for personal advantage among politicians. The novelists who described this new Spain that emerged after the transition to democracy are known as the Generation X. The label is borrowed from an American and British designation and its context is provided in several of the essays included in this volume. The fact that the term “Generation X” comes from abroad, though, does not reduce its validity, as in their time the terms Baroque, Romanticism, Realism, or Surrealism were perfectly appropriate to describe an international cultural stage in which Spain participated. Of the many characterizations Generation Xers have received, the most appropriate for our book is the one that Daniel Grassian provides in *Hybrid Fictions: American Literature and Generation X*:

Generation X is not completely eclectic or indeterminate. Rather, there is some cohesion amongst the generation, especially in terms of the central and common ground of media-focused historical and political events, as well as television shows, films and music that frequently serve as their common frames of reference. (14)

(What defines, then, this generation is not only the common references they use, but also the media through which these references circulate and the social economy into which they are integrated; not the book, but film, not opera, but rock music, not the exclusive, but the open and shared in youth culture.)

Twice before in Spanish literary history, a small number of significant writers has been called a generation. In both cases, not all the writers of a similar age who are actively participating in the cultural life of their period get included into a generation, as the term has been used in relation to the Generation of '98 and of '27. Antonio Machado (1875–1939) and Miguel de Unamuno (1864–1936) belong to the Generation of 98, which excludes Manuel Machado (1874–1947) and Ramón María del Valle-Inclán (1866–1936). Federico García Lorca (1898–1936) and Rafael Alberti (1902–1999) belong to the Generation of 27, while Juan Ramón Jiménez (1881–1958) and José Ortega y Gasset (1883–1955) are included in neither of these generations. The classification, therefore, may seem arbitrary and it has not always emerged with the same importance.¹ While literary critics have labeled some writers as Generation of

1950 and of 1970, these labels have not become as general or as contested as those of the Generations of 27 and 98. Richard Cardwell complains rightly that the division of writers of the same period between those belonging to the Generation of 98 and those marked by Modernism is an “altogether false picture [that] has bedeviled any proper assessment of the real identity and role of Spanish *modernismo*” (502). In fact, the recent and important book that contains Cardwell’s essay, *The Cambridge History of Spanish Literature*, does not devote a chapter either to the Generation of 98 or to the Generation of 27, but rather the authors classify them under other more general categories. And yet there is a reason why one can safely predict that the Generations of 98, 27, and the Generation X, will not be abandoned. To understand why, we must see how Ortega explained the generational method in his influential *En torno a Galileo* (1933, *About Galileo*).

For Ortega, human life is always relational and therefore human beings are not only just situated in a society as observers of history, but are also a questioning mind, a project, and more than an isolated self:

Cada uno de nosotros se encuentra, en efecto, sumergido hoy en un sistema de problemas, peligros, facilidades, dificultades, posibilidades e imposibilidades que no son él, sino que, al contrario, son aquello en que está, con que tiene que contar, en manejar y luchar con lo cual consiste precisamente su vida. Si hubiésemos nacido cien años hace, aun poseyendo el mismo carácter e iguales dotes, el drama de nuestra vida hubiera sido muy distinto.

La pregunta radical de la historia se precisa, pues, así: ¿qué cambios de la estructura vital ha habido? ¿Cómo, cuándo y por qué cambia la vida? (27)

(Each one of us finds oneself, in fact, immersed today in a system of problems, dangers, advantages, difficulties, possibilities and impossibilities that are not what one is, but, on the contrary, is where one is, that which one must take into account, since one’s life consists precisely in dealing and struggling with this situation. If we had been born a century ago, even if we had the same personality and equal gifts, our lives’ drama would have been very different.

The most profound question of history becomes, thus, formulated as follows: What changes have there been in the structure of living? How, when, and why does life change?)

