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**Alberto Fuguet's *The Movies of My Life*: Seismology,  
Films, Surface, Depth, the Media(ted) Self and  
the Search for Identity**

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[Hipertexto](#)

**A**s the title of Alberto Fuguet's novel, *The Movies of My Life*, suggests, it explores the relationship between memory and the modern technologies which influence and shape it. This study will focus on the relationship between the cinema, seismology and the structure of the novel. This article will then study the evolution of Beltrán's "techomemory" and his struggle to forge and maintain his personal identity in the face of a progressively more meidatic, deterritorialized, "glocalized" and globalized world. His memories, filtered through different technical media, (email, television and movies), are also linked to his childhood in California and to the history of Chile. Mass media, especially movies, also recreate the personal and collective identities and imaginaries in the novel.

**Cinema, Seismology and Structure**

In an interview, Alberto Fuguet, Chilean writer, film director, critic and one of the leading figures of the McOndo movement,<sup>1</sup> spoke about the seismological

<sup>1</sup> "Cansados del Macondo subdesarrollado, pobre y folclórico que no habla inglés, no usa la tecnología más reciente y no consume productos norteamericanos, los antologadores lo reemplazan con "otro país McOndo [que] es más grande, sobrepoblado y lleno de contaminación, con autopistas, metro, TV-cable y barriadas. En McOndo hay McDonald's, computadores Mac y condominios, amén de hoteles cinco estrellas construidos con dinero lavado y *malls* gigantescos" (17). Es decir, al reconocer implícitamente la existencia de dos países dentro de uno, uno moderno y desarrollado, otro pobre y 'folclórico', los antologadores socavan la imagen reductiva del continente que se consume en el Occidente. Al añadir la parte (post)moderna, urbana y con mayor poder adquisitivo, que existe como una realidad paralela pero conflictiva al mundo rural y subdesarrollado, se nos ofrece una visión más compleja y

structure of his novel, *The Movies of My Life*: “De repente caí en los sismos. Creo que fue realmente un momento de iluminación. Aunque yo creo que no. Yo no creo en los momentos de iluminación. Creo que es un trabajo previo pero no me di cuenta, y estaba buscando algo para poder hablar de la memoria, de la división. Por ejemplo a mí lo que más me gustó de los sismos es cuando yo iba a entrevistar a mi primer sismólogo y me dice: ‘Chile es un país muy fracturado.’ Un terremoto como lo defino ahí es un evento que divide un país en un antes y un después en la historia. Es algo de lo que todo el mundo tiene una opinión, un recuerdo y una historia. (Ernesto Escobar Ulloa, “Entrevista con Alberto Fuguet”).

The fusion of cinema and seismology in *The Movies of my Life* reveals the depth and surface features of this hybrid novel. The first two pages display horizontal film borders of what is a 35-millimeter film (this representation not only embodies the earlier Hollywood era but also echoes the nostalgia of the novel's title). They enclose the name of the author and a series of undulating lines as if Fuguet were enveloped in a double filmic-seismic event over which he has no control. Just below the film border appears the title of the novel *The Movies of My Life*. The wavy lines not only indicate the different primary and surface waves which accompany earthquakes but also the seismic events of Beltrán's life.

Several pages later the title is repeated accompanied by a strange drawing of what resembles a pair of glasses (or eyes), or a slide viewer, or a distorted representation of the DVD symbol. The viewing device or viewer is enclosed in a kind of box which serves as a parodic mise-en-abyme of the novel. The narrator Beltrán successively becomes the viewer viewing, viewing viewer and viewed viewer as he explores the movies of his life (this visual symbol appears before all the sections in which he communicates with someone else by phone or email, or he talks about himself: on the second title page, and on 3, 7, 17, 19, 20, 27, 31, 38, 40, 43, 47, 53, 59, 163 and 279).

Two more pages follow in which the horizontal film borders enclose the undulating lines of an earthquake. The line ends with two arrowheads enclosed in a square indicating the relentless forward movement of the earthquake and Beltrán's life. There is a quote from Anna María del Rio, and her work, *Pandora*: “The tremor didn't come out of now nowhere. Actually, nothing in this life does. Everything occurs just as it does in earthquakes: in a snap. We are those who live just a bit at a time” (*The Movies of My Life*, 2). This quote underscores the basic depth/surface juxtapositions which are successively foregrounded and backgrounded throughout the novel. The paratextual quotes resemble the fractalized outcroppings created by earthquakes (They appear on pages 1, 5, 15, 51, 58, 143, 151, 161 and 277. The large gap between 161 and 277 reminds us

