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Lucy D. Harney

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# Controlling Resistance, Resisting Control: The *género chico* and the Dynamics of Mass Entertainment in Late Nineteenth-Century Spain

*Lucy Harney is Associate Professor of Spanish at Texas State University, San Marcos. Her research interests include nineteenth and twentieth-century fiction, musical theater, and cultural studies in Spain and Latin America. Recent publications include articles in MLN, Latin American Literary Review, and Journal of Interdisciplinary Literary Studies, as well as a chapter on the Cuban novel and zarzuela, Cecilia Valdés, in Timothy J. Reiss's edited collection: Music, Writing, and Cultural Unity in the Caribbean.*

The one-act comedy (*género chico*), engendered by the *por horas* format and bolstered by the re-emergence of the *sainete*, dominated Madrid's theatrical box office in the late nineteenth century. *Zarzuelas chicas* (one-act plays set to music) were produced by the thousands for an economically heterogeneous audience with a seemingly insatiable appetite for debuts (*estrenomanía*). These patterns of production and consumption constitute a striking example of capitalized mass entertainment.<sup>1</sup> The present study considers the roots of both the genre's immense popularity and its problematic reception, while bringing to bear broader questions regarding the dynamics of mass entertainment genres generally, in order to demonstrate how social, political, and market factors provided mechanisms both of control and resistance among the artists, producers, and audiences in this theatrical sector of Spain's entertainment industry.

*Zarzuela* commercially dominated Spanish musical theater from the late 1860s to the late 1890s (Dougherty 211-14; Alier 77-85). During this time, as Marciano Zurita recalled, the genre:

llegó a la cumbre de su prestigio, abarcándolo todo y siempre con dignidad creciente, desde el *sainete* de buenas costumbres populares hasta la revista de malas costumbres políticas y desde la comedia musicada al drama lírico. (37)

*Zarzuelas* were produced by a precarious collaboration of impresarios, composers, and librettists, many of whom were also journalists. These producers, ever alert to shifts in audience

responses and preferences, maneuvered amid the pressures of copyright laws, government censorship, and journalistic propaganda (Versteeg 61-63; Alier 90-91).

During the heyday of *género chico* (the latter decades of the nineteenth century, more or less coinciding with the era known as the Restoration [1874-1898]), Spain was in a state of virtually constant political and economic crisis (Carr 413ff.; Brenan 1-16; Álvarez Junco 67-75; Moradiellos 125-30). The term “entertainment industry” in this historical context perhaps refers to something far less organized and profitable than the analogous marketing and production complexes of New York, London, or Paris in the same era. It is in fact possible that the very concept of an “entertainment industry” may not be generically applicable to all national or regional contexts, and that the differences between local instances of such industries may be so great that speaking of them as one phenomenon frustrates rather than facilitates analysis. *Género chico*, nonetheless, may be discussed as a verifiable market performer, in the same way that one may discuss horror films, rap music, or bodice-ripper romances as market performers of the present-day cultural industry. Indeed, the popularity of *género chico* during the last half of the nineteenth century alarmed many in Spain’s theatrical community, a collective aesthetic response that we may construe as analogous to our own day’s critical dismissal of merely popular forms as cynically exploitative of the mass audience.

The *zarzuela chica*, unlike its non-musical cousins, was felt by some to undermine both the venerable *zarzuela grande* and the struggling national opera (Alier 63-64). Nearly a decade before he composed *La verbena de la Paloma*, arguably the most famous *zarzuela chica*, Tomás Bretón, in a

pamphlet defending Spanish national opera, dismissed *zarzuela chica* as a perpetuation of “el género bufo francés” as typified by Offenbach’s *Orphée aux enfers* (1885: 10; see also Sturman 20-23 and Alier 72-73). Bretón’s denunciation, ignoring the fact that the *bufo* influence on Spain’s *género chico* had begun to wane by the mid-1870s (Alier 75-76), condemns forays by respectable composers into the disreputable underworld of *género chico*:

los que de ‘El Relámpago’ y ‘El Grumete’ [*zarzuelas grandes* composed by Francisco Barbieri and Pascual Arrieta, respectively] descendieron al ‘Proceso del Can-can’ y a ‘Potosí Submarino,’ bien se ve que cambian su antiguo noble ideal por otro más noble y más sonante—¿Cuántas operetas bufo-escandaloso-pantorrillesco-bailables escribieron Verdi, Ambroise Thomas, Gounod, Wagner, Ponchielli y Boito, en la época en que el género de Offenbach reinaba en Europa y América ...?—¡NINGUNA! (25)

However, even critics who deplored the rise of *género chico* grudgingly tended to acknowledge the often impressive musicianship displayed by a given overture or song. Many composers of *zarzuela chica* scores were highly regarded by patrons of classical music. These artists composed symphonic and chamber works, in addition to operas and *zarzuelas grandes*. Their more ambitious and aesthetically “appropriate” projects, one might say, were often underwritten by the composition of more remunerative *zarzuelitas*. Aside from such exceptions as Manuel de Falla, these composers, however, are generally better known for their *zarzuelas chicas* than for their more serious efforts (Alier 78-75; see also Moral Ruiz 87-98).