This question about the structure of one’s life resonates in periods of deep transformations, as was the end of the nineteenth century and the period right before the Spanish Civil War, and again after the transition from the Franco dictatorship to a democratic society was relatively completed. Not all writers in

those critical periods deal with the question that Ortega formulates so clearly: How, when, and why does life change? Those writers who do ask this question are those who come to form the generation, because they reflect intensely their own time. There had been a quiet transformation of the Spanish society before 1975—as is well described by José Carlos Mainer in “Spanish Literature between the Franco and post-Franco Eras”—but even the most innovative novels, such as those of Juan Goytisolo or Juan Marsé, remained mostly centered on the political issues of an oppressive history and the presence of a strong and censorial central government.² By the late eighties a significant part of a new young society is not only enjoying different material conditions, political structures, and freedoms, but the luxury of forgetting the past and being able to concentrate in living an exuberant, consumerist, drug-imbued, sex-abundant life.³ Spain had drastically and profoundly changed, but also had the world, where the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989 had been symbolic of the collapse of old regimes.⁴ Some would see this turn of the youth towards their own present as the consequence of a pact of forgetfulness, but much of this younger generation had only vague memories of the dictatorship and the Civil War, passed along to them by their parents and an elder society they saw as out of touch with the contemporary age.

Ortega adds a characteristic of generations that is useful here. He affirms that any present period is a compendium of the past, since our situation would be different had the past been otherwise (45). But generations do not always simply succeed each other: some accept their past and then take over to assure continuity of a society they have come to like, while others reject the past as an unwelcome inheritance and do what they can to change the way of life. Clearly, the Generation X belongs to this second group. Therefore, as rock music begins to appear in many novels studied in this book we are not seeing a simple ornament or marginal addition, but instead the manifestation of a radical choice to be different, joining the international music that Americans and British bands had brought to most of the globe, aided by the electronic revolution, which had liberated music from geography and, with the electric guitar, especially, had left the home or the concert hall to take over the large arenas where multitudes could feel transported in a communal frenzy.⁵

At the end of the nineteenth century, Walter Benjamin observed that a boom in the textile trade, the advent of building in iron, and the presence of crowds created a situation in the city that directed “the visual imagination, which ha[d] been activated by the new, back to the primeval past” (148) and to the illusion of a classless society. At the end of the twentieth century in Spain, the explosion in music, the advent of new electronic methods of production

and distribution, and the presence of crowds dedicated to Dionysian dance and leisure in discotheques and stadiums (frequently with the aid of alcohol and drugs), also produces the illusion of a classless society. In the novels we study, the social issues that were frequent in the fifties and survived through the seventies are but faint echoes: class recedes, history fades, money is not a serious issue, and traditional politics are distant and disdained. And yet, rock sends a loud message of individual and social restlessness, inviting to a defiance of social traditions and obligations. There is no doubt that sexual mores changed during this period, that women asserted their rights and gay issues emerged defiantly, and that it all came with the impulse of international and local bands that played a music which flowed from the double young tradition of American musicians such as Nirvana and the bands of the British invasion.⁶

Rock music, which had been known in Spain since its origin in the fifties, emerged in the nineties' novels with a new centrality. By then, decades had created layers of canonical rock music to which one could refer, knowing that most of the hip public would recognize the lyrics, remember the melodies, and share their significance. While in *Entre visillos* references are to Juan Ramón Jiménez and in Juan Goytisolo's *Count Julian* to Luis de Góngora, we are confronted in the newer authors' works with Bob Dylan, Nirvana, and David Bowie. This does not just demand of critics more necessary footnotes if their students are to grasp all the implications of the text, but an attentive listening to what characters in these novels hear through their headphones.