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verídica de la nueva realidad latinoamericana donde los barrios ricos de sus centros metropolitanos fácilmente podrían existir en el seno de Estados Unidos o Europa” (Diane Palaversich).

that the seismic waves of earthquakes and our lives can remain out of sight for a long time and then suddenly resurface).<sup>2</sup>

After a blank page, two pages of vertical film borders follow. Beltrán Soler's life resembles an earthquake, never able to gain his footing for more than a fleeting moment before instability strikes again: "It's already been four days like this, on the edge, to the max, sometimes in slow motion, other times in double fast forward" (4). The earthquake, like his life, is surface and depth, hypocenter and epicenter, and he compares himself to a shaken (nostalgic) bottle of coke: "Let's say I'm a bottle of Coke and the person who shook me up is a woman who I'll probably never see again. It was she who looked me straight in the eye, she who made me laugh, talk, doubt, connect, It was she who opened up my mind and let loose the thick, viscous, gooey stuff that memories are made of" (4). The vertical film borders throughout the novel constitute synchronic moments when the narrator discovers something about himself before the earthquake relentlessly advances. On page 5 the cinematic earthquake image re-emerges accompanied by a quote from Charles Richter which underscores the all inclusive nature of an earthquake: "An earthquake never comes alone" (5).

Another blank page follows indicating the underground movement of the earthquake. The next section, 7-13, is dated Sunday, January 14, 2001, 6:43 AM, Santiago de Chile, and involves a conversation between Beltrán and his sister, Manuela, who has called him. The vertical film borders mark another synchronic moment in Beltrán's life as he and his sister try to reconnect through a conversation punctuated by silences. Beltrán, who is on his way to Tokyo, has several hours before his next flight. He finds himself near the epicenter of his former life in Encino. His family is fragmented and scattered like the debris of an earthquake and Beltrán has become a transnational nomad whose identity exists in a fluid state, momentarily reconstituting itself in each new place. As the structure of the novel shows, Beltrán is seeking an intersection between the vertical and horizontal axes of his life, the reconciliation between the hypocenter and the epicenter. As he notes, things were good for a while, then they all went downhill and "we're still feeling the aftershocks" (13). On pages 14 and 15, the horizontal film borders and the undulating lines reappear with the arrowheads pointing toward the ceaseless forward progression. Another paratextual/fractalized outcropping appears from R. H. Blyth: "An earthquake, a toothache, a mad dog, a telephone message—and all our house of peace fall like a pack of cards" (15).

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<sup>2</sup> "A rough or fragmented geometric shape that can be subdivided in parts, each of which is (at least approximately) a reduced/size copy of the whole". The term was coined by Benoît Mandelbrot in 1975 and was derived from the Latin *fractus* meaning *broken* or *fractured*' (Fractal).

The next entry, Sunday, 7:14 PM, is enclosed by the vertical film borders and offers a brief glimpse of Beltrán's life. He remembers the day in 1976 when his uncle Teodoro gave him *The Book of Lists* by David Wallenchinsky which contains hundreds of lists and explanations on unusual and esoteric topics. Several other volumes were published in 1977 and 1983: "I read and reread every one of its pages until I had almost memorized it. *The Book of Lists* became my favorite book. Its influence, I suspect, has not been slight. Since then I've tended to enumerate and catalog events, people, happenings, earthquakes, things. I wouldn't go so far as to claim that that book full of miscellaneous trivia changed my life but, if pressed, I'd have no problem in declaring that it definitely gave it some structure" (17-18). *The Book of Lists* constitutes a mise-en-abyme of Beltrán's fragmented life which consists of a collage of heterotopic moments perceived through and associated with the "movies of his life."

Another vertical moment follows on page 19 and is dated Sunday, 7:25 PM. Beltrán attempts to justify his nomadic existence with its constant displacements: "But I lead a more low-key life and, despite the instabilities and little things that may be, I feel fortunate and at ease. Traveling is not synonymous with adventure and surprise. I don't try to find people who can move the earth; on the contrary, it's people who come to me when the earth decides to move itself" (19). The next moment, Sunday, 7:36 PM (20-22), deals with his grandfather Teodoro who "fought to be remembered as a leader in the field of predicting telluric movements" (20). His frenzied search caused him to be rejected by his fellow scientists. Teodoro ends up living in El Salvador and engaging in seismological evangelizing. Beltrán, fearing that he too will lose his sense of "self," inserts his curriculum vitae in an effort to validate his "credentialed" self (23).

