

# Magical Neoliberalism

*A decade of market reforms in Latin America has transformed more than the region's economies. It also sparked a 21st-century cultural revolution, a sort of shock therapy for the soul. The quaint, folkloric sensibility of magical realism has given way to a gritty, urban freneticism in fiction, music, and film. Welcome to the new world of Latin America's NAFTA—make that FTAA—generation. | By Alberto Fuguet*

I'm about to buy a movie ticket at the Parque Arauco Mall's Cinemark Theater in my native Santiago, Chile, when all of a sudden I feel dizzy. The sound of Los Bandereros de Teno, a local country-southwestern *huaso* band from the wine-rich Central Valley resounds in my brain. The taxicab driver was a fan. He wanted me to become one, too.

I look at the blinking red lights on the electronic board that announces, as if they were incoming flights, the 15 or so possible features I can select. But where are all the American movies? Where am I? I wonder, while I clench my frozen *lúcuma* yogurt cup. Am I not in the bowels of, as my antiglobalization friends would say, the enemy? For this is the mall, an American invention, the concrete cathedral of capitalism. And this here is a "transnational" theater chain that shows nonstop, alienating, Hollywood movies that crush the local culture.

So why is a cool, gun-friendly, Ecuadorian movie called *Ratas, ratones, rateros* (Rats, Mice, Thieves) competing against Sandra Bullock? Why is the number one box office hit *Te amo, made in Chile* (I Love You, Made in Chile), a local bilingual movie about geek teenagers with digital cameras? Where's

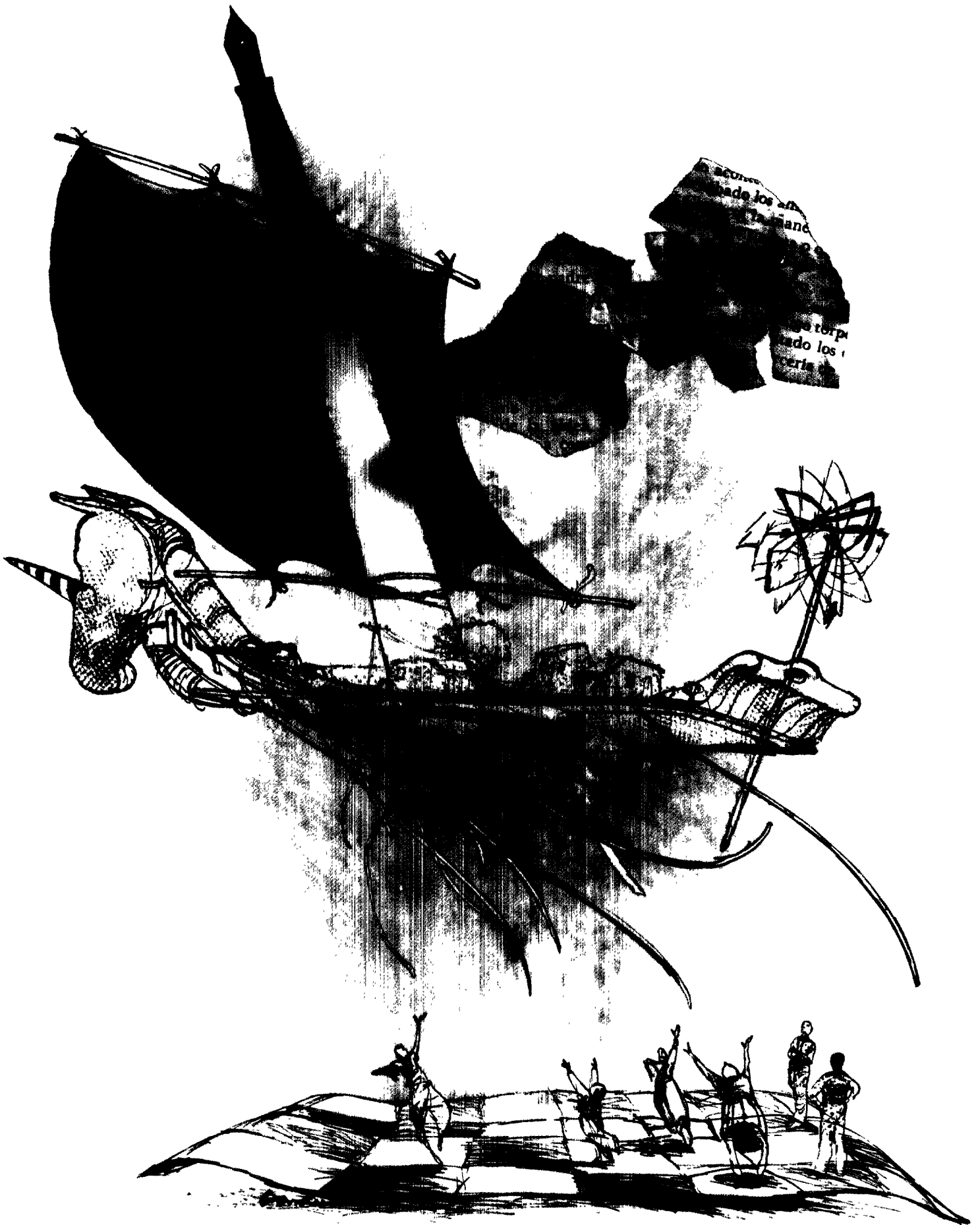
my Bruce Willis, my Arnold Schwarzenegger, my Sylvester Stallone?

