

**Movies Framing Memories: Mass Culture, Film Theory, and Transnational Identity in
Alberto Fuguet's Las películas de mi vida**

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Department of Romance Languages (Spanish-American).

Chapel Hill
2008

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Abstract

JOHN LANCE LEE: Movies Framing Memories: Mass Culture, Film Theory, and Transnational Identity in Alberto Fuguet's Las películas de mi vida.
(Under the direction of Dr. Alicia Rivero)

This work views Alberto Fuguet's novel, Las películas de mi vida, through the lenses of film and mass culture theory, examining how the novel's protagonist, Beltrán Soler, remembers and reconstructs his past through popular movies. The first section provides a brief overview of Fuguet's ties to the McOndo movement and the nueva narrativa chilena in order to outline key elements of Fuguet's place in Latin-American literature. The second section applies the following theorists to the text: Sergei Eisenstein, Gilles Deleuze, Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, and Walter Benjamin. These applications do not purport to be exhaustive; instead, one should see them as seeds of interpretative possibility for further development.

To my parents and Lesley-Anne

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Dr. Alicia Rivero for serving as my astute director. Her bibliographic recommendations, thorough comments, and all around support were very helpful in this process. I owe gratitude to Dr. Oswaldo Estrada and Dr. Juan Carlos González-Espitia for serving as conscientious readers of this work; their corrections improved its quality and provoked ideas for future research.

For their moral support, I have to thank all my friends in the Romance Languages Department for listening to me vent about the arduous task of writing a thesis. Last of all, I cannot begin to express how indebted I am to Dr. Grace Aaron and Dr. Glynis Cowell for their unfailing encouragement and inexhaustible kindness over the past two years.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

“Siento que la fecha más importante en Chile no es 1973 como dicen ellos, sino 1962, que fue el año que llegó la televisión a Chile.”¹ – Alberto Fuguet

Controversy surrounding Alberto Fuguet’s works abounds. While some Chileans view him as the voice of a generation, others criticize him for not probing and vehemently denouncing the Pinochet years in his writing. Frequently, Fuguet is accused of presenting a skewed portrait of Chile, claiming to be a realistic author while almost completely omitting Chile’s poor in his novels. Some North American book reviewers have failed to grasp the complex workings of his writing, particularly Las películas de mi vida, which, in part, serves as the impetus for this study. Perhaps this is the reason why Lawrence Olszewski, writing for the Library Journal, dismisses it as light reading: “The book is certainly fun to read, but it’s not particularly insightful. By blending popular culture and literature, Fuguet picks up where Manuel Puig left off, but in many ways the use of movies is just a gimmick” (129). The word “gimmick” does indeed serve as one descriptor of the technique Fuguet employs; however, the use of movies to frame the story of Beltrán Soler’s life is not just a gimmick.

Beginning with an analysis of the McOndo movement, in this work I highlight the debate surrounding the literary quality of Fuguet’s Las películas de mi vida, while applying theories from critics who work with mass culture and film, including Sergei Eisenstein, Gilles Deleuze, Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Walter Benjamin. By employing such theorists, I elucidate the conscious and purposeful relationship of Fuguet’s “gimmick”

¹ Interview with Enrique Planas in Debate (60).

technique with the international literary market and the way that he manipulates movies to weave a complex tale of identity and memory. His exploration of the self-focused question “¿quién soy?” rather than the nationalized question “¿quiénes somos?” ultimately produces a woven intertext of movies that form one unified movie of Soler’s life. These questions are relevant precisely because they form the central argument of Sergio Gómez and Alberto Fuguet’s prologue to McOndo, where the authors state that current identity matters deal with “realidades individuales y privadas” (13).

Rather than examining Fuguet’s other works, I have chosen to focus only on Las películas de mi vida primarily for two reasons. First, scant criticism has been published on this novel, and, to my knowledge, no one has employed the aforementioned film and culture theorists in its analysis. Furthermore, the criticism written on Fuguet tends to center on the political and economic elements of his writing and also on his place in Latin-American letters. Although these components remain undeniably important and even explored to a certain degree in my study, too few projects have been undertaken that determine how his texts function on an underlying, deeper structural and stylistic level. Second, in addition to considering Fuguet’s role in Latin-American literature, as others have done, I take into account his appeal to a literary market outside of Latin America. At the same time, we cannot disregard the growing interest and legitimate study of popular culture, movies, consumerism, and their portrayal in Latin-American literature. Fuguet’s polemic rise to the station of literary rockstar in the eyes of a new Latin-American and wider, global generation, as well as his exploration of the boundaries of literature, in format, content, and so-called “literary worthiness,” strike me as germane to our time and worthy of further analysis.

CHAPTER 2

“El País McOndo”: A Rebellion against the Literary Status Quo?