As critics, the first obstacle to overcome is the frequent association of rock with popular music, and therefore with a cultural element residing on the low end of the distribution system or spectrum between high and low. In fact, the novel has always incorporated all expressions of human activity; Miguel de Cervantes has his narrator in *Don Quixote* read pages he finds on the ground at marketplaces, and Benito Pérez Galdós has great fun in *Fortunata y Jacinta* with the titles of books sold by door-to-door salesmen. Placed into historical perspective, there was even a time when the novel was described as a frivolous avocation next to the time-honored epic poem, drama and poetry. When eventually the novel reached its peak, film began contending a position that made the academic study of movies respectable, while television only recently gained a foot into the door and the study of *telenovelas* is in its infancy. It is high time to realize that rock music attracts so many people for a reason: it can play powerful music, contain striking lyrics, and retain memorable performances, therefore meriting our full critical attention.

A second point to consider is the assumption that because rock is marketed by an international entertainment industry it is therefore extraneous to the

most vital concerns of Spanish youth. Obviously, a foreign language and fame never presented any difficulty when it meant acknowledging the importance of Petrarca for Garcilaso de la Vega, of the Italian neo-realist films for the fifties in Spain, or of jazz and even opera for many novels of previous generations.

A similar point is that commercial products, as most of the famous groups usually become, are alien to authenticity and conserve only weak tremors of their original shattering power. How can anything remain oppositional which is a bestseller or at the top of the charts?⁷ The most appropriate comparison is with religion, which makes radical demands for life transformation that are heard by many but followed by few. For most, religion is only a Sunday feel-good activity, but for some it has deep transformative effects.

Yet we must understand that there is a wave of rejection that comes from these novels to the orderly social life that we share as scholars. There is a vast gap that is not easy to overcome. Rock still has questioning power: questioning us. Kurt Cobain wrote in his notebooks, not long before his death by suicide (even if there is a theory that he was murdered), the following:

Hope I die before I turn into Pete Townshend. [The lead guitarist of The Who.] At this point in our uh, *career* [underlined in the original], before hair loss treatment and bad credit. I've decided that I have no desire to do an interview with *Rolling Stone*. We couldn't benefit from it because the Average *Rolling Stone* reader is a middle aged ex hippie—turned hippiecite who embraces the past as “the glory days,” and has a kinder, gentler, more adult approach towards liberal conservatism. The average *Rolling Stone* reader has always denied the underworlds musical options unless it becomes an obviously safe commodity. (269)

We hope we are not presenting here safe commodities, but live intellectual wires such as Etxebarria, Mañas and Loriga. Therefore, in this book, we wish to explore the very perspicuous confluence of novel, film, and rock that takes place in Spain in the nineties and after, but without claiming this as a general and defining characteristic of all writers of the period. The claim, instead, is that rock in literature and the movies is a new and significant cultural event requiring close study and placing new demands on literary and cultural criticism because, as explained above, it is the most salient expression of a generation that has entered into a radically different world.

Gonzalo Navajas' essay which opens this book describes the transition from the solidarity of humanism, represented by Jean-Paul Sartre, to an anti-ethical and individualist search, as seen in Mañas and Loriga. Also the register of language has changed, becoming more inclusive and tending towards the

minimalism that we associate in the United States with Bret Easton Ellis, Frederick Barthelme, Ann Beattie, and Raymond Carver.