What was usually disparaged by detractors of the *zarzuela chica* was not the talent of the composers, but rather their production methods and objectives. Flouting aesthetic and theatrical standards of creative originality and textual integrity, the *zarzuela chica* composers were, as a rule, casually derivative regarding sources, and scornful of any notion of the artist as unique creator of artistic works. A formulaic approach to themes and subject matters, as well as a mixing and matching of musical and spoken texts, characterizes the *zarzuela chica* (Membrez 1: 54-56). Frequently working in collaboration and often recycling material from one work to another, they generated output at a rapid pace. Federico Chueca, for example, collaborated on so many *zarzuela* scores with Joaquín Valverde, that it was a common misconception that Chueca y Valverde was the compound name of a single individual. Ruperto Chapí, a prolific *género chico* composer, was responsible for one of the most famous instances of recycling musical material. Chapí was originally asked to set to music Ricardo de la Vega's libretto of *La verbena de la Paloma*. However, when De la Vega rejected his score and commissioned Tomás Bretón instead, Chapí transferred his musical pieces, many virtually unaltered, to Emilio Sánchez Pastor's *El tambor de granaderos*, with commercially successful results (Zurita 71-72).

Negative critical reaction to *zarzuela chica* and its characteristic fondness for the formulaic ranged from contempt for its alleged corruption of Spanish musical and theatrical traditions, to a more generous allowance that, while the genre per se might be artistically suspect, each piece warranted assessment on its own merits. José Yxart, for example, though disdaining *género chico* generally, was favorably disposed toward the new musical *sainete*, expressing special praise

for *La verbena de la Paloma* (2: 106-12). On the other hand, while composers of *zarzuela chica* might have been seen as talented artists lamentably reduced to slumming, the genre's librettists, many of them journalists or petty functionaries, were often dismissed as hacks. Prominently disparaged were the "festive journalists" of the *Madrid Cómico* generation, so named for the flagship satirical newspaper of Spain's second journalism boom, which spanned the last forty years of the nineteenth century. These librettists, following the *costumbrista* journalistic tradition, commented wittily and acerbically on Spanish (particularly Madrilenian) society, entertainment, and politics (Versteeg 235-43).<sup>2</sup>

Yxart chronicles the origins, accomplishments, education, and lifestyles of various *género chico* librettists. His perusal of journals and magazines devoted to authors of the *teatro por horas* circuit cites autobiographical sketches or poems confirming these writers' own image of themselves as under-educated and professionally inept. Many were low-level public officials, living in constant penury, and sporting a devil-may-care attitude toward the precariousness of their circumstances. As a group, they were dedicated less to the cultivation of theatrical writing as an art than to the indulgence of a collective mania for facile puns and outrageous pronouncements (2: 80-106). Because so many *zarzuela* librettists belonged to the core of journalists who dominated the sensationalist press during these years, it is not surprising to find enthusiastic response to *género chico* in their columns. A memorable example is the versified apology for the *sainete* written by Ricardo de la Vega, the librettist of *La canción de la Lola* (published in *Madrid Cómico*, 1881, 2-3).

Critics beyond the circle of festive journalists generally bemoaned the depths to which Spain's best composers had sunk

in turning out what was disdained as mere pabulum. *Zarzuela chica* thus confronted “aesthetically-correct” critics with an interesting dilemma, in that it often resulted from the collaboration between reputedly serious musicians and librettists perceived as hacks. Additionally, to the chagrin of many music and theater critics, composers sometimes involved themselves with the popular press. Bretón lamented the accomplished composer Pascual Arrieta’s fall from grace, as he characterized it, as evidenced by the latter’s contributions to *género chico* as well as his editorial activities:

Causa pena y dolor profundo que el notable autor de *El Dominó azul* lo sea de la *Suegra del Diablo* y de una parodia de *Los amantes de Teruel!*... y que hoy hasta redacte, en un periódico taurino, titulado: *La Lidia!* Un Académico de la Real de San Fernando colaborador de un periódico de toros!!!! (10)

In considering Bretón’s asperity on these matters, one should note that he was both librettist and composer of the operatic version of *Los amantes de Teruel*, the work specifically parodied by Arrieta and librettist Eusebio Blasco in *Los novios de Teruel*.<sup>3</sup>

The aesthetic controversies of a century ago notwithstanding, many have considered the *zarzuela* a national treasure, in both its long and short varieties. It has been regarded as an indigenous form that resists the perceived incursions of an international culture industry dominated by France, Britain, and, increasingly, North America (Moral Ruiz 19-21; see also Sturman 24-26). Thus, Francisco Anaya Ruiz lamented the “temible igualdad de unos pueblos con otros” and the deplorable trend toward “occidentalidad” that would inevitably

result in all cultures becoming “igualmente mediocre” (38). A half century later, Antonio Fernández-Cid admired *zarzuela* in terms similarly disdainful of the cult of “lo exótico,” criticizing his fellow citizens for the “eterna actitud del español, tan reacio a exaltar lo propio, tan amigo de encandilarse con lo que llega con etiqueta exótica” (40). The provincialism of *zarzuela* critiqued by Bretón a century before is defended by José María Ruiz Gallardón as “quizás la expresión más acabada del alma popular.” Never before, he declares, has Spain produced anything “tan popular y al mismo tiempo tan genuino de nuestro mismo ser de españoles como nuestro teatro lírico” (9).

However, despite the popular characterization of *género chico* as authentic or *castizo* in the extreme, the foreign influences on the genre are pervasive and undeniable. Serge Salaün describes *zarzuela* as an “hibridación” or “mestizaje” of diverse elements. There was, first, the Italian component, emerging partly as the result of preferences of various sectors of the theater-going public—particularly the middle classes—and partly as the effect of imitative “gremios musicales interesados” (“La zarzuela” 2). While Salaün acknowledges that *zarzuela* was generally “más castiza en sus temas y tipos” than opera, he points out that the genre never lost the Italian influence that had so thoroughly saturated the cultural politics of the nineteenth century (“La zarzuela” 5).