I keep scanning the blinking board. There's the great *Amores perros* (Love's a Bitch), Mexico's tough, smog-ridden, dog-barking, Oscar-nominated masterpiece of violence showing in theater three. *Bastardos en el paraíso* (Bastards in Paradise), an independent film about a Chilean teenager lost amongst the South American exiles of snow-ridden Stockholm, is playing upstairs. Another good offer is *Pantaleón y las visitadoras* (Pantaleón and the Visitors), a Peruvian blockbuster that stars Angie Cepeda, the Colombian sex goddess. Directed by Francisco Lombardi, a well-known and well-awarded filmmaker, this deliciously funny farce reinvents Mario Vargas Llosa's antimilitary novel and sets it in *fin de siècle* Iquitos, a steamy, prostitute-infected, Amazon river town in Peru full of cellphones, satellite dishes, and IBM laptops.

It's not that American movies don't arrive in Chile. Of course they do—they'll probably always be the main fare. Almost all the big hits here come from Hollywood. But the truth is that Hollywood hasn't crushed the local industry, because there never was one. In fact, these new megatheaters, which have sprung up all over Latin America in the last five years, have allowed even the quirkiest Chilean movies (like *Angel negro*, a local horror film, or *LSD*, a digital film about rich teenage hackers) to find decent outlets. In the last couple of years, Chile has gone

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from producing two or three up to 10 or more films a year. Some have done very well. And once audiences came to trust movies in Spanish, films from the rest of the continent began to arrive. This, I understand, has happened all over the region.

Eventually, I decide to catch an American movie, for I have seen all the others. The film is called *Things You Can Tell Just By Looking At Her*. Deemed too

a work in progress. What the FTAA might establish, artistically, is a new creative fusion, a way of mixing influences without leaving the dough full of lumps. This fusion, I believe, will be achieved very easily, for America as a whole is quite new. The United States is not that much older than, say, Venezuela. To be new makes you vulnerable and eager, but it also gives you more liberty and creative recklessness. And all these mestizo countries knew what multiculturalism was before it became hip. Anyone who has been here knows that New York's energy is closer to Guayaquil than to London, and that Buenos Aires, for all its facades, is more akin to Chicago than to Spanish-speaking Madrid.

It seems to me that, in this new FTAA era, borders will be even less explicit and influences will become so global that a new type of artist will

evolve who will not be the nowhere man but, on the contrary, the here-and-now man. A pop psychologist might say that when you don't know where you are, when your roots are packed in your hard drive, you develop the resilience to understand. Perhaps this new artistic sensibility-to-be is less about nationality and more about empathy. Instead of trying to capture the essence of a village to show us the world, these new global souls are perhaps trying to understand the essence of our world and, thus, helping us deconstruct and, more important, care about, ourselves.