One could fall into the temptation of attributing a point of origin to novelists such as Ellis—his *American Psycho* (1991) is invoked frequently in *Historias del Kronen* (1994), even if perhaps Ellis' *Less than Zero* (1985) is more of a model—and seeing the Spanish scene as derivative. But Paul Begin in his essay, "Music and Subculture Practice in Peninsular Gen X Narrative," indicates we should not conceive of the rock and youth culture in Spain as a subculture of the British Invasion and the globalization of the United States and British music industry, but instead use Lawrence Grossberg's terms of "affective alliance" or "hyperalliance," which better convey the appropriation and rapid integration into Spanish culture of these international movements. Begin sees most of rock, but especially punk, as a rebellion against the cultural reaffirmation of power of the higher classes, what Antonio Gramsci accurately described under the term "hegemony." One can easily confirm this aggressive oppositional nature of punk by reading Craig O'Hara's *The Philosophy of Punk: More than Noise*, in which he affirms, for example, that "punk is gut rebellion and change . . . Punk is a formidable voice of opposition" (41). The excitement punk generated can still be faintly perceived in the many outrageous (for their time, but some still for today) photographs found in *Punk: The Definitive Record of a Revolution*, by Stephen Colegrave and Chris Sullivan. Alaska brought to Madrid the punk spirit after a visit to London, as is well documented in Rafa Cervera's *Alaska y otras historias de la movida*, with a prologue by Pedro Almodóvar. The problem, as Begin sees it, is that any form of rebellion and vanguard easily becomes co-opted and loses power when successful; nevertheless, punk did have an impact in Spain and was creative, offensive, transgressive, and fun. Punk's effect in Spanish culture can be compared to waves crashing on the shore: while each wave fizzles away in foam and recoils into the sea, it is only to return with renewed vigor.

With the British invasion of rock music, came the flood of books translated from United States' authors associated with Dirty Realism, such as Raymond Carver, Jayne Anne Phillips, and Tobias Wolff. Cintia Santana's essay, "What We Talk About When We Talk About Dirty Realism in Spain," insightfully shows that we should be cautious when speaking of the presence of these writers in Spain, since the translations, in spite of being of what was called *Dirty Realism*, used a standard Spanish that erased from the original all indexes of class, race, and region, always difficult to convey and perhaps more politically charged in Spain than in the United States. This essay raises the question not only of how insufficiently known models can still exert a decisive influence, but

also suggests that an examination of novels in this period may in fact encounter fewer examples of class conflict than in the novels of the fifties.

Yet there are also continuities (as Ortega knew) in what appears as a radical generational break. Samuel Amago, in “Can Anyone Rock Like We Do? Or, How the Gen X Aesthetic Transcends the Age of the Writer,” studies how the culture of sex, drugs, and rock and roll can be traced in Spain earlier than the Generation X, and finds an important role for controlled substances in the works of Juan Goytisolo, Carmen Martín Gaité, Juan José Millás, and Carlos Cañete. To these names one could add José María del Valle Inclán and endless drinking among many poets of the fifties. In Amago’s essay it is important to perceive that the model offered by rock is embraced not as a foreign lifestyle, but as reaffirmation of what had already native roots in the Spanish peninsula. When Carlos in *Historias del Kronen* wants to speak only of “de sexo, de drogas y de rocanrol” (205) (of sex, drugs, and rock-and-roll), he has much in common with previous writers—sex and drugs—as proven by Amago, but Carlos introduces the differential element that completes the Generation X’s sacred trilogy: rock-and-roll.⁸

One difficulty in approaching the novels we study here is that they can be ironical, satirical, or parodical, as many of the acts put on by rock bands among fire and smoke. Luis Martín-Cabrera, in “Apocalypses Now: The End of Spanish Literature? Reading *Payasos en la lavadora* as Critical Parody,” provides an excellent example of a novel in which traditional values are shattered, but within a rhetoric of complicity and evasive implication. In Geoffrey T. Holtz’s well-known book, *Welcome to the Jungle: The Why Behind “Generation X,”* he writes:

Some notable changes in the message of rock music have also sprung up. Rock-and-roll songs have long featured an us-against-them theme, with the idea that through perseverance, ideals, or love, people can change the world. But one notion that runs through many of today’s new music acts is me-against-myself . . . What hits home with such extremes of self-deprecation is that the listener isn’t quite sure if the singer is serious or just putting us on. (201)

While *Payasos en la lavadora* shows an author who makes us doubt if he is serious or just pulling our leg, Elizabeth Scarlett’s essay, “Not Your Father’s Rock and Roll,” provides two detailed examples of how rock appears in two authors not usually associated with this music, in Antonio Muñoz Molina and Manuel Rivas. In these cases, though, one can notice the difference that Holtz indicated: Muñoz Molina and Rivas echo the earlier era of rock music. Scarlett’s

close reading of several texts reveals how rock music becomes so charged with meaning—social, emotional, ideological—that very brief references to it are crucial to grasp the complexities of the interactions described definitely in a serious manner in these texts.

