

**Cosmopolitanism and Cultural Difference.**  
**On McOndoism and Other Global Subjects**

An interview with Alberto Fuguet on his book *The Movies of my Life*

By Karen-Margrethe Simonsen

*Alberto Fuguet, born 1974 in Santiago de Chile, literary writer, cultural journalist and filmdirector. For much of his childhood he lived in Los Angeles, USA. He has written a large number of novels, some of the most important being Mala onda (1991), Tinta Roja (1996), Las películas de mi vida (The Movies of my Life) (2003), Missing (2009) and Aeropuertos (2010). In 1996 he coined the term McOndo together with Sergio Gómez in order to describe a new generation of Latin American writers.*

‘McOndo’ is a term for a generation of Latin American writers after García Márquez. The term McOndo was coined in 1996 by Chilean writers Alberto Fuguet and Sergio Gómez in the introduction to an anthology of new Latin American stories entitled *McOndo*. According to Fuguet and Gómez, the concept of McOndo refers to a Latin American literature which is more global, realist and urban than the literature of magical realism. Alberto Fuguet has described his own novel *Las películas de mi vida/The Movies of My Life* (2003)<sup>1</sup> as McOndo, and it certainly depicts modern life without any reliance on myths or magic. It is global, or maybe post-global, since McOndo, just like the so called Walkman-generation, is post-everything: “post-yuppie, post-communism, post-baby-boom, post-ozone-layer.”<sup>2</sup>

However, *Las películas de mi vida* is not a celebration of modern globalization,

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<sup>1</sup> Alberto Fuguet, *Las películas de mi vida*, Santiago de Chile: Alfaguara Santillana A. S. 2004. All references to the Spanish are to this edition. (Original edition: Santiago de Chile: Aguilar Chilena de Ediciones, 2003). Alberto Fuguet, *The Movies of My Life*, translated by Ezra E. Fitz, New York: HarperCollins, 2003. All references to the English version are to this edition.

<sup>2</sup> Alberto Fuguet y Sergio Gómez: . *McOndo* 1996: “Introducción: Presentación del país McOndo”, [www.unc.edu/](http://www.unc.edu/), p. 1.

but rather a reflective narrative that shows a man's doubts about his cultural identity between two nations and between local and global communities. We meet Beltrán, the protagonist, who is an internationally renowned seismologist in the midst of a moment of crisis in his adult life, in a timewarp in Los Angeles, when he suddenly starts to think back on his life in Los Angeles and Santiago, Chile. His memories are structured around the memory of 50 movies. Like all memories, Beltrán's memories are only fragmentary and filled with insecurities. He remembers only partly what the movies are about, but he remembers who he saw the movies with, and from there his associative mind moves on to give us glimpses of important, amusing or weird situations from his life and his family story, which is a story split between the USA and Chile.

Because of the thousands of kilometers that separate us, I meet Alberto Fuguet only electronically. Although away on holiday, Alberto Fuguet answers all my questions politely and humoristically.

### **Global citizenship in McOndo land?**

When Fuguet and Sergio Gómez invented McOndo in 1996, they did so in response to the fact that the editor of the American *Iowa Review Magazine*, who planned a thematic issue on Latin American fiction, had refused a short story written by Alberto Fuguet on the grounds that it did not contain enough magic, that it could just as well have taken place in North America and therefore was not Latin American enough.

Alberto Fuguet and Sergio Gómez therefore set out to demonstrate that Latin American literature was a lot more than magical realism and the foreword to the anthology of New Latin American literature from 1996 was entitled, "Presentation of the land McOndo".<sup>3</sup>

As you may guess, McOndo is an ironic pun on Macondo, the mythological town where the events of García Márquez' *One Hundred Years of Solitude* from 1967 take place. The term McOndo also alludes to *La onda* ('the wave'), which refers to the introduction of modern rock music in Mexico in the 1960s. McOndo refers to a

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<sup>3</sup> Alberto Fuguet y Sergio Gómez, eds. *McOndo* 1996: "Introducción: Presentación del país McOndo", <http://www.unc.edu/~amejiasl/McOndo.htm>, visited August 9, 2011.

generation which is international from birth and whose cultural reference points are just as much North American pop culture as national tradition.