The reality of his life corresponds to the fissures, gaps, chaos, disruptions caused by earthquakes and as a seismologist, he cannot predict when earthquakes will occur, how much damage they will cause; that is, he cannot predict or control his life either. All he can do is make lists:

Beltrán Soler es un sismógrafo que carece de memoria, es un experto que sólo recopila y archiva datos (hace listas), en un mundo globalizado y conectado por medio de redes virtuales donde dominan el simulacro y la muerte de la historia. El inmenso acopio de referentes ha deshistorizado los lugares, se vive en un continuo tiempo presente. Consecuentemente, el rescate del tiempo íntimo en Soler, sus memorias, utiliza al cine como mediación, y además hace que sus recuerdos sean las memorias de un medio de comunicación, vale decir, denota el fracaso de la posibilidad de un imaginario personal y social no vinculado a los regímenes de transmisión de información. El nuevo imaginario hipermediático se encuentra en la publicidad, el cine, la radio, la televisión, es decir, en imágenes referenciales que funcionan en base al intercambio comercial que modelan las prácticas y formas sociales e individuales" (Alvaro García M., 32).

Reality always surpasses any attempt by Beltrán to (re)capture his life in cinematic moments or much less to live it in any meaningful way. what we

witness is the continuous and useless struggle to reconstruct and maintain personal identity in a mediated world based on the consumption of an endless series of images. The paratextual elements of the novel confirm the frantic nature of Beltrán's quest to impose the classic Hollywood chronological editing and ordering on his life, both past and present: "Los márgenes del texto se desbordan con las citas. La nivelación de estratos se compone de fragmentos polifónicos, las citas, los monólogos, los diálogos, los correos electrónicos y sus archivos (las fichas técnicas de los filmes y las memorias o listado de películas). Estos rastros escriturales de distinto soporte dejan de superponerse y se deslizan unos sobre otros, redundan." (36).

Between pages 24-60 a total of thirteen other moments occur before Beltrán lands in Los Angeles for a short layover before continuing on to Tokyo to teach for a semester at Tsakuba University. The time period covers from Sunday, 8:41PM in the airport in Santiago de Chile to Wednesday, January 17, 2001 at 6:52 AM when he writes to Lindsay Hamilton whom he met on the flight from Lima to Los Angeles. Beltrán crosses a mediatic threshold with his first email since it opens the way to the first 25 "movies of his life." Since Lindsay never answers his email, she contradicts the idea of reciprocity.<sup>3</sup>

Beltrán "speaks" to Lindsay through emails: "First of all, I'm the seismologist you met on the plane from Lima to L.A. We sat together, up front. Do you remember? I sure do. You got me to thinking about all the movies of my life and...maybe I don't have anyone else in the world to send my list to, but that doesn't seem either sad or embarrassing. Something tells me that it's a good idea to send you this list, all these movies" (*The Movies of My Life*, 59). The list of movies involves the search for *transhistorical* and *transtemporal* moments of *felt* history; that is, an identity epiphany. The space of the email lends itself to this evocative associative process. What Beltrán fervently desires to accomplish in his emails is to reconstruct a felt history of his life *associated* with the films he has seen and thereby demonstrate the power and intensity of movies in our lives. Beltrán fervently desires to close some of the fissures in his life and it does not suffice for him to keep telling Lindsay "what's been going on inside my head (remembering, remembering, remembering), but I think it's enough to say that I haven't been able to stop thinking about this whole 'movies of my life' thing. And I've never written a thing in my life. This is all your fault. It was like a reflex....I just started going over them in my mind. Just for that, I think you, and I'm in your debt" (60).

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<sup>3</sup> "Obviously e-mail is print; it is writing. But it is also speech. The emotionally seductive power of the epistolary genre, including e-mail, then, can also be understood in anthropological terms as deriving from this kind of gift exchange. What is offered as online gift is aesthetic pleasure which, when accepted, that is, when read and experienced, must be returned: reader is obliged to become writer. Hence e-mailers' experience of reciprocity, anxiety, and pleasurable anticipation" (Ellen Strenski).