Almost as important as the Italian element was the influence of French models on early *género chico*. A perennial theme of controversy in Spanish cultural and political history since the Middle Ages, the issue of aesthetic and cultural *afrancesamiento* intensified in the nineteenth century, manifesting, for example, as a perceived crisis

in autochthonous novelistic production, precipitated by French market penetration and domination of the Peninsular publishing industry, and furthered by indigenous novelists' inclination to imitate French models (Martí-López 33-41; 88-99; 114-34). In the specific context of nineteenth-century musical theater, the Gallicist issue intensified after Francisco Arderius returned from Paris around 1866 and began producing a Spanish musical works modeled on France's *opéra bouffe*. These works, featuring scantily clad chorus girls (*suripantas*) performing racy can-can numbers, infiltrated the major theaters as well as the newly forming *cafés-teatro* (Alier 72-74). This marks, Salaün asserts, "el acta de nacimiento de la zarzuela moderna" ("La zarzuela" 5). The French composers most imitated were the popular ones of the moment: Audran, Lecoq and Offenbach. The works produced in Spain ranged from minor occasional and festive pieces (*obritas de circunstancias*) to pieces composed by more accomplished artists like Barbieri, Eusebio Blasco, and Ramos Carrión (Membrez 82-90).

As the "invasión de los Bufos" proceeded, more and more composers and librettists dedicated themselves to the "saqueo de las obras ajenas" (Salaün, "La zarzuela" 5). Bizet's *Carmen*, notes Salaün, with its "acción y agilidad," its "centenar de comparsas," its gallery of "'tipos' populacheros y abigarrados," is perhaps the dominant stylistic archetype for *zarzuela*, although other French composers, such as Berlioz, Gounod, Franck, and Massenet, also had their Spanish followers ("La zarzuela" 6). Salaün suggests that *zarzuela's* receptivity to a heterogeneous melange of influences and models is reflected in its musical profile, which incorporates numerous foreign components ("La zarzuela" 9). He points out the seeming contradiction between the

*zarzuela's* characterization as authentically Spanish, and its role in cannibalizing the musical production of France and other countries. He suggests that the *zarzuela's* "virtual stage monopoly," lasting until around the turn of the century, paradoxically correlates with "resistance to foreign cultural forms." The *zarzuela*, amid a discordant cultural climate in which aesthetic xenophobia and receptivity were pitted against one another, came to facilitate the process of cultural diversification, succumbing to the latest European and American musical crazes: the waltz, the polka, the mazurka, and the *chotis* (that ultra-castizo dance of the Madrid lower classes whose name is a corruption of "scottish"), all of them foreign imports (Salaün, "The cuplé" 91).

The librettists of *zarzuela* borrowed as eclectically as did the composers. A vast textual production represented by hundreds of texts of varied lengths was underwritten by a "vertiginosa empresa de saqueo." French originals provided innumerable targets for this "pillaje sereno," that went on from 1850 to around the turn of the twentieth century ("La zarzuela" 12). However, as the setting of these pieces was usually adapted to Spain (especially Madrid), they took on a regional flavor. In addition, observes Salaün, most librettos showed "una tendencia marcadamente barriobajera, tabernera, popular." This "casticismo populista" dominated almost without competition until the operetta began to introduce more exotic settings. Even after the arrival of operetta, however, a certain "pintoresquismo nacional" was still to be found in abundance on the stages of *género chico* ("La zarzuela" 11).

Over the years, *zarzuela* has been characterized as essentially imitative by some, uniquely Spanish by others. Throughout its history, the genre has been labeled by turns as indigenous or derivative in its compositional



style; realistic or hyper-stylized in its depictions; subversive or reactionary in its ideology; progressive or patronizing in its social outlook. As a market phenomenon, it has been dismissed as not only populist, but pandering. Regarding its sense of national identity and interest, it has been called patriotic by some, traitorous by others (Alier 108-112; 21ff.).

To understand the commercial success of *zarzuela*, as well its contradictory critical reception, one must take into account *género chico*'s reliance on and manipulation of the *sainete* tradition, the *costumbrista* style, and the pastoral mode. The brief *sainete* form, so admirably suited to the *por horas* format, lent *género chico* the cachet of the taboo. From the *entremeses*, *sainetes*, *mojigangas*, and *jácaras* of Golden Age theater to the eighteenth-century *finés de fiesta*, *tonadillas*, and *sainetes* of Ramón de la Cruz, the so-called minor theatrical genres had always been spiced with a *souçon* of naughtiness. In the *género chico* era, *saineteros* capitalized on this atmosphere of taboo, particularly in the early years when social and cultural critics were warning of the corruptive social and aesthetic impact of the *teatro por horas* (Harney, "Carnival" 323-27).

Tomás Luceño's 1870 *Cuadros al fresco* (the first *sainete* composed for the *por horas* format), depicts the plight of various members of Madrid's disadvantaged classes. In keeping with the prurient reputation of the genre, the humor of *Cuadros al fresco* is raucous, even salacious. Further, while the play is essentially light-hearted, its depiction of certain social realities—the deplorable condition of the *cesante* for example, and the *jornalero*'s despairing plaint—suggests an audience familiar with the vicissitudes of life in the working classes (Membrez 1: 227-35; Versteeg 91). Anecdotal reports from this period attest to the large numbers

of workers, students, *chulos* and *chulas* in attendance at these early productions. The French journalist J. Causse described his impressions upon visiting the *teatros por horas*, where "one frequently sees by turns *chulas* in their shawls alongside society ladies" (244; my translation).