Randolph Pope, in “Between Rock and the Rocking Chair,” reminds us of how careful we must be in extending an anecdote, as it appears in a novel, into a general historical representation. He discusses the epilogue of *Historias del Kronen*, arguing that one of its functions is precisely to work against a totalizing interpretation and the reduction of a whole generation to the characteristics of a few of its members. At the same time, by stressing the importance of the transition from the main text of the novel to its epilogue, he shows how the individualistic project of the Generation X was frequently absorbed back into society, failing to transform its basic structure, even if eroding it.

Matthew Marr also writes about *Historias del Kronen* in “Realism and the Rocks,” comparing Mañas to Ernest Hemingway, and the Generation X to the Lost Generation. He establishes deep diachronic roots for *Historias*, while reminding us that the apparent slackers in the nineties are fighting for individual rights and resisting the government’s attempts to control their behavior. Both Mañas and Hemingway are reacting against legislation that has made the consumption of alcohol and drugs harder—Prohibition in the case of Hemingway and new laws to control the use of drugs and alcohol in Spain, after an early period of *laissez faire*.

A good number of novels are about being in a car, driving long distances, and feeling the thrill of the slim and relative freedom of speed and choosing directions in a map. Here again, there is a long tradition of travel literature in Spain that includes the *Quixote* as well as novels by Pío Baroja, Camilo José Cela and Juan Goytisolo. But Jorge Pérez, in “Reckless Driving,” describes how the road rock ‘n’ roll novels created a unique space outside the routine of daily life, even if being on the road seldom can offer a transformative social experience and it actually can bring to the fore gender issues.

Kathryn Everly, in “Television, Violence and Power,” explores the importance of television for this generation, which has grown up in its glow, becoming familiar with the medium and indulging in the virtual travel it allows, but also capable of insightful criticism. By counterposing Loriga’s development of a story he wrote as a novel, *Caídos del cielo*, and then directed as a movie, *La pistola de mi hermano*, a story in which television is a muffled protagonist, Everly shows the strengths, weaknesses and even dangers of all three genres and modes of production. Many questions, of course, remain open, since the ever-growing variety of offerings leaves space for exceptions while the freedom one

must allow for readers and spectators to choose their poison should make us very aware of the differences between description, opinion, and normativity.

The previous essay is complemented by Christine Henseler's "Rocking Around Ray Loriga's *Héroes*," an examination of how video clips provide not just material to sample, but a mode of conceiving existence which has radically transformative consequences for the novel, where the real and the virtual mix in a narrative in which the usual chronological line has been shattered as inconsequential and alien to the youthful experience of reality.

We conclude the book with a section that examines two instances of the visual, of crucial importance for the Generation X. Curiously in Gabriela Bustelo's *Veo veo* (I See I See), as Nina Molinaro explains, vision is meshed with rock music which is constantly accompanying the action and providing a commentary in an updated version of the Greek chorus.

Similarly, Linda Gould-Levine, in "Saved by Art?" on the 2003 movie *Te doy mis ojos* (I Give You My Eyes), examines how images, in this case museum paintings, serve as a catalyst to present the topic of domestic violence and highlight gender issues. The movie had great public success, indicating a strong support for the still needed reaffirmation of women's freedom from the patriarchal domination which long prevailed in Spain. Above all, this essay shows how the characters make paintings in a museum—an earlier form of virtual reality—part of their lives, threatening or inspirational, according to the points of view of the struggling couple, since ultimately these images on canvas become decisive in their lives.

The times, they are a'changing. The open and blunt expression of their rock-immersed lives by several key writers of the Generation X may have exhausted itself as fireworks that lasted too long, yet it opened up a scene of revelation that created new possibilities, not only for culture, but also for the life of the generations that will follow us, if we can light their fire.