Beginning to publish in the late 1980s, Fuguet soon gained notoriety with such novels as Mala onda and Por favor, rebobinar. In 1996, co-editing with Sergio Gómez the controversial McOndo anthology of short stories by Latin-American and Spanish writers, Fuguet became even more widely recognized, especially in North American academic circles. The now infamous prologue to McOndo, “Presentación del país McOndo,” serves as a literary manifesto for many writers of Fuguet’s generation: young Latin-American writers are saying goodbye to García Márquez’s magical realism of Macondo and welcoming with open arms McOndo, a country “sobrepoblado y lleno de contaminación, con autopistas, metro, TV-cable y barriadas” (15).

Playing on the connotations of the word “McOndo,” Fuguet and Gómez elaborate: “En McOndo hay McDonald’s, computadores Mac y condominios, amén de hoteles cinco estrellas contruidos con dinero lavado y malls gigantescos” (15). As frivolous as these descriptions may sound, they provide key insight into the reality that Fuguet and Gómez see: they perceive Latin America as an urban, not a rural, continent. McOndo embodies an opposition to the magical realist stereotype that uninformed North American readers may have of Latin-American authors, fed by the importation of works by well-known “magical realist” novelists, such as García Márquez, Isabel Allende, and Laura Esquivel.

Fuguet further explains his rebellion against magical realism in the short manifesto “I Am Not a Magic Realist!” After being told at the renowned Iowa Writer’s Workshop that his

writing was not “Latin American enough,” he openly rebelled against pandering to the desire of many North American readers for Latin-American literature to include such magically realistic events as levitation. While McOndo writers have considered themselves a new strain of authors, Diana Palaversich points out that Latin America, especially the Southern Cone, has had a long tradition of existential, introspective writing similar to that of the McOndo writers, practiced by such authors as Roberto Arlt in the early 20th century (45-48). Additionally, the employment of pop culture in literature finds its predecessors in authors such as Manuel Puig. However, Palaversich seems too quick to unmask Fuguet and the McOndo writers as mere continuers of a Latin-American existentialist literary tradition. The frequent and unabashed use of technology and mass culture among this generation remains relatively innovative, and the courage to fly in the face of magical realism deserves note. While the McOndo writers undeniably owe their literary heritage to earlier Latin-American authors, they also inhabit a unique literary time and space, expressing what it is to be Latin American in the global economy of the late 20th and early 21st centuries without resorting to magical realism. Naturally, many contemporary styles of Latin-American writing exist, such as the neobaroque, against which Fuguet and others could have chosen to rebel. Magical realism in particular, however, serves as the focal point for these authors’ rebellion because of its widespread popularity among many readers outside of Latin America. In countries such as the U.S., the volume of magical realist works were drowning out the other voices that represent more current and realistic facets of modern Latin America, according to the McOndo authors.

Primarily focusing on the urban middle class, Fuguet and other McOndo writers have been blamed for centering their attention on the elite rather than on the rural campesinos of

Latin America. Critics such as Diana Palaversich accuse Fuguet of not telling the full truth about the social disparity in Chile. As she sees it, he tends to write about an elite, Chilean middle-class; ultimately, he ignores the wide gap between the rich and poor in Chile, describing Santiago as though it were a fully developed city of the “first world,” while ignoring the real, underdeveloped Macondo in favor of the affluent McOndo (36). I contend, however, that Fuguet does not brazenly ignore reality; instead, he tends to write about Chile as he has experienced it as a white, upper middle-class male. Stylistically speaking, Fuguet generally depicts his perceptions of reality in a matter-of-fact manner. His writings provide evidence of his socioeconomic background: in many of his works, such as Cortos, Fuguet employs a variation of the same protagonist, who frequently resembles someone much like Beltrán Soler, who, in turn, reflects Fuguet. Las películas de mi vida is no different in this regard, displaying perhaps even more autobiographical elements than his previous works. Although the author should not be equated with the narrator, both the fictional Beltrán Soler and the historical Alberto Fuguet share a similar life story.

As a key figure of the nueva narrativa chilena, Alberto Fuguet receives both praise and criticism for his works. Palaversich has speculated about Fuguet’s latent political ideologies, implying that Fuguet’s writing is a thinly veiled, politically correct version of neoliberal doctrine that glosses over the problems of the Pinochet years (47-48). Interestingly, in the McOndo prologue, Fuguet states, along with Gómez, that the McOndo authors write “en español, pero que no se sienten representantes de alguna ideología y ni siquiera de sus propios países” (16-17).² Using a word like “McOndo,” which connotes such

² One must keep in mind that many of these authors frequently publish blogs on which they continuously reshape their beliefs. The above summary expresses the authors’ viewpoints at the time of the publication of McOndo, and it does not purport to represent an exhaustive version of their beliefs at the current moment; instead, it provides the reader with an important part of the authors’ history.

images of globalization as McDonald's and Macintosh, these authors impart political messages in their texts, despite stating that they do not view themselves as representatives of a specific ideology. Palaversich does, indeed, make a strong case for the neoliberal implications in Fuguet's texts, which she describes as part of his "neoliberalismo postmoderno" (47). However, she seems too quick to label Fuguet and the McOndo writers as poster-children for the neoliberal movement, who add no innovations to Latin-American literature:

Aunque tanto el prólogo como el resto de la escritura de Fuguet divierten por su humor e irreverencia, no hay que ignorar las consecuencias políticas de su toque liviano, particularmente en una época en que se oyen cada vez menos voces críticas que se atreven a exponer lo que se halla tras toda celebración de individualismo, pluralismo, y desapego político. En cuanto a su afinidad con el 'neoliberalismo postmoderno' que se refleja en su actitud supuestamente política, desdén por el marxismo, celebración del individualismo, de la tecnología, lo urbano y lo desarrollado, se puede indicar que los macondistas se han ubicado en pleno centro del mainstream político y cultural de Chile y de América Latina y no en sus márgenes. Forman parte del establishment social y literario y están instalados cómodamente dentro del sistema socio-político de su país. Más que como hijos rebeldes y desencantados de García Márquez, deben ser vistos como hijos obedientes del neoliberalismo y de una tradición literaria existencialista e intimista que desde hace décadas se viene escribiendo en el continente. (47-48)

Fuguet openly acknowledges this self-described "middle-class, metropolitan Chilean existence" in "I Am Not A Magic Realist!" The first-person narrator and protagonist of Las películas de mi vida, Beltrán Soler, experiences a childhood similar to Fuguet's own. Soler laments his return to Pinochet's Chile as a young boy, not because of his opposition to the political regime, but because of his disdain for the backwardness of Chile when compared to the United States, as seen here when he initially refuses the grade-school milk that the dictatorship provided:

Yo no tomo esta cosa, esta asquerosa leche en polvo, este Fortesán con leche en polvo y agua hirviendo, esta leche para pobres, esta mierda para chilenos subdesarrollados que no tienen tele a color y no saben lo que son los M&M's. No dije eso, pero sí lo

pensé; sólo dije: ‘no, gracias; yo no tomo esto’ y luego agregué ‘I don’t like it’, y la profesora, una alemana nazi, pinochetista, la tante Renata o la tante Margarethe, me lanzó sin aviso una bofetada tan llena de furia que me aterró: ‘Te lo tomas, cabro de mierda; no estamos en Estados Unidos, estamos en Chile.’³ (78)

Soler’s apparent disdain for Chile’s dictatorship, in part, stems from a lack of widely available, mass-produced products rather than from a disgust for the government’s practice of censorship and torture. According to Soler, the “chilenos subdesarrollados” need “tele a color” and “M&M’s,” not powdered milk. Here Fuguet satirizes the reactions of a privileged child, effectively drawing attention to his lack of discussion about the harshest circumstances of the dictatorship by talking about less important ones. By satirically noting Chile’s need for color television and candy, Fuguet hints at his solution for Chile’s problems: not government-issued milk, but instead a free-market trade system, which would slowly work its way into Chile over the course of Pinochet’s dictatorship. These ties between Fuguet’s alleged neoliberalism and the Pinochet government’s neoliberalism perhaps make critics like Palaversich hesitant to fully embrace him as a worthy literary voice.⁴ Nevertheless, Fuguet does criticize the dictatorship obliquely in the cited passage by comparing Pinochet’s regime to Nazi Germany with respect to the teacher.

Few would argue the impact that he has had on recent Latin-American literature, and Time International magazine cited him in a list of 50 leaders for the new millenium as the voice of an emerging Latin-American generation (99). Although one should always be careful when interpreting these verdicts, Fuguet has worked as a leader for writers of his

³ “Tante” means “aunt” in German, although it appears to be a typographical error since nouns are capitalized in German; thus, it should read “la Tante Renata.” Based on the reference beforehand to the “alemana nazi,” it is unlikely that this is the French “tante,” also meaning “aunt.” One may conclude that Soler is poking fun at the totalitarian nature of the women working at the school, ironically referring to them as “aunt” during this narration about adjusting to Chilean life during the dictatorship.

⁴ See Chapter 9, “Military Rule and Neoliberalism, 1973-90” in John L. Rector’s The History of Chile for a brief introduction to the Pinochet dictatorship and its economic policies (185-211).

bent, co-editing and orchestrating anthologies such as McOndo and Se habla español: Voces latinas en USA. Furthermore, as the figurehead for the McOndo movement, Fuguet has stimulated much discussion about what it means to be Latin American in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, drawing attention to the increasingly globalized nature of the continent and questioning the nature of “latinoamericanidad.” Many readers of a younger, Latin-American generation see in him a representative figure of their time.