Accounts from periodicals during this time further suggest that working-class audience members had a palpable impact on the production and performance of these works. Outbursts from audience members who took exception to what was transpiring on stage sometimes interrupted performances and often provoked script changes for subsequent shows (Harney, "Género chico" 44-46). Nor were such demonstrations limited to *por horas* productions. The late nineteenth-century theater critic Francisco Flores García recalls various incidents involving audience outbursts in Spanish theaters. On one occasion, during a three-act *comedia* presented in the Teatro Español, a restive *moreno*, "tan vulgar que tomaba como realidad la ficción escénica," brought the entire production to a standstill. Responding to the concerns of a certain character who was preoccupied with catching a train, and irritated by the play's sluggish pace, the theatre-goer shouted out: "Eh! Caballero, caballero! Que ya se va a marchar el tren!," at which point the weary audience joined in an overwhelming chorus of "¡Al tren! ¡Al tren!" preventing the actors from continuing the performance. This outburst prompted producer Antonio Riquelme to come out onto the stage and address the audience directly:

señores: puesto que no les gusta la comedia nueva, quieren ustedes que en lugar del tercer acto que falta hagamos una pieza Julianito Romea y yo? '¡Sí, sí!' contestó unánimemente el

público. Y con efecto, los dos citados actores representaron *Noticia fresca*, una pieza... que estaba entonces muy en boga. (265)

An original member of the *bromistas madrileños*, a group of amateur actors that created the first *teatro por horas*, Riquelme thus opportunely seized on his audience's preference for lighter and livelier fare. In this way, producers as well as authors and composers of *género chico*, by exploiting the genre's reputation for bawdily interactive humor, managed both to appeal to their economically-marginal audience members, as well as please their middle- and upper-class patrons, who found in the *sainetes* and other comic sketches familiar and palatable representations of the vexatious underclass.

The *génerochiquistas* further capitalized on this theatrical bridge between the classes by enacting their unique version of *costumbrismo*, exalting lower-class characters while simultaneously appropriating them for a broader, distinctly bourgeois social vision. Due to the affordability of the *teatros por horas* and its accessibility as an oral medium, *género chico* succeeded in reaching a broad and economically-diverse cross-section of Madrilenian society, many of whose members were sub-literate. The *costumbrista* strategy of *género chico* writers is predicated on the clever melding of lower-class character types with middle-class social philosophy. In 1898's *El santo de la Isidra* by Carlos Arniches and Tomás López Torregrosa, it is Eulogio, the folksy *zapatero de viejo*, who conveys this philosophy. In explicitly commercial terms, Eulogio embarks on an ex/tensive discourse, insisting that love, courtship, and marriage are metaphorically reducible to the transactions of the shoe trade:

El mundo, Venancio, en lo referente al amor, es talmente una zapatería: la juventud es el escaparate, las mujeres son el calzado, y el hombre es el parroquiano. Las mujeres, como el calzado, ca una tié una piel distinta [...]. Ahora, que la mujer, es un calzado que tié el defezto de que no lo hacen a la medida. ¿Qué tié que hacer el hombre [...]? Pues mirar por el escaparate y escoger a ojo, y decir aquel calzado es el mío, y entrar a disputárselo al sursum curda. (Valencia 600)

According to Eulogio, if a man pursues his chosen mate with the same tenacity with which a store patron defends his choice of shoe from a rival customer, he is sure to succeed in love. This set piece illustrates the "*génerochiquistas*" oft-used technique, whereby lower-class characters can be dignified precisely through their colorful embodiment of such middle-class virtues as commercial canniness and dogged perseverance (Harney, "Costumbrismo" 49-55). Not surprisingly, such portrayals of bourgeois values as class-transcendent and universal have evoked some of the most vehement reactions against *género chico* among modern critics like José Monleón, who points out the patronizing tone characteristic of so many of the plays (138).

Certainly by the 1890s the most successful *zarzuelas* had increasingly distanced themselves from the social realities of lower-class existence. The petit-bourgeois and lower-class types in Tomás Bretón's and Ricardo de la Vega's *La verbena de la Paloma* (1894), for example, are stereotyped to the point of caricature: the cowardly and lecherous *boticario*, the nagging *tía*, the irrational, lovelorn *chulo*, and his flighty and flirtatious *chula*. The exquisite quality of Bretón's score and De la Vega's libretto notwithstanding, the play's action revolves around conflicts of



a purely theatrical and typological nature. *La Revoltosa*, an 1897 *sainete* by José López Silva, Carlos Fernández Shaw, and Ruperto Chapí, adds a new layer of objectification to the role of the *chula*. Beyond being merely willful and capricious, the notorious Mari-Pepa emerges as the personification of the alluring, exotic, and quintessentially sensuous other. The flamenco musical progressions that accompany many of her coquettish utterances bespeak an unmistakably exoticist characterization of Madrid's Andalusian population, exemplifying what Salaün refers to as "el exotismo del terruño" ("La zarzuela" 11).