## Media(ted) Self and Global Flows

After he mentions the movies of his life, he frantically begins to (re)construct the pieces of his identity through the movies of his life. Beltrán straddles the identitary fence between California and Chile. The pluriverses of Beltrán Soler's life and his fragmented, mediatized identity consist of a series of conflicting global zones through which he passes: "The central problem of today's global interactions is the tension between cultural homogenization and cultural heterogenization. The new global cultural economy has to be seen as a complex, overlapping, disjunctive order, which cannot any longer be understood in terms of existing center-periphery models. The complexity of the current global economy has to do with certain fundamental disjunctures between economy, culture, and politics which we have only begun to theorize. I propose that an elementary framework for exploring such disjunctures is to look at the relationship between five dimensions of global cultural flow which can be termed: (a) ethnoscapas; (b) mediascapas; (c) technoscapas; (d) financescapas; and (e) ideoscapas. These landscapes thus are the building blocks of what I would like to call *imagined worlds*, that is, the multiple worlds which are constituted by the historically situated imaginations of persons and groups around the globe" (*Theorizing Diaspora*, 30-1). Beltrán Soler's family is polarized and dispersed between California and Chile. Beltrán's identity is correspondingly scattered and dispersed across the global and glocal heterotopic universe of his work and personal life and his contacts with his family are often reduced to vocal and electronic interfaces.

Deterritorialization also characterizes Beltrán Soler's situation: "Se trata de una desterritorialización de la cotidianeidad. En el ámbito de lo cotidiano, en los ritos de lo privado y en comportamientos públicos sería donde se materializaría esta concepción para los individuos" (García M., 22). Indeed, Beltrán constantly passes through different scapes in his globetrotting peregrinations. In addition to his fissured ethnoscapas, his meandering route takes him through technoscapas which are "the global configuration, also ever fluid, of technology, and of the fact that technology, both high and low, both mechanical and informational, now moves at high speeds across various kinds of previously impervious boundaries" (*Theorizing Diaspora*, 32). Television, email, phones and other forms of technology make up the technoscapas of Beltrán Soler's world and embody the phenomenon of secondary orality. Secondary orality, like the 50 films that Beltrán recalls and describes to Lindsay in his two emails, constitute nostalgic attempts to recapture the space of primary orality in which the community gathered to listen to storyteller who recounted the traditions, customs and history of the group.

The very technology that encourages us "to reach out and touch someone" instead distances us from the very people with whom we are in contact. Modern technoscapas, ethnoscapas and financescapes increase the global flow of information and people in disjunctive patterns. In *The Movies of My*

life these unpredictable global flows are graphically portrayed by the meandering horizontal line which moves relentlessly forward throughout the novel and will continue after its last appearance on page 277. Beltrán realizes that “contrary to what the public thinks, seismologists work in memory. In this regard, we’re related to historians and, in certain ways, to psychiatrists. Just like them, we cannot predict what will happen but, rummaging around in what’s already happened, we can at least help people to better understand and to be prepared. The important thing is to be prepared. That’s the hard part. My academic and personal experience has shown me that unfortunately---or perhaps fortunately---man is never prepared for anything” (*The Movies of My Life*, 28).

### **Memories, Movies and (M)identity**

Beltrán selects 50 films which are going to highlight crucial moments of his life history. Instead, they constitute 50 heterotopic, disconnected moments. Beltrán seeks to connect the moments of his emotional life so he can form a continuity that lasts more than a few seconds or minutes, before the solidity of the earth and his identity shift: “*One world. Once we really were one single world. One continent. Pangea. And one ocean: Panthalassa*” (*The Movies of My Life*, 27). Nothing is what it seems in this televisual world: “I always look deeper, I scan for the cracks, I scan for flaws and resistances” (27). While still in the airport in Santiago, Beltrán experiences one of his many emotional tremors: “I’m walking in circles. A blond, willowy girl of about twenty is consoling him. Reminds me of Federica Montt. The kid’s stopped crying. I feel as if something’s happening to me; an internal tremor. I touch my cheeks; they’re dry, thankfully. I try to calm my breathing, to relax, to quell the force of emotion in time” (37).

When Beltrán meets Lindsay Wagner on the flight to Los Angeles, they strike up a conversation about movies and books. Lindsay’s comments underscore the fictionality of Fuguet’s novel: “I’ve gotten addicted to DVDs. I’ve got quite a stockpile. I started making a list. I read this book--- by---Lorenzo Martínez Romero. Have you seen any of his films. The guy’s a phenomenal director. A lot of fun too. Captures all the energy of the border” (*The Movies of My Life*, 49). A little later on Lindsay says: “That’s the point of Lorenzo Martínez’s book: those movies weren’t important for everybody, but they meant something to you” (50). The mediated self cannot retreat into a past which no longer exists or project itself into an unknown future, so the only refuge is a kind of imagistic, eternal present constructed of the endless procession of simulacra. The old movies become the last repository and hope of redemption for Beltrán in his desperate quest to find himself, or at least some vestiges of his identity.