Ironically, as Fuguet seeks to explore the nature of the individual instead of the nation, many critics have examined his relation to the latter question in Chile.⁵ Also, Fuguet may not appeal to the literary establishment because he pronounces a disquieting truth about literature: books are based on the economic market and they are no longer Art with a capital “a.” In “21 notas sobre la nueva narrativa,” Fuguet explains his view on the economic aspect of the nueva narrativa chilena:

Junto con el boom económico, la privatización de las historias. El fin del stalinismo literario. Adiós a las megalomanías socialistas, la llegada de la pequeña historia personal. Esto, creo, es una característica de la supuesta Nueva Narrativa. Incluso de la gente más roja. Se acabaron los panfletos. Cada uno cuenta su rollo. Y hay para todos los tipos. (121)

Adelaida Caro Martín argues that Las películas de mi vida has its roots in the Hollywood novel, exemplified by Nathaniel West’s Day of the Locust. More than modeling himself after a specific author, though, Fuguet uses American films as a source of literary inspiration, rather than relying on past literature. Certain Latin-American writers such as

⁵ In an interview with José Noé Mercado in the Mexican publication Excélsior, Fuguet shared his feelings about the criticism he had received and the anxiety he had about continuing to write after the McOndo controversy: “Yo esperaba ser aceptado, pero no sucedió así. No sé si fue una crisis, pero sí tuvo que ver, creo, con querer desaparecer, ser anónimo, no publicar para que no me jodieran. Por lo tanto, si me callé por unos años antes de Las películas de mi vida fue para sobrevivir: dejar de ser mediático, dejar de estar expuesto. Creo que, más que crisis, fue como la resaca McOndo. Me dije: ya que me odian tanto, quizás deba callar. Pero seguí creando y comenzó mi acercamiento al cine” (taken from the online archive of Excélsior).

Fuguet have turned to non-literary mass culture, film in this case (as Puig did in El beso de la mujer araña), much of which originates in the U.S.

In addition, Fuguet increasingly seeks to market his works in the U.S. Both his collection of short stories, Cortos, and his novel, Las películas de mi vida, were published simultaneously in Latin America and the U.S., where the works were translated into English as Shorts and The Movies of My Life, respectively. In “I Am Not A Magic Realist!” Fuguet asserts that he had always desired to publish in the U.S., feeling that once he had reached this milestone, he could accomplish his goals as an author:

I had a secret agenda that wasn't really a secret at all: I wanted to take advantage of my being in the heart of the heart of the literary land. And I also wanted [to] get published in the States, the home of so many writers and artists who had inspired me. To be published in English, in a sense, was like joining that group. Iowa City, to me, was the promised land.

CHAPTER 3

Las películas de mi vida: A Centerless Universe of Movies

In addition to being a self-described author of the nueva narrativa chilena, Fuguet has been categorized by Raymond Leslie Williams as part of the second wave of Latin-American postmodernism (71-72). Williams comments that, in many cases, Latin-American fiction has moved to a centerless universe, elaborating that “the novel has moved from utopia to heterotopia—from the centered and historical universe of the Alejo Carpentier and García Márquez’s utopias to the centerless universe—Foucault’s heterotopia—of Eltit, Piglia, and Sarduy” (90). While Fuguet’s writing, especially in his earlier works such as Mala onda, includes language—Chilean slang and English—that intends to subvert the dominant literary discourse, he differs from other postmodernist authors like Diamela Eltit in that his use of a non-dominant or foreign discourse serves not to speak out against the government, but rather to shun a broader literary establishment, particularly that represented by the Iowa Writer’s Workshop where he was pronounced as not Latin American enough.

In Las películas de mi vida, Williams’ postmodern, centerless universe manifests itself in the geographical dislocation that Beltrán Soler (like Alberto Fuguet) has experienced. For Soler, home is hard, if not impossible, to find. Living out his childhood on two different continents and in two different languages, he exemplifies Williams’ postmodern idea of the lost homeland and the forgotten mother tongue. However, the protagonist seems compelled to make his centerless universe more structured, proceeding to organize his life around the context of films that he has seen. Here Fuguet hearkens back to

the modernist pursuit of unity and harmony in structuring his narrative, never failing to recognize that these modernist ideals are only questions of perception—movements of the camera—in a postmodern world. By using films to frame his narrative, Fuguet superimposes modernist ideals of unity on a thoroughly postmodern world.

Soler grew up between Encino, California and Santiago, Chile. As an adult, he studied seismology on multiple continents, both in France and Chile. As a professional seismologist on his way to Japan, Soler finds himself reflecting upon his childhood memories, located disjointedly between the U.S. and Chile. During the flight from Chile to Los Angeles, Soler becomes acquainted with Lindsay, an American lawyer, and the two begin to discuss movies. Lindsay recommends that he go to DVD Planet to find all the movies from his childhood once he lands in Los Angeles, and they exchange e-mail addresses. Finding himself fixated upon the movies and memories from his childhood, Soler remains in Los Angeles instead of continuing on to his teaching position in Japan, abandoning work in order to reminisce about the past. Via e-mail, he feels compelled to tell the story of his life to Lindsay, who shares his love for movies.

