

Nostalgia for Monsiváis¹

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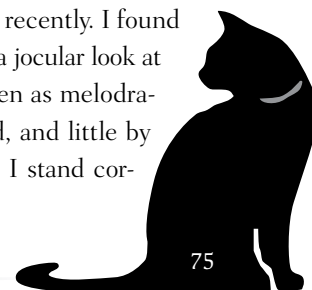


Sáshenka Gutiérrez/Cuartoscuro

The first thing I ever read by Monsiváis was a brief article in a semi-pornographic magazine that used to come out in the 1970s, *Eros*. The title seemed original and interesting: “Es muy Molesto/Tener que llegar a Esto/Tener que Menear el Tiesto/Para poder mal Vivir (Impresiones)” (It’s Really a Drag/To Come to This/To Have to Shake Your Booty/To More or Less Scrape By [Impressions]). When he wrote it in 1975, I hadn’t been born yet; I first came across it when I was a teenager in high school. I remember it well because the author’s language caught my eye right away, a style I had never come across or read. The choice of words

and the way of arranging them inside the phrases, creating images that were both ironic and poetic, made the story a kind of secular revelation. At least, that’s what it produced in me: the feeling of a truth revealed about the day-to-day world, an easeful, playful version of reality. Right away I bought a little book of his, *Los mil y un velorios. Crónica sobre la nota roja en México* (One Thousand and One Wakes: Chronicle of the Crime Page in Mexico), published by Alianza —a corrected, expanded version of this book came out recently. I found there exceptional lucidity, together with a jocular look at something that until then I had only seen as melodramatic. And from then on, I was hooked, and little by little I discovered the rest of his work. I stand cor-

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rected: I discovered part of his work, because, clearly, due of his efficient, speedy, super-fertile pen, I will never be able to get through it all—something which seems both magnificent and terrible.

When I heard about the death of Monsiváis and heard the mournful tone of those around it, I remembered his sense of humor, that constant facetiousness that gave him a certain childlike air, as though he had been playing a prank when he was making fun of reality—you really had to be quick to know if he meant things literally or if his words hid some irony that could make you end up the object of fun. Of course, I thought that in place of paying homage, serious faces, and unending condolences, he would have preferred that somebody perform a parody in his name, a Marx Brothers' film be shown, or for Jis and Trino to draw a grotesque comic strip about his wake.² Some years ago, when he was given one of

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his innumerable awards, he said, "My vanity is intact, locked up in a strongbox, and there's no way of getting it out... Unfortunately, I only brought words against myself, and I can't use them, because I'd be behaving badly given what has been said about me here. But another time, I'll explain why this is all false." Contrary to the national custom of melodrama and facile tears, Monsiváis always went with his sense of humor, his lively thirst for shenanigans, and jocular irony, particularly when it was a matter of talking about himself. And that attitude is precisely one of his legacies that I hope survives.

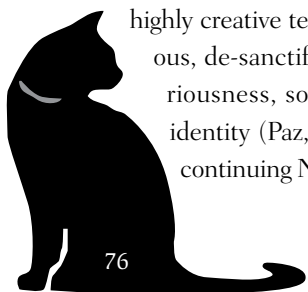
In addition to new characters, voices, tones, and treatments that had not existed before, as well as the renovation of different unorthodox literary devices, Monsiváis contributed to Mexican literature a new way of looking at reality, a privileged, unique perspective for making an inventory of the world in highly creative terms that always implied finding a humorous, de-sanctifying key. In a tradition dominated by seriousness, solemnity, and the existential question of identity (Paz, Rulfo, Fuentes, Elizondo...), Monsiváis, continuing Novo's work, reclaimed laughter as a means

to deal with an adverse reality. By being anti-solemn and irreverent, Monsiváis's work ends up as a breath of fresh air amidst literary priggishness and solemnity. This is an unparalleled parody writer—only Ibarguengoitia is on his level in Mexican letters. The different kinds of irony he practiced deserve a study that has yet to be done.

Christopher Domínguez Michael said that Monsiváis deserves the greatest praise that can be given to an intellectual in Mexico because without his work, the attempt to create a Mexican democratic, liberal culture would be inconceivable. Though limited to the political virtues of his legacy, this accolade takes on meaning if we relate it to literary intent and innovation practiced by the maximum exponent of literary journalism in Mexico. In contrast to what his detractors think, Monsiváis's work has undeniable aesthetic worth, and at its highest point, it was the expression of a highly renovating dynamic. His work—multifaceted, variegated, and practically unfathomable in its vastness—is the original synthesis of diverse literary traditions: English satire, nineteenth-century literary journalism, Biblical language (in the translations of Casiodoro de Reina and Cipriano de Valera), modernist poetry, the chronicles of the Indies, the essay-like fiction of Borges and Reyes, the new American journalism. His is a unique, unrepeatable language. As Sergio Pitol has said, the passion for form and an interest in popular topics do not usually go hand in hand. His eccentric style is one of the liveliest forms of expression invented by Mexican literature.