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**Latin America is quite literary, yes, almost a work of fiction, but it's not a folk tale. Magical realism reduces a much too complex situation and just makes it cute. Latin America is not cute.**

artsy for mainstream American audiences, it never made it to the big screen in the United States and was shuffled on to cable. The film, which stars Glenn Close, Holly Hunter, and Cameron Diaz, among other actresses, is constructed as a series of interrelated short stories and explores the small lives and large pains of six lonely women living in the Los Angeles basin. Watching *Con sólo mirarte*, as it was called here, I felt I was peeking into the future. This subtle, almost silent, movie fast-forwarded me into a new era.

*Things You Can Tell Just By Looking At Her*, which was written and directed by Colombian-born, Mexican-raised, and French/Spanish/U.S.-educated Rodrigo García, reeks of suburbia and all things American. Yet, if García's movie can be labeled as anything—except a near masterpiece—it should be as a perfect example of a certain new Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) sensibility, one that remains

**MCDONALD'S, MACS, AND CONDOS**

Yet, what most caught my attention about *Con sólo mirarte* is that Rodrigo García, the film's amazingly talented first-time director, is the son of none other than Colombian novelist and Nobel Prize-winner



Gabriel García Márquez, creator of the magical-realist town of Macondo appearing in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and other works, and founding father of the cult of magical realism, a sort of curse that has afflicted novelists, filmmakers, and tour guides all over the Americas and, more recently, the Indian subcontinent.

For me, this was too good to be true. The son of Macondo lived in McOndo. The enemy's offspring was a friend, indeed.

But what do I mean by McOndo?

McOndo is no more and no less than a sensibility, a certain way of looking at life, or, better yet, of understanding Latin America (make that America, for it is clear that the United States is getting more Latin American every day). In the beginning, it was a literary sensibility, but now, I suppose, it encompasses much more. McOndo is a global, mixed, diverse, urban, 21st-century Latin America, bursting on TV and apparent in music, art, fashion, film, and journalism, hectic and unmanageable. Latin America is quite literary, yes, almost a work of fiction, but it's not a folk tale. It is a volatile place where the 19th century mingles with the 21st. More than magical, this place is weird. Magical realism reduces a much too complex situation and just makes it cute.

Latin America is not cute.

The word "McOndo" itself began as a joke, a spoof of García Márquez's magical and invented town of Macondo where levitation mingled with eternal rain and the eccentric, the overfolkloric, was the only way to grasp a world where true civilization would never be established. The word then crawled into a novel of mine and eventually became

the title of an anthology of new Latin American literature that was published in Spain in 1996, edited by Sergio Gómez (another Chilean writer) and myself. The aim of the book was to seek out fellow authors of "our generation" (i.e., born after 1960) and to see, firsthand, if this anti-magical-realist sensibility was truly spreading like a virus. *McOndo*, therefore, was a defensive and somewhat adolescent response to the user-friendly magical-realist software that politically correct writers were using to spin tales that would give world audiences exactly what they expected: an exotic land where anything goes and eventually nothing matters, for it's no more than a fable.

On our quest we found some authors, true. And some of them, yet unknown, eventually became part of the new "Boomerang" generation (as



## McOndo Revealed

Excerpt from Edmundo Paz Soldán's *Sueños digitales (Digital Dreams)* (La Paz: Alfaguara, 2000), a novel about a graphic artist tempted to digitally alter compromising political photographs.

Sebastián enjoyed walking back home. It wasn't long, barely twenty minutes, enough to open a parenthesis between the din of unlikely news—reality tried so hard to outdo itself that it was very difficult to take it seriously—and the world with Nikki in the flat in which they had lived since the wedding. A new city bloomed before his eyes, amid the hubbub of money-changers peddling dollars and street vendors with their wagons full of pirated Calvin Klein jeans from Paraguay and Gameboys without boxes and juicy peaches from Carcaje. The sidewalks were relatively clean, and the mayor, as part of his "To Welcome the New Millennium" project, had kept his promise to rejuvenate the urban landscape (they had planted weeping willows and jacarandas in the avenue flower stands, and in the plazas installed fountains that launched streams of water on which rainbows and hummingbirds rested). Bill-

boards materialized, announcing the construction of a fifteen-story building in lots that only yesterday housed colonial churches and ancestral homes. Video clubs and cybercafes abounded, and restaurants and flower shops exchanged their Spanish names for something in English or Portuguese. Half a block from the "Books, Still" bookstore, a woman still sold photocopied editions of *The House of the Spirits*. A peeling wall displayed an enormous black-and-white photo of president Montenegro with the mayor—hugging, smiling, gushing—and next to it an ad for Coca-Cola and another with Daniela Pestova sporting her Wonderbra breasts. Montenegro was tiny but did not seem so there....