CHAPTER 4

Cinematic Technique and Film/Mass Culture Theory in Las películas de mi vida

Caro Martín interprets the movies that frame the majority of the chapters of the novel as a symbol of globalization, which, when combined, create an “imaginario colectivo” where people can share in their experiences of fictional movies. Around the world, real life viewers (outside of the text) of the films referenced in the novel consume the same cultural products as the fictional Soler by seeing the same movies, such as It’s a Wonderful Life, Jaws, and Soylent Green. Not only does Fuguet utilize American movies as concrete references to frame his life, but he also employs cinematic techniques within his writing. For example, when Soler talks to his sister on the telephone, the dialogue appears much as a script would:

—Feliz año, Beltrán. Ahora sí que comenzó el siglo.
—Cierto. Feliz año atrasado.
—Sí, feliz año.
(silencio)
—¿De dónde me llamas?
—De Puerto Octay. (9)

The choppy style and the interjection of the descriptor, “silencio,” have the visual format of a movie dialogue. Unlike a script, however, not all of the characters’ names are given, as frequently occurs in typical novelistic dialogue. Thus, Fuguet combines elements of the film format of the script with a more traditional, literary approach taken from the novel or short story, creating somewhat of a hybrid technique.

According to Gerald Mast, two camps exist regarding film as an art form: 1) it is distinct from literature; 2) it is quite similar to literature (278). Furthermore, he points out the

social gap that existed until recently, between those who primarily read, seen as more educated, versus those who mostly saw films, considered as less educated since movies do not require that one know how to read (279). Critics still hanging on to this outmoded view may find Fuguet's brazen use of film references less literary. Regardless of one's position in this argument, novels are now imitating film, raising further questions about the nature of the two forms.

Mast draws parallels between certain genres of literature and their movie counterparts. For example, fictional prose corresponds to the narrative film, while nonfiction prose resembles the documentary (286). Las películas de mi vida would correspond in part to narrative film since it is, indeed, fiction. Also, considering the autobiographical elements that appear throughout the memoir-style narrative, one could argue that the prose contains elements of nonfiction and the documentary as well. The films superimposed upon the novel fictionalize Fuguet's autobiographical elements and work in conjunction with Soler's memories to assemble a narrative film, in book form, of Soler's life.

While the films employed in the novel, such as Dumbo or Close Encounters of the Third Kind, may certainly represent globalization as Caro Martín argues, in my view, the movies collide to form what Sergei Eisenstein refers to as "montage," described as "an idea that arises from the collision of independent shots—shots even opposite to one another: the dramatic principle" (Film Form 49). Instead of chapters, Fuguet cuts each section into shots as though they were intended to form parts of a full-length movie. In turn, the series of shots makes up a short film, so to speak, for each section. Each "short" could stand alone as a story, like a typical narrative vignette but, given the filmic context of the novel, the term "short" better describes how these insights into Soler's past function. Unlike traditional book

chapters, they are not clearly labeled as “Chapter One” and so on. Instead, they range from ones with no introductory heading, as in the opening short, to giving specific information detailing Soler’s current location or providing a history of when the movie framing the scene was first viewed.

Reminiscent of Eisenstein’s comments regarding montage, cited above, these independent shots are combined over the course of the novel to form the “movie” of Soler’s life, to which the novel’s title alludes, through montage. Imitating movie subtitles, the headings of each shot describe where and when the action is taking place. For example, the first sections, and the very last, give Soler’s precise current location, as seen in the heading of the third section: “Domingo, A bordo del van de TransVip, Alameda Bernardo O’Higgins, altura Universidad de Chile, Santiago. Hora: 7:14 PM” (17). Each shot, both from the present and the past, works together to create a new interpretation of memories. As an adult reflecting back on his childhood, Soler has matured to the point necessary in order to reinterpret life experiences and movies from his past, just as one may recall a movie from one’s own childhood, or another part of one’s past, and gain new insight upon reexamining it.

Considering each section to be a scene from the movie of Soler’s life is further related to Eisenstein’s idea that “two film pieces of any kind, placed together, inevitably combine into a new concept, a new quality, arising out of that juxtaposition” (Film Sense 4). In the novel, every time that new movies are introduced into the text, they are juxtaposed, and, as a result, they form new products from the old. Unlike Puig in his novel, El beso de la mujer araña, Fuguet explicitly labels the movies that appear in order to fashion an original meaning from the old. Puig’s reader has no clear way of telling whether or not the movies from the text are invented or real, whereas Fuguet’s reader knows considerably more about the film’s

authenticity, down to the director and the date when the movie premiered. By giving such details, Fuguet creates a great degree of verisimilitude for the reader. Recycling the plots from these films, he fuses many stories together into a coherent, movie-type narrative of Soler's life.

In addition to exploring the concept of montage, Gilles Deleuze examines technical aspects of film such as movement and framing. According to Deleuze in Cinema 1, the frame is “the determination of a closed system, a relatively closed system which includes everything which is present in the image—sets, characters and props” (12). Each section from Soler's life requires a framing of the shot, so to speak. For example, Fuguet selects a movie to place at the beginning to set the shot up and focuses his writer's “camera” on the memory described. When framing a shot, Deleuze notes that an out-of-field always is present: “In one case, the out-of-field designates that which exists elsewhere, to one side or around; in the other case, the out-of-field testifies to a more disturbing presence, one which cannot even be said to exist, but rather to ‘insist’ or ‘subsist’, a more radical Elsewhere, outside homogenous space and time” (17). The most noticeable “disturbing presence” that exists in the out-of-field in Las películas de mi vida is either the U.S. or Chile, depending on the country in which the shot is taking place. As a result, an intercontinental tension regarding self-identity surfaces; Soler's identity remains subject to the country in which he is not at the current moment. When he is in the U.S. during the first years of his life, his identity is, in part, defined by not being in Chile, the out-of-field. After moving to Chile, the situation is reversed: Soler's identity is contingent upon not being in the U.S., now the out-of-field. Even while in France, Chile and the U.S. are always right outside the frame.