The late *zarzuelas*'s powerful fusion of low and high elements, in which folksy characters and situations are expressed through an often quite sophisticated musical register, conforms to practices of the literary pastoral tradition which, in its most complete modern permutations, seeks to encompass broad issues of universal human experience within the confines of a particular and nostalgic space. A common propensity toward foregrounding rural folk at work and play is raised to new sentimental heights in the work of Romantic poets such as Espronceda, for whom those outside the urban vortex of mercantilism are seen to inhabit a peaceful world privileged with untroubled slumber. It is from this common pastoral motif—suggesting that simple folk are essentially happier than their social betters, and by extension, that they are well-advised not to aspire to change their social station—that many of Spain's later *zarzuelas* derive their impetus. Hence the genre's appeal in the waning years of the nineteenth century to increasingly middle-class audiences with decidedly ambivalent attitudes concerning class hierarchy and social mobility (Membrez 1: 110-12; Harney, "Carnival" 324-25).

The relationships among producers and consumers, and the effects of such relationships on the form and style of the product, are difficult to elucidate. As Raymond Williams has observed, the complex interaction between innovation and reproduction takes place at the level of "the social organization of culture" (205). The entertainment industry is organized around a relationship between customers and purveyors that is by turns—or even simultaneously—adversarial and symbiotic. Distribution and consumption occur over a very broad and varied spectrum of commodities and of distribution networks and sales venues. Entertainment output is sub-divisible into a diversified array of products and genres of products, and of intersecting and complementary lines of subsidiary and ancillary products. Approaches to the problem of consumer participation in this system (summarized by Judith Mayne 50-52), tend to paraphrase Theodore Adorno's analogy of cultural production and political campaigning. Consumers are understood to "vote" with their dollars or *pesetas*. At the same time, it has been pointed out that cultural products, like politicians, still must win over audiences or segments of audiences. Mayne cautions against "top-down" models that fail to account for consumer influence on production. Theories of unilateral industrial domination, at the creative as well as the marketing level, "cannot imagine viewers except as the constructions of the industry" (51).

What has been called "the exhibition context" of cinema (Mayne 66) comprises a synchronic totality of conditions of distribution and attendance, including the interaction of spectators with producers in concentric spheres of consumption, from neighborhood, to city, to region, up to the national-industrial level. The nuanced, contradictory intimacy of spectatorship and

entertainment production resides in the producers' constant reading and attempted prediction of audience response, and in the no less constant and unpredictable decision-making by audiences reacting to the products purveyed. Correlating such verifiable historical contexts and their relation to communities of spectators is a complex but necessary task (see Staiger 56, 132-33).

Even more than in cinema, spectatorship in popular theater implies a negotiatory, almost social-contractual expectation of audience response and participation. Theatrical space nurtures a sense of the right not only to react to the play, the performance, and the players, but also to use the theater as "a forum for social display and interaction" (*Blackadder* 7; see also Bennett 150, and Hemmings 123 [cited by *Blackadder* 85]). Theater's propensity for interactive display came gradually to be tamed, at least for certain sectors of the theater-going audience, by what Peter Stallybrass and Allon White describe as "the formation of a refined, cosmopolitan public, *internally disciplined*" (85). The degree to which raucous, interactive spontaneity lingers on is a probable measure of the popular status of a given theater or a given theatrical genre.

Within the entertainment economy, implied feedback mechanisms are intricately interconnective and crosscutting. Meaning does not circulate in the cultural sphere the way money does in the economy. Commodities, as Storey observes,

do not move in a linear fashion from production to consumption; pleasures and meanings circulate without any real distinction between production and consumption. (Storey 25-26)

Producers, even the most slavishly attentive to trends, can never reliably predict what will sell. At the same time, "resistance to the power of the powerful by those without power in Western societies" is often expressed by audiences' reappropriation or aesthetic recategorization of artifacts or works for unintended, often highly political purposes (Storey 26; summarizing Fiske 311-16).

Examined from this interactive perspective, the various commercial permutations of *zarzuela* are intelligible not with reference to any verifiable formula of production and consumption, but rather as a collective, improvised response by a community of producers—itsself made up of a variable population of artists and impresarios, all living within the local community—to broad trends in market-driven entertainment media. *Zarzuela* in its various manifestations is a production category of the theatrical industry. That industry has a history involving the emergence, diversification, distribution, and secondary distribution of products in new, often unanticipated venues, audiences, and media. *Género chico*'s emergence and diversification in the later nineteenth century, as well as its subsequent canonization as a folkloric or national genre, may thus be compared to possibly analogous patterns in other popular entertainment genres and media.

*Género chico*'s blurring of generic boundaries, its egregious plundering and modification of musical and literary styles, modes, and texts, exemplifies the fraternization of high and low culture that so vexes the categorical aesthete. At once divertingly streetwise and operatically sophisticated, it has always scandalized those offended by blurred distinctions of genre and cultural

discourse. The efficiency and productivity of *género chico* seemed from the first to exemplify mass production. The inclusive diversity of its audience, at the same time, renders it paradoxically susceptible to cultural standardization (Versteeg 6-10; Moral Ruiz 219-22). *Género chico's* hybridization and downward leveling provoke an aesthetic resentment comparable to the reaction elicited by cultural phenomena associated with the middle-brow. Janice Radway convincingly characterizes book clubs, for example, as provocative of elitist or purist contempt due to their commingling of high and low. Marketing and distributing serious works and authors as if they were on a par with such vulgar genres as mysteries, horror, science fiction, fantasy, popular biography, and self-help manuals, book clubs and popular series like the New American Library or the Great Books of the Western World make high and low each the accomplice of the other, threatening the autonomy and authenticity of both (Radway 221-23, 244-45; Bonn 112-19; see also Rubin 22-26).