While gazing upon the buildings that sprung forth in the city like hyperbolic mushrooms, the supermarkets, and the plentiful Nautica and Benetton shopping malls, Sebastián wondered about the shadowy regions they concealed, and the invisible infrastructure sustaining them. What dirty money—or not so dirty—hid itself there, what furtive dealings, what cruelties and anxieties,

what artful stabs in the back? Perhaps because he worked at retouching surfaces and knew how simple it was to obscure—through muddling harmony or hypnotic sheen—the puddles that flooded his steps, the termites that cracked wood, he admired those powerful individuals who would not let themselves be seen, the innocuous neighbors of whom one knew nothing but who, nonetheless, ruled empires. The secret owners of secrets. He would've liked to be one of them. He didn't long for the easy fame of street recognition, too exposed to the fifteen seconds of weariness that blinding visibility extends. He wanted to slip through the halls of the newspaper at three in the morning and reinvent at will the front-page photographs, those on the international section and the sports page, too, create a new reality for the readers of *Tiempos Posmo*. He wished to do that and much more. He wanted to control the city and for no one, not even his wife, to know of it. Dreams of grandeur which, he suspected, in one way or another, any common man should have.

—Translated by Carlos Lozada

Mexico's Carlos Fuentes coined it—the New New Latin American Boom) and, what matters more, found and established their own unmistakable voices. The book was in many ways more eager to condemn than to rejoice. Still, there were good stories in it and, better yet, important authors: Rodrigo Fresán and Martín Rejtman of Argentina, Santiago Gamboa of Colombia, Jaime Bayly of Peru, Edmundo Paz Soldán of Bolivia, and Gustavo Escanlar of Uruguay, among others. These prolific authors have since

gained critical acclaim but have gone, as anticipated, on their individual literary journeys, followed their own way. This divergence, for certain, was expected, for *McOndo* was not a deal, nor a treaty or a sect.