After his death, a public cultural official remembered him by saying that it was a shame Monsiváis had not written more *really literary* texts. This kind of prejudice permeates people's judgements about Monsiváis's work, as though because of its referential nature, the feature article could not be considered *literature*. With Monsiváis, this is clearly not the case. His capacity for recreating atmospheres, building characters, setting a solid architecture for the story, and reinventing popular speech through oral means, dialogue, polyphony... all this turns him into an exceptional narrator, with a powerful sense of intrigue, probably derived from his passion for detective literature. His chronicles of Mexican life show it:³ in them you can see not only the depth of his critical interpretations about what is Mexican, which prove him to be a unique essayist, but also his gifts as a non-fiction novelist. In my opinion, Monsiváis's work achieves what the failed novels of Carlos Fuentes did not: narrating the great *Human Comedy à la Mexicana*.

If Monsiváis achieved anything, it was constructing an inclusive, plural, critical literature (behind it, there is a nation-



al project). The whole and combination of focuses that he handles, the polysemous gaze he proposes and shines on his objects of study, the multiplicity of the voices he includes in his texts, the gamut of (literary, philosophical, historical...) discourses and references he constantly dialogues with, the mix of genres and the diversity of registers and rhetorical devices he resorts to... these all reveal the work of an author who always sought to put down in his own language the voices of others, the composite voice of the public space, as though we were face to face with the pages of a newspaper in which all of society speaks, and is revealed and deciphered by a demi-urge who reorganized it to make it accessible to the reader.

And herein lies another of his virtues: generosity. I will not recount here the long list of stories that would confirm this. I will just refer to the pedagogical spirit of his work to illustrate it. Monsiváis took from Alfonso Reyes the need to write in a reader-friendly way about the most urgent, all-encompassing matters, always thinking about making the reader an intelligent accomplice. In this sense, if recovering the value of the "minor," popular genres questions the very notion of fiction, then Monsiváis also stands up for a political, civic intention that Mexican literature had left to molder in a nineteenth-century, liberal roll-top desk: his writing sought to turn the reader into a citizen, put him/her in contact with modern, democratic values, denounce the demagogy of languages, and make literature a matter of interest beyond aesthetic purism and elitism, still so in force in Mexico's cultural world.

Here, I should perform an act of contrition. I am a bit disturbed by the fact that everyone recognizes Monsiváis, but so few read and study him. This paradox explains the reception he has had. In this sense, my generation (born in the 1970s) has a conflictive, contradictory relationship with the figure of Monsiváis. In principle, I would say that for young writers, Monsiváis is an uncomfortable reference point. In many cases, interest in his work can only flower after jumping over the hurdles of uncritically created and accepted prejudices. The literary world in Mexico is full of status-related clichés. Opinions in vogue are validated and authors are celebrated who the market or misunderstanding have designated as "legitimate." Platitudes are our favorite pulpits. This is why for several years now, supposedly transgressing, iconoclastic refrains have been sung in chorus: "he's a writer who has nothing more to say"; "a journalist who doesn't do literature, and in any case spends his time on cultural gossip"; "an anachronistic thinker who has not renewed himself and just repeats over and over"; "a patriarch who has no ideas, just quips,"

etc. There is something of the cultural parricide in these—all indefensible—pronouncements. This would have some value if it were based on having read the author and a full knowledge of his work. Unfortunately, this is not the case (Castañón was not in error when he said that his polygraphic nature made Mexico's most public writer into a truly secret writer). I have the impression that the figure of Monsiváis and his transformation into a legend have a great deal to do with this. As was clear at his funeral, the public personage was overwhelming: everyone thought they knew him just because they had heard him on the radio or read some newspaper article that mentioned his opinions—not always accurately—which meant that Monsiváis stopped being read because, "You already knew what he was going to say." People avoided evaluating his work, replacing that with attacks on his cultural omnipresence, the phenomenon of his persona. A text by Luis

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González de Alba entitled "El gran murmurador" (The Great Murmurer) is the paradigmatic example of this ill-intentioned reductionism. Somehow, the public image Monsiváis gradually acquired worked against him. In any case, this is a clear effect of a process of cultural sanctification and institutionalization, the result of the success of his own writing project.