The reevaluation of authors, works and genres, whether in late-nineteenth century Spanish theater, or in twentieth and twenty-first century cinema, is prompted by discernibly similar market dynamics. Forms and works previously derided as formulaic and escapist product are retroactively upgraded, particularly when they are the work of acknowledged masters of the genre. Such has been the case with the *zarzuelas* of composers and librettists such as Bretón, Chapí, Chueca, and Echegaray. Furthermore, one must not discount the fact that the social classes that consume mass entertainment are not static in their membership, but rather continuously change their constituents owing to the permeability of class divisions in mobility-friendly capitalist systems.

Works from *género chico's* early years continued to be performed throughout its politically more conservative later period, and continue to be produced today. Cable television networks provide for a similar type of juxtaposition by broadcasting films from various periods and classifications (e.g. "pre-code," "war-era," "indies," etc.), thereby creating a repertoire of available materials for simultaneous usage, production and consumption (Sturman 25, 136-37, 143-47). In terms of aesthetic reassessment of the genre (exemplified, for example, by recent performances and recordings of *zarzuelas* by Plácido Domingo and other prominent artists; see Alier 126-30), the reception of *género chico* has its analogs in other popular forms and genres, notably American cinema and its imitators. The original commercial success of *género chico's* writers and composers as a community helped to move them from the aesthetic and social margin of their time and place to the vital center of the emerging culture industry of later decades. This subsequent elevation of *zarzuela*, by certain critics, to the level of "respectable" artistic production parallels the upgrading of certain cinematic genres (e.g., westerns, film *noir*, samurai films) once dismissed as mere escapism, but more recently designated as worthy of serious critical consideration. The influence of *auteur* theory, for example, has insured that films once dismissed as merely generic (e.g., Alfred Hitchcock's suspense thrillers, the westerns of John Ford and Howard Hawks, the *films noirs* of Sam Fuller and Robert Aldrich; see Coates 20-21, 83-87) are now regarded as artistically valid.

The market-defined working space has been generally defined by Pierre Bourdieu as one delimited by extremes of "pure disinterestedness and cynical servility." Within the zone between art-for-art's-sake and

market-driven decision-making, a compact is renewed, daily, hourly, moment-to-moment, between producers and consumers (Bourdieu 240). The concept of pragmatic leeway in aesthetic production is more precisely nuanced by cinematic *auteur* theory and its analogues. Assigning authorial status to directorship, *auteur* theory, as summarized by Andrew Sarris, holds that authorial style is defined by consistent “look and feel,” by a discernibly coherent technique verified in a body of work. “Technical mastery,” manifested in “stylistic consistency,” authenticates authorial integrity (Sarris 516). Cinematic authorship, then, is defined by technique, personal style, and “interior meaning.” The latter aspect is perceptible in “moments of recognition” presenting a distinctive pattern in a director’s body of work (517).

*Auteur* theory has itself been voluminously critiqued, largely on the grounds of a perceived over-emphasis on the equivalence of film direction and film authorship. An obviously collaborative art form like film, it has been often remarked, cannot be reduced to a single job description, especially given the virtual autonomy of the many crafts (photography, set and production design, sound, etc.) that interact to produce a work, and the verifiably frequent lack of control exerted over these separate craft functions by even the most autocratic and individualistic directors. Such factors are multitudinously debated in film criticism.

We do not have space, in the present discussion, to rehearse even the most cursory summary of such debates. What we can derive from *auteur* theory and its attendant controversies is a terminology of collaborative, productive latitude, and a model of interactive complicity between producers and consumers. *Género chico* exhibited, at its productive height, patterns of production and consumption somewhat analogous to

those of popular cinema. The producers of *género chico*—its de facto community of impresarios, composers, librettists, theater owners, stagecraft workers, and publicists—worked within a system of incentives and constraints in which aesthetics is a function of the producers’ aptitude in exploiting the leeway afforded by the system. The *por horas* format both shaped and responded to a ticket-selling, multi-session milieu not unlike that of cinema, in which the exhibitors’ need for maximum numbers of daily showings has always affected the filmmakers’ decisions as to film length, thematic emphasis, generic category, etc.

The output of both *género chico* and cinema, however subject to generic or sub-generic categorizations, is, of course, not completely predictable as to content or quality. In contrast to the literally serial output of assembly line manufacture, artistic production’s aleatory variegation yields product lines whose individual works are distinguishable from one another despite thematic and generic mandates, however imperious. An *auteur* theory of *género chico* may therefore assign singular, authorial status to those teams of impresarios, composers, and writers whose collaboration—on a work-by-work, improvised, or occasional basis—ultimately yielded a corporate “body of work” intelligible in terms of cooperative authorship. This allows us to understand each separate work of *género chico*, or other popular forms, as singular manifestations of authorial function within a precarious habitat of ever-shifting, highly contingent political and economic conditions.

The modern distinction between high and low culture, as Williams reminds us, is untenable without “the closest consideration of the shifting structures of social class” (127). As Williams suggests, those enthralled by dominant social forms customarily

see them as natural and necessary, rather than as specific and arbitrary. Similarly, those who dominate cultural production may be unevenly aware of the practical interconnection among various modes and contexts of aesthetic evaluation. Control of production and distribution ranges from consciously deliberate oversight (as of the press and broadcasting under interventionist political regimes), through varying degrees of artistic and productive freedom, to the official autonomy of professional and aesthetic values in a supposedly open-market, “free-entrepreneurial” climate. A work or genre’s change in aesthetic ranking does not, however, prevent earlier themes or stylistic attributes from resurfacing in later products, themselves variously classified or appreciated. In addition, cultural production may avail itself, in its need for sources and models, of both the ever-growing repertoire of works from earlier and different societies and times, and the expanding, emergent body of newly created works. Older work may remain available, to be used by certain groups as an extension of or alternative to dominant contemporary cultural production (Williams 204).