Notes

1. In his very detailed study of how the Generation of 27 was formed, Andrew Anderson shows conclusively that what began as a vast group of poets became decanted into a few by the power of anthologies, especially by Gerardo Diego's *Poesía española: Antología 1915–1931*, a book published in 1932. See especially p. 81 of Anderson's *El veintisiete en tela de juicio*.
2. Part IX of the *Cambridge History of Spanish Literature* is appropriately called "In and Out of Franco Spain," with almost every chapter referring to what Ortega would have

called the structure of living under a dictatorship: “The Literature of Franco Spain, 1939–1975,” “Prose in Franco Spain,” “Poetry in Franco Spain,” “Theatre in Franco Spain,” and “Film and Censorship under Franco, 1937–1975.” Innumerable other books and articles express this condition, such as Jordi Gracia García and Miguel Ángel Ruiz Carnicer’s *La España de Franco (1939–1975)*, which highlights the many complexities of the Franco period, rich in ambiguity, and with many undercurrents that continued the culture of the first part of the century and prepared the future democratic society. But the fact remains that the title still speaks of a united country dominated by one figure, which was the dominant ideology to be shattered in the late seventies and eighties, as superbly described by Teresa Vilarós in *El mono del desencanto: Una crítica cultural de la transición española (1973–1993)*.

3. Teresa Vilarós, in “The Novel Beyond Modernity,” puts the relation with the past as follows: “Novels of the democratic state negotiated the rift between the two former, antagonistic constructs of Spanish difference by wiping them out” (254).
4. Tara Brabazon cites the Pet Shop Boys, “My October Symphony,” which speaks about an international change “from revolution to revelation.” She comments: “This lyric traced a movement away from credible, authentic, public domain politics to the realm of affect, identity politics and change-fatigue” (1).
5. Hank Bordowitz in *Turning Points in Rock and Roll*, devotes a chapter to 1946–55, the period in which “Les Paul Invents the Solid-Body Electric Guitar, Close Miking, the Multitrack Studio, and a Bunch of Other Stuff” (23–33). Bordowitz explains that “As the technology revolutionized the instrument, it started to change the way players—especially young players—approached the instrument. With the guitar amplified, it changed the need for large bands to generate the volume required for groups to entertain dancers (and compete with drummers). Beyond that, the guitar, which had primarily been a rhythm instrument, now could develop an expressive voice as a solo instrument” (27). Another chapter, of course, is “1965: Bob Dylan Goes Electric at the Newport Folk Festival” (125–33). Added to the improvements in television (where Alaska introduced in the 80s some glorious songs in *La Bola de Cristal*), radio, and portable players, the change was technologically driven and international in scope. In Spain the time of the lonely poet singing political songs accompanied by his acoustic guitar, as the members of the *Nova cançó* or the Latin American *nueva canción*, was over (Boyle 294).
6. Not all agree, of course, with the ample tolerance and unconcern with moral values that the novels of the Generation X reveal. A chapter in a book by Sebastian Neumeister, which includes examples of German, American, British, and Spanish novels, is titled “Bankrott der Moral: Die Generation X und der Untergang des Abendlandes,” (“The Bankruptcy of Moral: The Generation X and the Decline of the West”), beginning with references to Nietzsche’s concept of beyond good and evil, Paul Feyerabend’s “anything goes,” and ending with an ominous reference to Oscar Spengler’s classic book on the forthcoming decline of the West. The collection of his essays, published in 2004, celebrated Neumeister’s 65th birthday.

7. Leslie Haynsworth states that ‘the various artists—like the members of R.E.M., Nirvana, and Green Day—who have emerged from subcultural enclaves into the national spotlight generally insist that this shift in status and positioning has not altered their identities or their artistic vision in any significant way’ (43). But she adds: “The increasing absorption of Gen X values and practices into mainstream youth culture signifies a perhaps irrevocable loss of pure countercultural status, which is troubling for a movement that is self-defined through its oppositional stance” (57).
8. For this topic there is ample and irrefutable evidence in *The Mammoth Book of Sex, Drugs & Rock’n’Roll*, edited by Jim Driver.