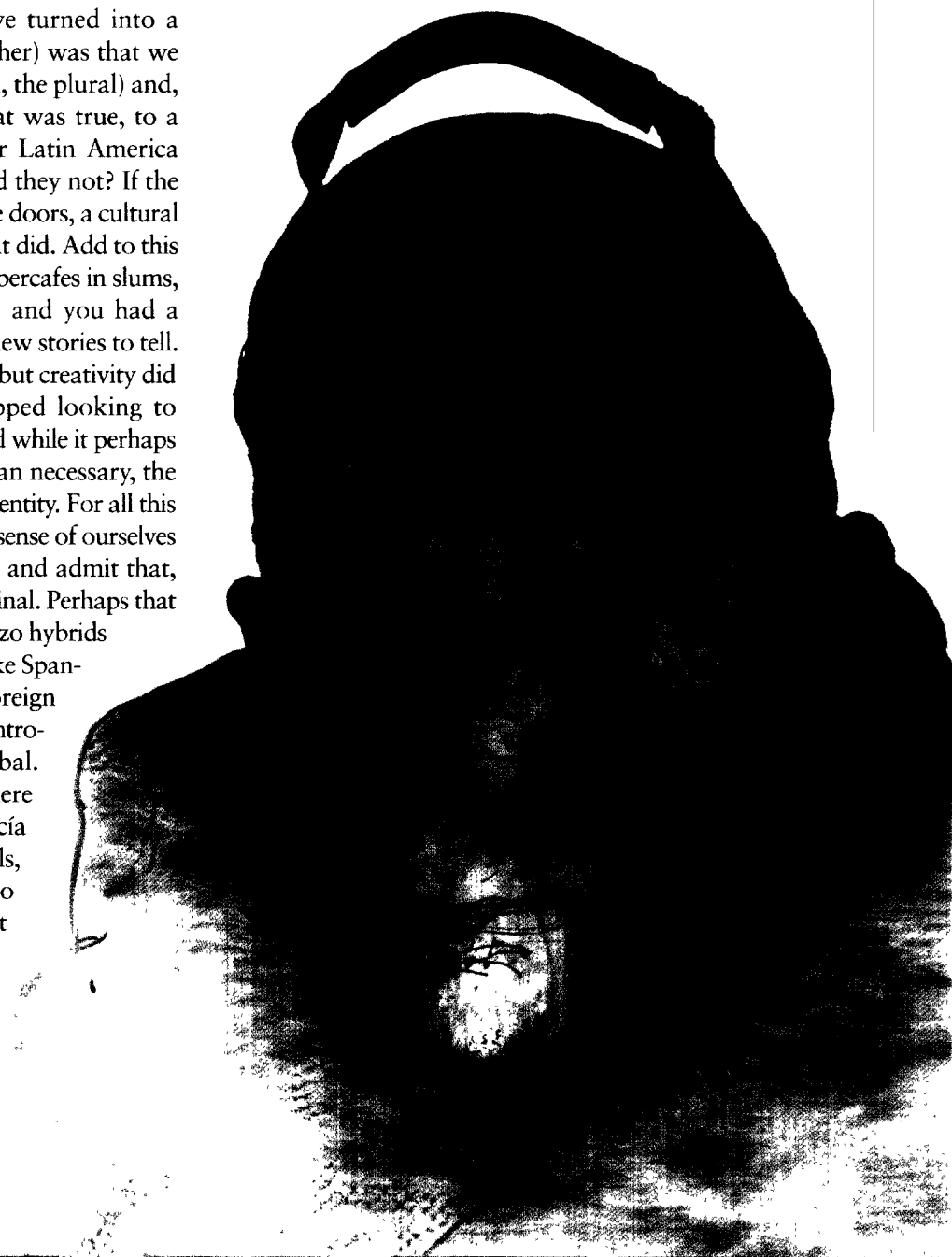
A lot of important voices were not included, of course, only because we didn't know about them yet (oh, how the Internet has changed all that!). We did not even glimpse the astonishing achievements of the so-called Mexican Crack clan—authors such as Jorge Volpi and Ignacio Padilla, who not only reject

magical realism but free themselves from writing about Latin America altogether, setting their books in Nazi Europe—simply because their main works had not yet been published. But for all of *McOndo*'s aims and misses, what ended in the spotlight was the prologue, a mini-essay that was, in the end, more sociological than literary. The prologue's money shot declared that the new Latin America is a world of "McDonald's, Mac computers, and condos."

A good line, but also the sort that pleads to be taken out of context. In the view of many left-wing ideologues, *McOndo* was little more than a neoliberal, or even fascist, manifesto suggesting that the poor had been all but erased from the continent and that the new Latin American fiction was no more than the rants of U.S.-style alienated rich kids.

Another attack we endured (we turned into a "we" before even meeting one another) was that we didn't write about "our land" (again, the plural) and, instead, wrote about ourselves. That was true, to a point. The market reforms all over Latin America had to reform us as well. How could they not? If the point of liberalization was to open the doors, a cultural and social flood had to pour in. And it did. Add to this mix advances in communications (cybercafes in slums, cellphones on cramped city buses), and you had a clean canvas on which to paint and new stories to tell. Yes, the economy grew (for a while), but creativity did even more so. Latin America stopped looking to Europe and Cuba for recognition, and while it perhaps looked toward Miami a bit more than necessary, the continent stumbled on its own new identity. For all this change and turmoil did not erase our sense of ourselves but made us confront who we were and admit that, in many senses, we were not that original. Perhaps that was our strength—to be young, mestizo hybrids speaking and writing in a language like Spanish that has always been open to foreign influences. Our stories went private, introspective, but "our land" went global. That did not mean we turned into mere copycats, nor did we, as Gabriel García Márquez suggested in one of his novels, sell our seas to the United States to pay off our foreign debt. In these last 15 years, our culture has exploded. It has lost its close-knit, parochial aspects, gaining not only strength and vitality but a certain democratic feel. Culture is not what the elite makes or accepts. Culture has finally turned pop.