Much contemporary criticism of mass entertainment centers on the latter’s exploitative effect on consumers. Works intended for mass distribution and consumption are viewed as suspect, regardless of the artists’ possible pretensions to aesthetic achievement, or the audience’s potential transcendence of or resistance to market manipulation. Mass-cultural production, as Paul Coates phrases it, is capable of resisting “Romanticism’s Promethean transvaluation” of such categories as the kitsch/art dichotomy. Entertainment, on the other hand, may generally be defined as “the anti-art of a world with no time for art” (2). It is diversion dispensed to “those

it has rendered incapable... of the aspiration to art.” Entertainment’s “transhistorical presence” manifests not as the transitory diversion of carnival, but rather as a cyclical intermission “incorporated into regimes of exploitation.” While even bad art displays “a fearsome mirror to ourselves and social orders,” entertainment, asserts Coates, may be defined as aesthetic production that denies the very existence of social and psychological depth, deliberately limiting itself to “the most superficial levels of the personality” (2). Recalling theories of the middle brow, Coates points out that entertainment, avoiding both the sub- and the superhuman, dispenses “dreams of redemption cynically aware of their own unreality” (3).

Coates’ appraisal recalls the captious assessment by Max Horkheimer and Adorno of the modern culture industry. Blaming the latter for the crippling stultification of the masses, Horkheimer and Adorno argue that the indices referenced by the culture industry to gauge audience response are alarmingly similar to the methods of political polling, in which consumers figure as mere demographic categories (96). The culture industry, in their view, is the instrument of a hegemonic capitalist elite whose commercial and political interests are served by thwarting the intellectual and ethical enfranchisement for which all human beings are as ready as modern productive and technological capacity might permit (105). Truly artistic production is thus impossible within the market system, which insures an “unending sameness,” “a constant reproduction of the same thing” (106).

In later writings, Adorno somewhat attenuates the concept of the mass consumer as a mostly passive assimilator of encoded propaganda, and of the cultural industry as an irresistible juggernaut of commercialization and cultural manipulation. Adorno’s

later model allows some slight creative latitude to the individual artists who labor in the industry (“Culture Industry Reconsidered” 100-01), and perhaps slightly nuances the harsh model of an absolute correlation of cultural-industrial manipulation and consumer acquiescence, as he hints at the faint hope of enlightened resistance, at least by an informed few (106).

An allowance for creative individuality, in the sense of distinguishing between the cultural industry and its operatives, underpins Walter Benjamin’s notion of the subversive potential of products distributed for mass consumption. Benjamin postulated that the technology of reproduction politicizes art for its audience, this depriving the work of art of its “aura of authenticity” and traditional ritualistic function, thereby casting audiences in the role of critic as opposed to cultural actor (228-29). For Benjamin, this tendency counters the fascist strategy of aestheticizing politics: “Communism,” he maintains, “responds by politicizing art” (242).

From Benjamin’s perspective, even mass-produced art is potentially revolutionary, if received by a critical proletariat. Works of mass entertainment may be seen as structurally suited to accommodate multiple or even contradictory ideologies. Dictating that what can sell, will sell, consumerism in effect insures that even dissent itself may be converted into merely another commodity. Extreme condemnations of the presiding elite and the structures and networks partnered with it are tolerated, at times even fomented, by the polymorphic opportunism of the marketplace. This explains, for example, why popular films produced and distributed by corporate conglomerates can avidly condemn corporate corruption and cynicism, and even capitalism itself (e.g., the ferociously anti-corporate *Robocop* and *Alien* series).

Some, notably Roland Barthes, regard popular or mass culture as inherently reactionary, or, at least, as ineffectual or acquiescent with respect to institutionalized hegemony. For Barthes, there can be no left-wing myth. Myth, despite its habitually populist presentation, is by its very nature a founder and supporter of regimes. It is therefore inveterately complicit with the right, forces of reaction, *anciens régimes*, the hegemonic status quo (147-48). A countervailing opinion sees popular-cultural forms and genres as potential foci of protest and refutation of power structures. According to this more optimistic model, “trash” genres, such as pornography, fantasy, science fiction, and horror, in large measure derive their popularity from their often conspicuous disillusionment with and abjuration of bequeathed aesthetic standards. They even may be seen to articulate the antagonism of certain subaltern or otherwise marginal social categories excluded from the supposedly civilized social mainstream (Ross 231).

In other words, being popular, pandering to the cheap seats, as *généro chico* so often does, itself enables resistance. Although many discern aggressive antagonism toward the political and ideological status quo in much of popular fiction, film and other media, the precise content of supposedly insubordinate or dissident texts is, however, often not clearly articulated. The dominant system’s appropriation and manipulation of criticism and perceived resistance may always act, we might say, to subvert the subversion. Clem Robyns, for instance, has argued that gothic or biological horror, while often seeming to controvert the status quo, paradoxically invigorates bourgeois stereotypes, while subtly ratifying the dominant culture (21). Tania Modleski, on the other hand, has pointed out how exploitation horror films (as when, for instance,



a loving father cannibalizes his own child, or priests become the devil's minions) stealthily impugn the fundamental tenets of bourgeois culture (159). Even if such depictions are not actually revolutionary, they may fan the flames of public mistrust and disgruntlement. As Helen Graham and Jo Labanyi point out, it cannot be assumed that "the institutions that control the production of meaning identify themselves monolithically [...] with the establishment," or "that state power is always repressive rather than enabling" (5-6).