When the plane touches down at Los Angeles, Beltrán says: “I was home again” (*The Movies of my Life*, 55). Beltrán can grow up in California and live in Chile because in a media-created and dominated society, the First World is in the Third World and vice versa, and the new novelistic canon represented by these multimedia(ted) works functions in a new creative space: “We are therefore witnessing the formation of a new canon; camp and pop have been particularly

exemplary in this process because, while operating from a space “high” culture has greatly resisted (as it resists any manifestation considered in “bad taste”), they came to be dominating forms. Mass culture or consumerist formulas are quoted in these texts as metaphors for an aesthetic whose margins are always in dispute within an already exclusionary system.” (Ana María Amar Sanchez).

The quote by François Truffaut from the prologue of his own book, *Les filmes de ma vie*, parallels Beltrán cinematic experience: “I saw my first two hundred films clandestinely, playing hooky from school and sneaking in through the exit or the bathroom window. Contrary to the few other moviegoers of my age, I didn’t identify with the heroes but rather with the helpless and, more systematically, with everyone who found themselves in difficult circumstances” (*The Movies of My life*, 57). Like other electronic media, movies offer the illusion of unity, sharing and bonding. The “reality” of Fuguet’s *The Movies of my Life* is “copied” by Truffaut’s book, *Les Filmes de ma vie*, and finally it is simulacralized by the fictional memoir with the same title, *The Movies of My life*, by Lorenzo Martínez Romero. It is from this simulacrum of Fuguet’s novel that Lindsay is compiling a list (49). These three works constitute a recursive structure that involves performing the “same operation over and over again, each time operating on the product of the pervious operation” (*Postmodernist Fiction*, 112). Each repetition of the title plunges Beltrán more deeply into his simulacral world: “El cine mediatiza, igualmente, la percepción de la realidad del protagonista. Para su descripción del mundo, Beltrán emplea elementos pertenecientes a un sistema semiótico propio del cine y buenos ejemplos de ello encontramos a lo largo de todo el texto. Puede afirmarse que nos encontramos ante una identidad que, especialmente durante los primeros años de vida del protagonista, se encuentra totalmente mediatizada por el cine” (Víctor Silvia Echeto). Beltrán lives immersed in a sea of images, incapable of escaping them even in his most “private” space. His emotional reactions transform themselves into an endless procession of simulacra, and he experiences “the ecstasy of communication.” Beltrán recovers his past through a series of mediatized images profoundly tinged with false nostalgia: “En Fuguet se trata de mostrar que el mundo es DVD Planet, que la emocionalidad bloqueada por el *Fortesán* de Pinochet y sólo se recupera en el cine, donde, como dice el protagonista, “nadie te ve llorar”. El niño Beltrán vivirá en Chile como si fuera el país del exilio que lo recibe con la más calurosa violencia estatal y familiar. La respuesta a la violencia de Beltrán Soler es la anestesia emocional y estética de la que solo se recupera a través de los sentimientos envasados de los medios y del registro folletinesco” (Rubí Carreño Bolívar).

When Beltrán arrives in Los Angeles and goes to his hotel in Van Nuys, he says to Lindsay in an email: “Pues, I’ve done a few things since we split up at the airport on Monday. I took your advice and went to DVD Planet. It was great, like a return to my youth, when I ate up movies like they were M&Ms. By the way, I’m not in Japan. In the end I didn’t go. I missed my flight” (*The Movies of My life*, 60). Beltrán’s winding road takes him back to the “center” of his life and he



decides to remain in the place where many of his memories are anchored in the films that he saw during his youth. Beltrán's attachment to California is revealed in his first film experience which is *Born Free* which appeared in 1966 and which he saw in 1996: "The four of us, they tell me, saw *Born Free*, in a car at a drive-in at the edge of Culver City, next to a cemetery complete with a waterfall. I like the idea of the four of us in the car, surrounded by teenagers making out, the windshield grimy with sea salt, my mother nursing Manuela while my father slept, and I in the back, awake, watching that odd pair play with the lion cub that didn't belong to them at all" (63).