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Part I

Rocking the Academy: Generation X Narratives

◆ 1

A Distopian Culture: The Minimalist Paradigm in the Generation X

Gonzalo Navajas

The Humanist Framework

In 1946, Jean-Paul Sartre published a controversial and highly influential work, *L'existentialisme est un humanisme* (*Existentialism Is a Humanism*), in which he provides a comprehensive foundation to his philosophical program, which is based on the rejection of universal axiological principles. In the book, he attempts to link his program to the humanist project that has been a central focus of modern thought from Goethe and Voltaire to the present. Sartre does not pretend to restore and save the classical tradition of thought, but he, nonetheless, establishes a connection between the nihilism and solipsism of his philosophy and the history of humanism, which, at least theoretically, posits a common and solidary destiny for all humanity. Without renouncing his negative critical methodology, Sartre inserts his philosophy within the modern paradigm in which the humanist ideal supplies the central justification.

From this perspective, Antoine Roquentin, Sartre's nihilist figure of *La nausée* (*Nausea*), would ultimately propose a renovated and more genuine view of the human condition. His critical examination of the philosophical tradition takes on an extraordinary dimension since, after assuming the burden of a past

that he considers false and illegitimate, he undertakes the task of exploring new venues that would be exempt from prior metaphysical presuppositions. He thus claims to uncover a freer form of humanism that potentially can provide a more valid path for a self that, in a Nietzschean manner, has overcome the restrictions of the past. For Roquentin, the old version of humanism is dead, but he can still act according to a new version of humanism in which the only framework of reference is absolute freedom without limits: “l’homme, sans aucun appui et sans aucun secours, est condamné à chaque instant à inventer l’homme” (*L’existentialisme* 38) (Man, without any support and without any assistance, is doomed to invent man at every moment). More than fifty years later, this radical proposal still resonates actively in the foremost critical movements of the end of the twentieth century that derive from the negative hermeneutics of the Sartrean model: deconstruction and postmodernity. In them, negation is an initial phase that eventually leads to the exploration of new forms of ethical and axiological assertion. Thus, these developments make apparent that the humanist horizon, albeit reconfigured and redefined, cannot be excluded from the contemporary philosophical and aesthetic debate.

The Sartrean parallel is useful to frame conceptually significant segments of the current contemporary cultural condition. In particular, it provides a suggestive methodological tool for the analysis of the works of the authors of the so-called Spanish Generation X that produce their works in the last decade of the twentieth century and the beginning of the new century. For these authors, the Sartrean dichotomy between old and new humanism is irrelevant. That opposition implies a dialectical exchange between past and present cultural paradigms in which one is bound to prevail over the other. However, for these authors, one component of the dialectical opposition is missing and thus the confrontation cannot take place. As the narrator of Angel Mañas’s *Ciudad rayada*, Carlos, asserts, those who remain concerned with the cultural tradition are “fossils” that lack the conceptual and vital instruments to understand the current cultural situation and adapt creatively to it. Roquentin rejected the conventional humanist project because it relied on values that had become a subterfuge used to mask a strategy of ideological domination, but his rejection was the consequence of a rigorous examination of the cultural tradition. On the other hand, for the narrator of Mañas’ novel, that humanist enterprise is not even worthy of consideration since he has never been exposed to it and he lacks the motivation to know it: “A veces, cuando me encuentro con alguno [humanista], tengo la impresión de que vivimos en planetas diferentes, como si nunca hubieran sido como yo . . . Siempre he pensado que los fósiles son unos hijosdelagrandsimaputa” (*Ciudad rayada* 145) (Sometimes, when I run into