On the other hand, what happens to young Mexican writers *vis-à-vis* Monsiváis is the same thing that happens to certain women who criticize feminism in general and rather blindly: they are incapable of recognizing that the possibility of expressing oneself in certain ways, in certain contexts, with different values than those that prevailed in the past, is related exactly to the achievements of what they are criticizing. Monsiváis is a timely author in the sense that many of his points of view, literary operations, and critical viewpoints still prevail in today's literature. If the themes and commitments have changed, the determination of style and the unfettered vision underlying his work have spread among young writers. I would even say that Monsiváis's writing has been central not only to how we conceive of our place in the history of our country, but to how



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the very idea of literature is perceived today in Mexico. Who better than Monsiváis has defended dissidence as a driving force for writing in our context, the right to first-person irreverent expression, the notion of literary creation as a political framework, the recovery of the marginal as a space for renovating literature, the use of irony and parody to offer unofficial versions of history, the need for a literature that breaks barriers —gender, hierarchical, textual...— and dialogue with other forms of discourse?

What is actually no longer current is how Monsiváis conceived criticism of the public space. Clearly, the merely reactive form can no longer have the same value in a country that has undergone the profound changes Mexico has in recent years. The weakening of written culture in light of the rise of the spectacle and the diminishing relevance of the humanities in the public debate are extremely important factors in this process. With Monsiváis dies a way of being an intellectual in Mexico. While for decades he personified the indispensable conscience, the lucid gaze that could interpret the changes the country was experiencing, today that is out of the question. It is impossible to imagine today a writer who could achieve anything like that or who would even be interested in taking on that responsibility.

The way any writer will be received is difficult to predict. There is a great deal of fortuitousness and also whim in what happens to books. Nevertheless, I think that we can say that Monsiváis will be read —and widely— in the future, in part because of his unlimited bibliography. Mexico's publishing world has been enriched by the tens of thousands of pages —let's be clear, this estimate is as vague as it is moderate— that Monsiváis wrote and disseminated in books, articles, essays, prologues, lectures, interviews, etc., as well as the many, many sources that quote him. If Monsiváis wrote obsessively, the bibliography that quotes him incessantly continues growing.

It's not a matter of knowing whether he will be read or not in the next five or ten decades, but understanding what that reading will be like. My opinion is that

for a while, he will still be underestimated as long as his public figure continues as one of the great architects of contemporary Mexican culture —cultural underdevelopment is expressed as a complex when faced with authority. Later on, when this fades, little by little other ways of reading Monsiváis will become more popular, which today, even though they can be predicted, still have not become generalized: the great historian of the mentalities of Mexico's twentieth century, the narrator who practiced a kind of realistic experimental fiction, the great cultural interpreter of our nation, an unparalleled literary critic. Each of these ways of reading him will determine what is recovered and what is left behind in Monsiváis's exhausting work. If readers are looking for testimonies or documentary evidence in his texts, they will hunt for what he published originally in newspapers and magazines. If their interest is in aesthetic values, they will look at his books, which he always revised self-critically. In this regard, it is clear that one of the inevitabilities of literary journalism has to do with its always being written against the clock —Juan Villoro, echoing Fernando Benítez, has said that feature articles are “literature under pressure”— and the only way of dealing with formal errors and imprecise information is to correct them.

In any case, what is certainly the case is that we are dealing here with an author who will never be read in his totality. José Emilio Pacheco said that the meaning of the work of both Reyes and Monsiváis is its variety and ungraspable vastness. That is why any anthology of their texts will always imply a loss. And any edition of their complete works would be an obstacle for approaching the author. In any case, anyone who wrote as a chronicler, bibliophile, polemicist, aesthete, writer of articles, critic of power, collector, historian, film analyst, public opinion maker... cannot be forgotten.

The work of several dozen highly informed, lucid, disciplined specialists would be required to replace his daily activity and the patrimony he crafted every day. When he was in the hospital, the vacuum created by his absent opinion could be felt in the public sphere. We cannot even begin to calculate how much we will have need of him in the future. ■■■

NOTES

¹This article is

²Jis and Trino are two well-known Mexican cartoonists. [Editor's Note.]

³One very important journalistic form in Mexico is called a “chronicle,” which can be anything from a short newspaper article to a series of books. The chronicle looks at daily life over time or in the present, and is not limited to a historical account without analysis or interpretation, as the English word implies. [Translator's Note.]