After the first series of films, Beltrán calls his sister Manuela. Beltrán's world is the DVD Planet: "I hired a car with Salvadorean driver. He took me to this store pretty far away. I didn't buy anything, but I spent almost three hours looking at DVDs. I bet they had very movie there that I've ever seen in y life. Plus thousands that I haven't, and never will. 'You know, the TV keeps you from dreaming. It just hits you with so many stimulants that, no matter how tired you are, you end up sleeping on average at least forty-five minutes later than if you didn't have the TV in your room'" (*The Movies of My Life*, 147-8). One striking example is his discussion of the movie *It's a Wonderful Life* which was shot at the RKO Studio in Encino. The town embodied the film industry and all the imagined worlds produced by Hollywood, so its repertoire of images was endless: "But Encino wasn't just situated near the movies; rather it was built on unmistakably cinematic foundations. Encino was RKO Telepictures giant backyard. Where cowboys and Indians fought it out for the cameras, and where medieval Paris and Capone's Chicago were reconstructed" (*The Movies of My Life*, 85). The title of the novel and the film are interchangeable because both are feature films, the former which is being edited in the novel and the latter being edited by Beltrán's nostalgia.

Beltrán fetishizes the film and he sutures (or stitches) himself into the film as he does with other ones. Suturing takes place in the film and in the imagined world of Beltrán's family: "Thus it was that we learned we were the descendants of RKO, and then [the teacher] took us to the auditorium so we could see an old 16-mm copy of *It's a Wonderful Life*. I've since watched it many times over the years and, as I've come to understand it, I've come to realize that nothing is as moving as a film about the value of family when one doesn't have one of his own" (85). His life, the movie and Encino merge into an imagined world so that he says: "I felt myself extremely fortunate to have lived the first years of my life in a place colonized by Frank Capra and Jimmy Stewart and not by a group of stinking, resentful Spaniards who escaped from their native land to kill Indians and rob them of their riches at the other edge of the world" (s86).

His rejection of Chile inverts the expectations of readers accustomed to the usual anti-American political rhetoric which seems out of place in the cyberspatial, televisual world represented by DVD Planet. This younger cyberspace generation has assumed an apolitical and aliterary stance because

space, time and boundaries and notions of authorship have changed along with identity: “Las nuevas navegaciones cartográficas que pretenden reflexionar sobre el ‘lugar’ de la literatura en plena revolución *bio-tecno-comunicacional* incentivan un profundo estudio en torno a los potenciales cambios de esta disciplina en el contexto de dicha alteración ‘tecnocultural.’ En un ‘universo’ saturado de imágenes que anuncian –en más de una ocasión– crisis y finales que se propagan a velocidades vertiginosas, el objeto literario siente cuestionada su individualidad y su práctica discursiva concreta. Las fronteras estéticas se diluyen y la técnica radicalmente adquiere un ‘estatus’ de validez. La tecnología, por tanto, ya no es un vehículo de transmisión, sino que son *medios* que se ubican *entre los medios*, lo que abre una brecha o encrucijada en el amplio universo simbólico de la literatura. Así ya no es posible referirse a medios sino a *entre-medios* que mezclan imágenes, sonidos, textos y hasta experiencias biológicas que se encapsulan en la técnica” (Víctor Silvia Echeto).

Beltrán registers the Pinochet dictatorship like so many scenes from a movie: “In Encino, everyone hated Nixon and called him a liar and a cheat; in Chile, however, everyone seemed to love Pinochet and think of him as their savior. He wore dark glasses at all times, even on days when the sky was cloudy and ominous” (*The Movies of My Life*, 182). Pinochet resembles a Hollywood star with his signature sun glasses, a figure completely devoid of reality for him, a Baudrillardian hyperrealistic third order simulacrum. Politics, social activism, history, wars, revolution and dictatorships are all seen and “experienced” through a televisual filter. Beltrán cannot conceive of the historical reality so deeply felt by his relatives: “Every family member and distant relative who visited us told us incredible stories from the era of the UP and Allende, full of mystery and adventure, violence and heroism. Once, I mentioned that it was a shame that we had lost all that, that everything must have been much more entertaining back then, as if the entire country had been in the throes of some strange celebration. ‘Don’t ever say such a stupid thing again,’ snapped my grandmother in Spanish. I didn’t understand her, but I was struck by the tone of her voice” (183). Beltrán may not understand her, but the tone of her voice marks the dividing line between her experiential reality and his simulacral reality because it seems to him that she will do anything “so as not to lose what she felt belonged to her” (183).

Beltrán does not experience any crisis of representation because he has grown up in the post-crisis era when media have radically transformed the concepts of representation and the represented: “La ‘reproductibilidad técnica’ y la consiguiente pérdida del *aura* que enmarcaba la individualidad de la obra de arte (sobre la que alertaba Walter Benjamin), contemporáneamente ya no representa ni reproduce sino que *la copia se apoderó de todo el escenario*. El simulacro del ciberespacio radicaliza la experiencia ya desarrollada por la fotografía y el cine, que reproducían una realidad análoga -como realidad reproducida ‘al infinito’- la cual había tenido lugar una sola vez. Por tanto, lo que

se radicaliza en el ciberespacio es la inconsistencia de esa inmaterialidad que se produce en la superficie especular” (V́ctor Silvia Echeto).