Indeed, despite all their global patina, our novels (and movies and songs and paintings) were, above all, extremely local, many of them written in the street slang or youth jargon that is heard on the mean streets of our metropolises and, for certain, on our bubbling, too-weird-to-be-true TV. Yes, our television—a First World technology thriving in a Third World context—offers an amalgam too bizarre to understand and yet is astonishingly entertaining. To the amazement of the academic cultural watchdogs, our television's content is largely local. If someone is alienating us with trash, it's us. While our elites gobble up *E! Entertainment* and the Sony channel on cable and satellite TV, prime time is ruled by *lo popular*—by the lower classes.



In this sense, Latin America is very McOndo in its in-your-face, never-stopping, gaudy, and contrasting grandeur. Peru, for example, is quite McOndo. Iquitos, as it appears in *Pantaleón y las Visitadoras*, should be the capital of McOndo, outstripping crazy, wild, and corrupt Ciudad del Este in Paraguay. I remember driving down Lima's traffic-packed Avenida La Marina, a sort of copycat Las Vegas Strip plagued with neon-lit casinos with names like Magic City and Texas Station that try unsuccessfully to imitate those in Nevada. Some scholars have argued that Peru is dragged down by

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too much historical baggage: the Incas, the conquest, the Iberian legacy, the traumas of a former rich colonial viceroy. But a stop at the Plaza San Miguel open-air mall or the Marina Park next door, a sort of theme park entertainment complex, suggests that Peru was, in fact, founded by recent President Alberto Fujimori. For, like TV, this place seems to have no memory. (Just ask Peru's miraculously rehabilitated politician Alan García.)

What can be more McOndo than the scandals surrounding Vladimiro Montesinos, Fujimori's corrupt intelligence chief? The fall of Fujimori in late 2000 was not *The Autumn of the Patriarch*, but rather *The Spring of the Cyber Freak*. Or, to quote Edmundo Paz Soldán's new novel about political manipulation of the media, *Sueños digitales*, it was "digital dreams." Exactly. Peru's president tumbled not because of bombs but was blown to pieces by the full force of some digital broadcasts and a cellar full of badly-shot videos.

But one great thing came out of this McOndo mess: The name became a sort of brand, transcending its origins and becoming much more than a literary anthology. Perhaps it never should have been a book at all, but a special magazine issue, or a documentary, or a Web site. Of all the art forms, the one that was somewhat behind in capturing the region's zeitgeist was literature, because the shadow cast upon the newer generations by authors such as Jorge Luis Borges, Julio Cortázar, Mario Vargas

Llosa, and, yes, Gabriel García Márquez, was far too powerful. Either you copied them (as was the case with the legions of paint-by-number magical realists), or you just stood there staring, shaking, wondering.

Alejandro González Iñárritu, the 37-year-old director (and ex-radio DJ) of the groundbreaking *Amores perros*—a film so Mexican that Laura Esquivel, perpetrator of *Like Water for Chocolate*, probably thought it took place somewhere else—is a McOndo prototype without knowing it. *Amores perros* is no *Like Water for Chocolate*. It's the perfect NAFTA movie, clogged with maquiladora-made Nikes and Mexican rock. It's no fantasy theme park junk. It's the real thing.

In a recent interview, González Iñárritu explained his motivations: "My goal was to show the world how interesting Mexico City is. We worked on 36 drafts of this movie over three years. I wanted to get it right or not make the film at all.

The way America sees Mexico, if they have any sense of it, is like Taco Bell. Our countries are neighbors, and the only hard food to get in America is true Mexican. It's impossible to find, even in L.A. Why is that? In music, Americans only want Ricky Martin. You have to shake your butt if you are Latin and want to be huge in America. That's not what it is to be Latin American. You don't see people here shaking their butt. Americans see us as . . . folkloric. They don't accept that we're a powerful, diverse culture, and my goal is to enlarge the view of Mexico. To show life as it is here. Not the Taco Bell idea."

### FINDING DIVERSITY BENEATH THE SKIN

I almost had a Taco Bell taco on my way out of the theater. As I passed the food court, I saw the local mall rats ingest their fast-food lunch. If I didn't get myself a Taco Bell taco it was not because of what González Iñárritu had said but because the film I had just seen was anything but McOndo.

