CULTURAL PLURALISM OR CULTURAL UNIFORMITY

BESTSELLING FICTION BOOKS IN EUROPE

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I

There is no easy answer to the question what makes a bestseller. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the term bestseller was first coined by The Kansas Times and Star in 1889, while the first attempts to define a bestseller more clearly date back to the post-World War II period. Definitions have changed from various statistical determinations (a bestseller is a book that has been bought by 1% of the total population within 10 years of its publication [Mott, 1947]) to the tautological definition (bestselling books are books that appear on bestseller lists [Dudovitz, 1990]), which appears—as we will see later—to be the most sensible one from today’s perspective (both cited from Miller 2000).

Any attempt to analyse a bestseller as a social phenomenon should consider the ways in which bestseller lists are compiled. As a rule, bestseller lists are considered to reflect the sales figures of the market: the more copies of a book that are sold, the higher it climbs on the bestseller list representing that specific market. But it is not always like this. Arguably the most famous bestseller list, the one published by The New
York Times (since 1931), is compiled by means of a questionnaire sent to a set of bookshops and asking about the sales of selected books (see Miller, 2000, 290–91). Bookshops of course have an option to add a title that they think sells remarkably well in a specific week, but this box often remains empty. On the basis of such collected sales figures from a few thousand surveyed bookshops (see Miller 2000, 290–91, and wikipedia.org/wiki/New_York_Times_Bestseller_List) The New York Times then compiles the list. Such a methodology of list creation is neither neutral nor accurate in any objective sense. The most famous anecdotal evidence for questioning the Times’ methodology is probably the lawsuit filed by William Peter Blatty in the early 1980s. After his novel The Exorcist had topped the list for a considerable time, there was every reason to expect something similar to happen with his next novel Legion. However, the book did not appear on the list for several weeks after its release, and then stayed there for 1 week only. In this way The New York Times, according to the complaint brought to the court, had caused damage to the publishing house and the author as such a short time on the list allegedly had a negative effect on the sales of the book. However, Blatty and his publisher lost the lawsuit as The New York Times publisher argued that their lists had never claimed to represent the exact situation on the book market. Even more, they confessed that the list was basically an editorial construct, which allowed their lawyers to refer to the first amendment to the US Constitution that defines freedom of press as one of the constitutional freedoms. The court accepted their argument in its entirety and dropped Blatty’s case, which basically gave one of the most famous bestseller lists in the world a court certificate that it does not reflect the exact sales situation in the book market (Miller, 2000, 297–98).

II

A real revolution in building bestseller lists was brought about by the Nielsen Company in 1995. In simple terms, the system the company developed records each purchase at point-of-sale in the number and distribution of bookshops considered broad enough to statistically represent a given market. The system currently works in nine countries: the USA, Great Britain, Australia, Ireland, Denmark, Italy, New Zealand, Spain, and South Africa (see http://www.nielsenbookscan.co.uk).

With the introduction of this system, two things became clear: first, there is a systematic distinction to be made between the book market as