According to Deleuze, the frame creates a new unit of measurement, such as the close-up or the long shot, and it also “ensures a deterritorialisation of the image” (15). The frame isolates the objects in its view and removes them from the context of their surrounding space, that which is in the out-of-field. Deleuze’s use of the word “deterritorialisation” to describe this effect perfectly corresponds to Fuguet’s techniques and to the transnational feelings of Soler in the novel. Writing the memories of his childhood from a generic and anonymous Los Angeles hotel, Soler appears in a transnational state; the standard chain hotel room, which mirrors similar ones found around the world, could be in Santiago, Los Angeles, or London. Furthermore, the memories he writes to Lindsay are not communicated face to face, but less personally, via a cold, unresponsive machine. Nor do we hear a direct communication from Lindsay, highlighting the solitude and introspection that isolates Beltrán. Ironically, although Fuguet is a founding father of the McOndo movement, he builds upon the great theme of solitude in Gabriel García Márquez’s Cien años de soledad, but does so from a transnational, global perspective.

Landscapes too seem to blend together. The U.S. resembles Chile at times, as seen here: “El valle de San Fernando tiene una cierta semejanza con Chile: el sol sale por la cordillera y se pone en el mar. Y está toda esa fruta, todo ese desierto cerca, los valles con vino, y tanta calle, tanto pueblo, con nombre español” (85). The process of deterritorialization reinforces the symbolism of movies as part of a globalization process, which Caro Martín describes. Juan Poblete further explores this deterritorialization and reterritorialization, or fragmentation, that globalization causes (272). Speaking of non-places, Poblete accurately explains the representation of space in a variety of Fuguet’s work: “Los no-lugares son aquellos espacios internacionalizados (como aeropuertos, centros comerciales,

hoteles, etc.) en que la circulación global de bienes, mensajes y personas ocurre en sitios que en estructura y funcionamiento son idénticos mundialmente” (297). The confusing similarity of spaces, such as the hotel from which Soler is writing, reflects the non-place of the deterritorialized frame where each chapter takes place. Soler must look back from this deterritorialized locale to recover the memories of his childhood.

People around the world can own the same mass-manufactured goods and stay at the same hotel chains. Similarly, they can consume the same mass culture. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer theorize about the nature and effects of mass culture in their essay, “The Dialectic of Enlightenment,” stating that “culture now impresses the same stamp on everything: films, radio and magazines make up a system which is uniform as a whole and in every part” (1223). Writing during the post-World War II 1940’s, their statements still ring true today. Adorno and Horkheimer take aim at the conformity of mass-produced art, even venturing that “movies and radio need no longer pretend to be art” because of their unoriginal and widespread nature (1224).

Just as Olszewski calls Fuguet’s use of movies a “gimmick,” some critics would agree that Fuguet’s incorporation of film is appealing, yet ultimately not worthy of further examination. Upon applying Adorno and Horkheimer’s ideas about the uncreative nature of mass-produced art, Fuguet’s writing may seem to become part of a bland, manufactured package, raising the following question: “If movies are no longer art, can using them in a literary work be considered art?” Most people would agree that Andy Warhol successfully turned mass-produced images, such as the Campbell’s soup can, into art. Fuguet also recycles cultural material to make his own new novel, a carefully executed technique that I see as going far beyond the gimmick into the realm of art. Acutely aware of the relationship of

North American cultural products consumed in Chile, Fuguet cleverly manipulates the movies he uses with global relationships in mind. Beltrán Soler is a product of globalization himself. He grows up between Chile and the U.S., while consuming the cultural products of each country. He seems hesitant to identify himself as Chilean or American, more easily associating himself with his more clearly defined, career label, “seismologist.” This fact is not accidental: Soler finds it difficult to pin down his sense of national origin, whereas describing himself in terms of what he does is much more convenient and determinate.

In part, Adorno and Horkheimer’s negative views on mass-produced art such as movies stem from the post-war period in which they were writing and from their Marxist ideology. Having seen propaganda films that directors like Leni Riefenstahl produced about Adolf Hitler, they relate authoritarian control to technology and what they refer to as the culture industry. According to them, those few who control the culture industry through technology are the ones that had the most economic power to do so in the first place, leading to a cycle of both physical and cultural domination: “A technological rationale is the rationale of domination itself. It is the coercive nature of society alienated from itself. Automobiles, bombs, and movies keep the whole thing together until their leveling element shows its strength in the very wrong [the dominance of an all-powerful few] which it furthered” (1224). Actors must appeal to talent scouts, who are arms of the film studio, in order to obtain a role in a movie; thus, they must adhere to a standardized list of requirements that the film studio desires. The film studios own these actors long before they appear before the public (1224). In short, Adorno and Horkheimer claim that few real differences exist between any of these cultural products, be they movies, cars, or actors: “What connoisseurs

discuss as good or bad points serve only to perpetuate the semblance of competition and range of choice” (1225).