William R. Blue, with regard to Spanish Golden Age *comedia*, addresses the latent subversive potential of works produced in an institutionally sanctioned framework. His observations concerning an important historical antecedent of *género chico* and its original milieu may illuminate the problem of entertainment's capacity or incapacity for subversion. Blue allows that the characters of these plays, although frequently rebellious, seditious, or alienated, never structurally invalidate the conservative social vision underpinning the action of a given play: "That they end up where society would have wanted them anyway was, no doubt, comforting and satisfying to many." However, he notes, "what horrified others was the path the characters blazed to get there." For Blue, "whether one foregrounds the path or the destination could provoke radically different reactions" (235).

Critics who, like Adorno in his earlier writings, characterize mass audiences as passively uncritical receptors, severely overstate their case. Indeed, evidence suggests that the greater an audience's exposure to certain formulas, the more acute will be its critical stance. Flores García observed such an evolution among late nineteenth-century theater audiences in Spain:

En otros tiempos, era muy fácil sorprender agradablemente al público con recursos y situaciones verdaderamente infantiles, que promovían el aplauso y hasta la admiración. Hoy aquellas situaciones y recursos producen el efecto contrario y son, precisamente, la causa originaria de los fracasos ruinosos que asistimos. (263)

Somewhere between the two extremes, which view mass entertainment as either utterly appropriative and complicitous or "a revolution waiting to happen," there remains a critical space in which to maneuver. A work or genre's production for mass consumption does not preclude the dramatization of meaningful social concerns, thereby contributing to broader impulses toward political change. The extremely popular 1898 *zarzuela*, *Gigantes y cabezudos* by Miguel Echegaray and Fernández Caballero, with its unsettling vision of Spain's illiterate and exploited underclass, depicts the solidarity of workers in the face of a coercive municipal bureaucracy, and includes an overtly feminist manifesto, in the spirited chorus of Saragossa's besieged *vendedoras* entitled "Si las mujeres mandasen" (Valencia 434-35). Appearing amid the lighter, more escapist confections that predominated in the *zarzuela* repertoire of this period, *Gigantes y cabezudos*, despite its instances of humorous local color, can be seen to represent a dissenting social vision, both responding to and encouraging a growing public consciousness of impending social crises. Such an interpretation qualifies the work for what Raymond Williams describes, in his consideration of culture as product, as an emergent form, according to which, "the emergent becomes the emerged, as in bourgeois drama, and then often the dominant" (205).

Cautioning against the underestimation of audience tastes and inclinations, Flores García insisted:

La multitud que no se compone de tontos precisamente, pero sí de seres vulgares en su inmensa mayoría tiene el instinto del buen gusto, el don del buen sentido y la seguridad del acierto, al juzgar primera vista y por impresión momentánea las obras de arte a su juicio sometidas. (261)

As Graham and Labanyi remind us,

consumption is never a passive or homogeneous process: not only do different sectors of the public respond differently, but the same sector can respond in ways that are simultaneously conformist and contestatory; indeed the same response can be both at the same time. (5)

Such is certainly the case for the audiences of such varied forms of mass entertainment as *zarzuela* and popular cinema. So that, while ever-present forces of control—ranging from critical pressure to bottom-line imperatives to corporate and governmental surveillance and coercion—help to account for many formulaic and conformist aspects of *zarzuela* and other popular forms, these same forces can be said to provoke (or at least fail to prevent) unexpected gestures of resistance to the official line(s), whether artistic, social, or ideological. Ultimately, an entertainment industry operating within a pervasively market-driven environment cannot utterly control its output, nor pre-determine the reaction of consumers in the economic, social, or political orders. The dynamic interplay among producers and consumers evokes responses (among both groups) that

are so fluid, variegated, and contingent as to resist absolute control.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Género chico* is the term that came to encompass all theatrical works of one hour or less that were presented in the *por horas* format, according to which a different show was performed each hour or so. See Nancy Jane Membrez, chapters 1-4 and 23-25, on *cafés-teatro*, *teatros por horas*, *juguete cómico*, *astracanada*, *esperpento*, *zarzuela grande*, *alta comedia*, and opera. María Pilar Espín Templado (63-66; see also Versteeg 318ff.) distinguishes *sainete*, *revista*, *juguete*, and *zarzuela*, while applying the latter term to one-act as well as three-act musical plays (*zarzuela grande*). For the purposes of this study, *zarzuela* will be understood to refer to the one-act *zarzuela chica*, unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>2</sup> Membrez defines “festive literature” as “prose or poetry meant to inform, entertain, and satirize society” (1: 69). Spain’s second journalism boom began in the 1860s and lasted into the twentieth century. The first boom occurred during the Napoleonic wars (see Schulte 119-33, 137-47).

<sup>3</sup> Leopoldo Alás, writing under his customary pseudonym of Clarín, refers to what appears to be yet another editorial dispute of this period over the inherent artistic quality of *zarzuela* (3). This time P.P. Gil attacks the genre in *La Monarquía* and Barbieri takes up the defensive position in *El País*.

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