Beltrán’s family turns into another third order simulacrum, a hyperreal image which replaces the reality of the family’s fragmentation and polarization between Chile and California: “My grandparents believed in the family, but they didn’t believe much in themselves, and it wasn’t easy to live together with two people who didn’t love each other and who---I soon decided---never had. The horror of being uprooted is recouped when the promise of life there, in the new place, is ostensibly greater. When the new country has something to offer you that yours could not: money, work, freedom, love, a heightened consciousness. But Chile had none of this. At least not to me.” (*The Movies of My Life*, 190-1). When Beltrán’s parents return to Chile, they have become simulacra of familial stability and unity: “It was already late when he touched down in Chile; he was already someone else---we all were different people---and the possibility of starting over, along with my mother’s obsession with saving us from the dangers that were lying in wait for us back in the United States, were becoming more and more remote. They didn’t know it yet, but I did” (191). The movie associated with this moment is *The Towering Inferno* which he sees in Santiago in 1974. Although he does not remember saying good-bye to his parents, he anxiously awaits another element of his televisual world: “I had been waiting for months to see *The Towering Inferno*. I’d seen the previews in Encino, and that day of its release in Chile just couldn’t come soon enough. But here I was, watching *The Towering Inferno* and thinking about what would happen if it was struck by an earthquake before it caught fire. The tower would collapse” (189-90).

Beltrán finally reaches the point in his televisual world where even the notion of some kind of collective experience with secondary orality disappears and he prefers to see movies alone: “*The Barefoot Executive* was the first movie I ever saw by myself, and the experience was so intense that from then on I began going to all the movies alone. El Huelén was practically empty. Nobody laughed when I laughed; maybe the subtitles weren’t saying the same things. Then, at the most comedic part of the movie, a complete and overpowering wave of nostalgia washed over me. I felt like I was back in the Valley, sitting in the shabby yet decadent Reseda Theater, and the emotions---the conflicting emotions---the fear of being in distant Santiago with only the certainty of never returning to keep me company, made me cry like I’d never cried before and like I would never cry again” (*The Movies of My Life*, 202-3). This overwhelming experience takes place in a movie theater and is “reproduced” in another theater in the United States, and one has the impression that it could be repeated in an endless series of simulacra: “Al ser un “sistema” acentrado, sin jerarquía, faculta la desterritorialización y los márgenes, sin conexión con una estructura central de control. Solamente se define por una circulación de estados, de esa forma, las ‘intensidades’ virtuales ocupan especularmente el ‘no lugar’ de la creación. Los laberintos enlazan indefinidamente, abren caminos y brechas, habilitan la discontinuidad y quiebran los rasgos evolutivos y jerárquicos de los textos. En el

ciberespacio, asimismo, podría llegar a adquirir validez el carácter polifónico de la obra, dialógico y de heteroglosia, al decir de Mijail Bajtin.” (Víctor Silvia Echeto).

Beltrán’s life and identity are continuously constructed and deconstructed through the different media (television, movies and email) so that neither one remains stable or unified. Since media and urban landscapes go hand in hand, Beltrán’s travels all take place in this land/techo/mediascape: “Narrative linked to mass culture is by definition urban. The intersection of narrative and mass culture is repeated throughout this century; the city is the ideal arena for the signs of mass culture to reign” (*Latin American Literature and Mass Media*, 211). On the one hand, Los Angeles epitomizes the origin of the media while Santiago constitutes a simulacrum of its American counterpart: “I’ve been here before. I’ve traveled this freeway; certain landmarks along the way come back into focus: the HOLLYWOOD lettering there on the hill in the distance, those endless cemeteries, and the Goodyear blimp circling above in the smog-infected sky” (*The Movies of My Life*, 153). Beltrán does not see Los Angeles; it comes into focus and he concentrates his gaze on the media-generated hyperrealism of the city.