CHAPTER 5

Mass Culture as a Means to an Artistic End

Choosing from a canon of movies produced by the culture industry that Adorno and Horkheimer criticized, Fuguet manufactures his own cultural product aimed at readers in both Latin America and the United States. Just as actors are owned by film studios, authors hold contracts with certain publishing houses. Instead of becoming a mindless cog in the cultural machine, on the one hand, Fuguet appears to be fully aware of the culture industry, celebrating it and manipulating it for his own ends. Rather than disavow mass culture, he embraces it whole-heartedly. He crafts a novel with great appeal to followers of pop culture and mass media, typically a younger audience. On the other hand, his personal reflections on identity and transnational issues of feeling displaced or lost between two countries and their cultures appeal to another type of reader, who may be young or old, especially due to global diasporas and immigration.

One sees these two audiences catered to in the reviews at the front of the 2005 Rayo edition, ranging from renowned authors such as Mario Vargas Llosa to the American youth-oriented men's magazine, Details, which proclaims on the blurb: "El establecimiento literario latinoamericano no se le acerca a Alberto Fuguet ni con un palo que mida diez metros de largo, pero los jóvenes adictos al MTV Latino no se pueden pasar de él [...] Es para ellos lo más cercano a una estrella de rock." The respected literary magazine, The New Yorker, offers an alternative, yet equally laudatory, opinion: "Aterradoramente introspectivo. Fuguet ha creado una novela de formación moderna en la que la cultura americana enriquece y no

ahoga el entendimiento que tiene el protagonista de su país de origen.”⁶ Thus, for some critics, Fuguet remains in an uncomfortable territory: he straddles two continents in his novel and in real life, and he also floats between two markets, the literary and the commercial.

Fuguet appeals to multiple audiences, or markets, yet he also offends some, particularly academic readers, such as Palaversich, who would prefer a novel criticizing the Pinochet dictatorship or, at least, detailing in a full, realistic manner the gaps between rich and poor in Chile. Although the Pinochet era is not praised, it also receives little criticism, and Chile’s poor receive hardly any attention in Las películas de mi vida. For Palaversich in De Macondo a McOndo, Fuguet’s ties to neoliberalism associate him indirectly with Pinochet’s economic doctrine. Departing from Allende’s socialized government, Pinochet appointed economic advisers who advocated the privatization of businesses such as healthcare and other neoliberal policies.⁷ While Fuguet surely is not ignorant of the poverty present throughout Chile, he tends not to focus on it; instead, he creates what Palaversich would consider a neoliberal, fairly economically stable portrait of Chile.

Instead of fleeing the Pinochet dictatorship, the pro-Pinochet, Soler family leaves for the U.S. during Allende’s rise to power, only returning to Chile after Pinochet’s government installs itself. Arriving with the intention of staying three weeks for vacation, the family permanently moves to Chile after Soler’s uncle persuades his mother that the children would grow up immoral and isolated from family in the U.S. Soler recognizes, however, the fallacy of the uncle’s reasoning upon reflection: “Estaban errados, claro, pero la gente tiende a escuchar lo que quiere escuchar, tal como ve lo que quiere ver” (186). The general tone of

⁶ Both citations come from the blurb in the edition of Las películas de mi vida listed in “Works Cited.”

⁷See John L. Rector “Military Rule and Neoliberalism, 1973-90” The History of Chile (185-211).

Soler's narration about life in Chile, despite references to "soldados apuntando sus metralletas hacia los edificios," is joking and lightly satirical (180).

Regarding films, Soler finds Chile backwards, having spent his early childhood in the U.S. where he had access to the newest movies. After moving to Pinochet's Chile, he finds that films typically arrive long after their U.S. premiere. To the young Beltrán, Chile seems an outdated kind of place, described here upon first arriving to Chile in terms of television: "Todo aquí era en blanco y negro. Al menos me parecía que era así; lo recuerdo así. Yo creo que, en efecto, era así. Los pocos canales de televisión, que comenzaban a transmitir a eso de las cuatro de la tarde, transmitían en el más contrastado black and white. Todo era antiguo, arcaico, de otra era" (173). Beltrán is not only talking about technology; he is describing the military state as well: "¿Estaba en el Santiago de 1974 o en una ciudad enemiga durante la segunda guerra mundial?" (173). Even as a child, Soler realizes that the political situation in Chile is not ideal, hinting at a disdain for Pinochet's leadership and the isolation that Soler sees as having ensued from it.