It had McOndo embedded in its DNA, don't get me wrong, and Rodrigo García, no doubt, grew up in a McOndo world (his father is an Apple computer fanatic). But its style was a different one. For *Things You Can Tell Just By Looking At Her* perfectly exemplifies that diversity lies underneath the skin, just as the actresses tended to show little but felt more than they could bear. Rodrigo García and his Mexican cinematographer shed a Latin

sensibility on an American story and made something new; not a colorful, multicultural piece. The film doesn't get its energy from the clash of two cultures but, instead, from the understanding of one through the eyes of the other. García sees things perhaps an American director would not. He takes his time to look at them. And when he gets too close to his father's milieu (a romantic dwarf, a fortuneteller), his cosmopolitan good taste makes him refrain from going over the top.

*Things You Can Tell Just By Looking At Her* is more than a McOndo movie. McOndo is tough, loud,

wild. But this new sensibility—global yet rooted—is more unplugged, more understanding, more settled. Perhaps it can be called the FTAA way, but maybe the wise thing is to leave it unnamed. In the United States and in Canada and all over, Latin American artists are looking at their new surroundings not as foreigners or aliens but as locals. And soon, I'm sure, we'll be perceived that way, too.

Something tells me, also, that this is the road I want to take. Global, local, and unplugged. I pass Taco Bell. I arrive at Au Bon Pain. I order a coffee. Decaf. **FP**

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**[ Want to Know More? ]**

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Lawrence E. Harrison and Samuel P. Huntington, eds., explore the relationship between development and culture in *Culture Matters: How Values Shape Human Progress* (New York: Basic Books, 2000). Mario Vargas Llosa argues that globalization enhances rather than curtails the evolution of local and regional culture in "The Culture of Liberty" (*FOREIGN POLICY*, January/February 2001), while David Rothkopf's "In Praise of Cultural Imperialism?" (*FOREIGN POLICY*, Summer 1997) suggests that the world will be a better place thanks to the dissemination of U.S. culture.

For reviews of the award-winning *Amores perros* (Love's a Bitch) (Lions Gate Films, 2000), see "From Mexico, 3 Stories and an Array of Lives United by a Car Wreck" by Elvis Mitchell (*New York Times*, October 5, 2000), "Amores Perros" (*Salon.com*, March 30, 2001) by Andrew O'Hehir, "Going to the Dogs" (*National Review*, April 30, 2001) by John Simon, and "Pitbull Realist" (*Washington Post*, April 22, 2001) by Sharon Waxman. John D. Watling assesses the contemporary Mexican film industry in "Amores Perros Spearheads New Age of Mexican Cinema" (*Business Mexico*, August 2000).

For a description of the unlikely events leading to the downfall of the Fujimori regime in Peru, see Isabel Hilton's "The Government is Missing" (*The New Yorker*, March 5, 2001) and Alberto Fuguet's "This Revolution Is Being Televised" (*New York Times Magazine*, February 25, 2001), which highlights the growing role of the mass media in Latin America's political life.

For an anthology showcasing the new generation of Latin American fiction writers, see Edmundo Paz Soldán and Alberto Fuguet's, eds., *Se habla español: Voces latinas en USA* (Spanish Spoken Here: Latin Voices in the USA) (Miami: Alfaguara, 2000). Notable works from the McOndo generation include Jaime Bayly's *Los últimos días de "La Prensa"* (The Last Days of "La Prensa") (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1996) and *Yo amo a mi mami* (I Love My Mommy) (Lima: Adobe Editores, 1998); Alberto Fuguet's *Mala onda* (Santiago: Alfaguara, 1991)—translated into English as *Bad Vibes* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997)—and *Tinta roja* (Red Ink) (Santiago: Alfaguara, 1996); Edmundo Paz Soldán's *Sueños digitales* (Digital Dreams) (La Paz: Alfaguara, 2000) and short-story collection *Amores imperfectos* (Imperfect Loves) (La Paz: Santillana, 1998); and Ignacio Padilla's *La catedral de los ahogados* (The Cathedral of the Drowned) (Mexico City: Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, 1995) and *Si volviesen sus majestades* (If Their Majesties Returned) (Mexico City: Nueva Imagen, 1996).

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