Ironically, his taxi cab driver in Los Angeles is a Salvadoran man named Ambrosio Peña, whose company’s name is “Salvation Cars: We Are Your Salvation” (*The Movies of My Life*, 153). Los Angeles no longer offers any identity signs to be read: “The city has no center, no downtown, it so damn big that you can’t help but get lost; just about all my countrymen who come have no idea how to get around” (154). Place has been displaced by depthless simulacra of a cityscape: “The world has become a virtual space, it is just a mediating image. Cities have lost their uniqueness, their cultural or tourist charm; they have become just like everything else which is crossed by mediating experience. There are no longer spaces defined or perceived through their signs; a new space replaces the real. Cities have become ‘non-places,’ in the sense that Marc Augé uses the term: ‘then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place, supermodernity produces non-places. If a place is a space of identity, relation, historical bonds, then those non-places, characteristic products of postmodernity, are defined by the absence of such markers” (*Latin American Literature and Mass Media*, 212).

Beltrán loves earthquakes because they create a momentary collective experience in which everyone must participate: “Earthquakes are watersheds, distinct points, moments of inflection, collective mega-events that no one can avoid, not even those who aren’t in the habit of attending anything” (*The Movies of My Life*, 155). Earthquakes, unlike mediated experience in which Beltrán immerses himself, gives a person a momentary glimpse of reality: “Everyone remembers at least one earthquake, everyone has a particular angle or distinct detail that gives them the right to tell us a story that we know like the back of our hand, a story whose ending we already know full well” (155). Since Beltrán’s

profession of the seismologist is solitary, the inability to predict earthquakes relegates him to passive, non-experiential position in which his experience cannot be shared with others. Even earthquakes quickly turn into images which lose their reality.

Beltrán wants Ambrosio to take him on a tour of Los Angeles: “The downtown skyscrapers are in sight, the same image made famous through innumerable TV programs. La Gigante Tropical, 1090 AM, is blaring over the radio at top volume; the hyperactive hosts haven’t stopped talking about yesterday’s earthquake” (157). In this city of angels and images, “television emerges as a cultural mediator that disperses ‘fast, prepared’ discourses and offers a type of sterile learning.” (*Latin American Literature and Mass Media*, 224). Televisual media produce a zapping culture “which is oriented toward the greatest possible accumulation of high-impact images per unit of time; paradoxically, this gathering of images provides a low quantity of information per unit of time delivered through the disguise of a high quantity of information” (224).

One starts to realize that the second part of the novel is a repetition of the first part. The novel’s structure is open-ended, a procession of simulacra in which the movies of my life can repeat themselves endlessly. In the same vein the identity and life of the narrator are subject to recursivity, or infinite regress and repetition. Beltrán no longer looks to “mass culture with which to decodify the signs of the city, but rather [replaces] all contact with the outside world with mass culture” (*Latin American Literature and Mass Media*, 214). Beltrán’s immersion in mass media has deterritorialized all the components of daily life so that they all appear undifferentiated: “If media has homogenized experience, it has also made the virtual familiar, and daily life foreign; it provides the only safe haven in the face of a city that paradoxically feels dangerous and empty at the same time. All possibility of utopia has ended; indeed, *the non-place is the opposite of utopia*. It is interesting to note the paradox created by the displacement of terms: if utopia is the non-place as an imaginary, ideal, or desired space, the non-place is its opposite and characterized by the lack of any utopian project” (214). Santiago constitutes a simulacral non-place which Beltrán experiences like a spectator: “I had finally grasped Spanish, but I still didn’t feel a part of things, much less welcome. I was a changed person, and the person I had become didn’t seem to need other people around him. I didn’t want to feel a part of things, because I just wasn’t going to be there long. Chile was a transitional place, somewhere to pass through, an experience that would fascinate my future colleagues at Cal Tech” (*The Movies of My Life*, 213). Santiago cannot compete with the media center of Beltrán’s universe which is Los Angeles and Encino.

Beltrán lives suspended “between the zapping culture and the culture of real virtuality [which is] urbanized and computerized, distinguished by its character of uncertainty and ambiguity” (*Latin American Literature and Mass Media*, 222). Beltrán lives in a virtual universe, like so many of his generation, who “are thirty-something adults that move in the world of mass culture and are

forever behaving like adolescents. They know American movies inside and out, spend hours clicking the remote control, chase the show business lifestyle, search for fame as models, and find employment in the field of publicity. They are lone individuals that move about in an urban setting without values and in a dysfunctional family environment that offers them neither affection nor support” (223). In the end, Beltrán cannot escape from his mediated experience of life. While talking to his sister on the phone, he says that his father had moved back to Chile and lives near him without realizing it. So when he goes to see him, he will say: “Hi, Dad, it’s been a while.’ Maybe then I’ll invite him to a movie” (287).

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