For Soler, cinema provides reference points for his life. Between his unstable relationship with his father, the tumultuous times of the dictatorship, and moving between various countries, Soler finds constancy in the movies and something he can share with kindred spirits such as Lindsay. Appropriately, the chapter headings reflect how movies form a framework for his life. The cinema provides a common meeting place for people around the world. Referring to the movie theater itself, and, in contrast to Fuguet's praise, Adorno and Horkheimer proclaim: "This bloated pleasure apparatus adds no dignity to man's [sic] lives. The idea of 'fully exploiting' available technical resources and the facilities for aesthetic

mass consumption is part of the economic system which refuses to exploit resources to abolish hunger” (1230).

Fuguet’s celebration of the movies in his novel stands diametrically opposed to Adorno and Horkheimer’s view. Their ideas echo those of critics who write Fuguet off as light reading. Like the critics who dismiss Fuguet, Horkheimer and Adorno find little worth in mass-produced, low culture from the culture industry. By contrast, Fuguet’s novel shows how the productions of the culture industry can be meaningful to individuals, providing a global point of reference with which to communicate with others, as Soler and Lindsay do. Readers who have seen the same movies that Beltrán describes, like Lindsay, belong to an interpretive community of sorts.

The concept of the interpretive community, as developed by Stanley Fish in “Interpreting the Variorum” with respect to readers, which I am expanding to movie audiences, illustrates how in Las películas de mi vida certain readers—those well-versed in particular movies—can be more drawn into the action of the novel. Those readers who have seen the films referenced in the novel may share a set of unspoken strategies regarding their interpretation of the novel, at least with respect to movies: they understand the filmic context, so they are more likely to draw similar conclusions from the text. This technique can have an alienating effect on those readers of Fuguet who have not seen the movies to which the novel refers, until they view the films. While some readers of Fuguet may lose interest, others may be intrigued by the use of films.

In an economic sense, readers are basically consumers of literature for Fuguet. They choose what to read (and see) in the global economy. The “privatización de las historias” that Fuguet refers to in Nueva narrativa chilena (19) evidences itself in Las películas de mi vida.

The author can write what he or she wants, as long as a publisher picks it up. If the piece has economic value, then it must be good in that publisher's eyes. For the professional author, writing must be interesting and marketable to the public. Fuguet knows about these factors and manages to combine entertaining reading with his own literary style. Just as Soler e-mails his life story based on movies to Lindsay, with no indication of a response on her part, Fuguet—or any other author—similarly writes to a public he can never fully know.

Combining the mass culture of movies with what could now be considered the mass culture of literature, Fuguet brings to mind the eminent essay by Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." When a work of art is reproduced, Benjamin theorizes that it loses its aura; to very briefly summarize his complex ideas, it loses its spirit of originality. Unlike a one-of-a-kind painting or theatrical performance, a movie lacks this aura. The actor acts for a camera instead of a live audience, similar to how Soler writes to Lindsay (his reader) via e-mail without Fuguet's readers being provided with her response. The entire novel revolves around movies, which are mass produced, that posit a viewing audience as receivers of this type of work of art.

In Benjamin's ideas, all aspects of mass-produced art are not seen negatively. For example, he acknowledges that "technical reproduction can put the copy of the original into situations which would be out of reach for the original itself" (1169). People who normally could not have seen a particular work of art can now see it reproduced in a book. Similarly, Soler's memories of his childhood are reproduced in writing and associated with movies in order for him to interpret and transmit what he recollects. By technically reproducing his life story via e-mail, the adult Soler attempts to piece together memories from his childhood. Since he never seems to contradict his narrative, there would be little reason to suspect Soler

as an unreliable narrator. He is, instead, an introspective, sympathetic protagonist that instills trust in the reader. The reproduction of his original, childhood memories and Soler's adult association with movies puts them into a complex place of psychological recovery that would be out of reach for the original memory itself, to paraphrase Benjamin's previous quote. Fuguet's mass-produced novel is itself a compilation of the mass reproduction of movies. By using these movies as guideposts, Fuguet creates a unique novel that shows a positive side of mass culture.

As Fuguet himself implies, the McOndo movement is a mass-manufactured, cultural product: "This new genre may be one of the byproducts of a free-market economy and the privatization craze that has swept South America" ("I Am Not a Magic Realist!"). Las películas de mi vida exemplifies this mass-manufactured genre by using movies as its driving force. Much like a shopper in a mall, Soler chooses certain movies from the culture industry to define himself. Instead of identifying himself politically as an allendista or pinochetista, Soler labels himself as a cinéfilo. Fuguet similarly avoids political labeling; instead, he defines himself on his blog as "cinéfilo, cinepata, lector, escritor, cronista, ex-periodista, blogger a medias" (Alberto Fuguet: Escritor/lector). In "el país McOndo," no other descriptors are necessary: defining one's life through movies is a new mode of self-expression, Latin-American or otherwise. Fuguet's novel deserves full consideration from the literary establishment for its creative use of mass culture and innovativeness in Latin-American letters, even if not everyone would agree with his not taking an overt political or ethical stand. In conclusion, rather than presuming my applications of the theorists employed in this study to be exhaustive in their interpretations, one should view them as seeds of interpretative possibility for further development in much-needed scholarship on Fuguet.

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