I do not begin the interview with a question about McOndo, because I have read that Alberto Fuguet is tired of answering questions about McOndo. However, when I finally ask how he sees the term today and whether it is still a fitting term for some of the developments of Latin American Literature, he answers affirmatively: “I believe it’s a concept of its time: 1996. But all in all, yes, I would say that the term is valid and Latin America is, to a certain extent, [McOndo] if one is open to understand the term and not use it as a stereotype”.

I go on to ask if he thinks that the novel *Las películas de mi vida* is McOndo, and he also confirms this: “I’d say the novel is, yes, a McOndo book. Why not? I do hope it’s more. But yes I think in the almost 15 years since the McOndo essay the continent has gotten more McOndo than Macondo. Hugo Chávez is McOndo. Perhaps the new term or the one that would fit now is less sexy or funny: liminal. Or just plain 21st Century.”

So what is it that makes *Las películas de mi vida* McOndo? The most immediate and obvious answer seems to be that it is because its protagonist, Beltrán, is a global citizen. He lives an urban life, likes American pop culture and has an international career. Due to his work as a seismologist, he is constantly on the move, and his cultural references are very much international. Therefore, he is a natural inhabitant of McOndo land. Maybe the slightly ironic and amusing way of telling the realistic stories of Beltrán’s life is also McOndo. However, if we examine the book more closely, things get a lot more complicated, since McOndoism is not the only kind of globalism in the book. To phrase it differently, maybe it is simply McOndoism that is more complicated, since it may also be related to liminal experiences, as Fuguet says above.

### **Earthquakes: a universal or cultural experience?**

Earthquakes play an important role in the book and in Beltrán’s life, both literally and metaphorically. Not only is Beltrán a seismologist, his grandfather is too, and from him he has learned that big earthquakes mark important events in history and places on the map. Later he learns that they play a metaphorical role. When, in the opening of the book, Beltrán finds himself in a momentary crisis in Los Angeles, he compares himself to a

Coca Cola bottle being thoroughly shaken, an experience which must be just as shocking as an earthquake. “Earthquakes are the Earth’s way of freeing itself from its demons. One must fear them, respect them, know what they are. [...] Only fear can protect us.” (p. 21). says Beltrán’s grandfather. (“Los terremotos son la manera que tiene la Tierra de liberarse de sus fantasmas. Hay que temerlos, respetarlos, saber qué son. [...] Sólo el miedo es capaz de protegernos.”( p. 28).) When I ask if the earthquake also is a metaphor of the risks of modern life, Alberto Fuguet (hereafter AF) answers:

AF: “Yes...exactly: I wanted to find a profession that was uniquely Chilean but also universal. And I noticed that there were many novels about politics and the coup but none about earthquakes and seismologists. I thought that said a lot about our culture. The book was reread and relooked after the 8.8. [The earthquake in Concepción Febr.27. 2010, ed.] I loved that in seismologic terminology, so many words seem metaphors. Like “the earth shakes under you” or “cracks”. No need to go magical-realist when we have the real thing.”

The earthquake seems to be a natural symbol for universal fear, perhaps even cultural fears that are so overwhelming that they exceed their cultural limits. If McOndo is a catchword for the international or cosmopolitan experience of belonging to a global culture, the earthquake seems to be essential universal: apparently beyond any cultural meaning and first and foremost a devastating bodily and mentally experience which can and will effect anybody within reach of its epicentre. Yet at the centre of the book *Las películas de mi vida* is neither the cosmopolitan McOndo nor the universal earthquake-experience, but rather the painful cross-cultural experience of belonging to two cultures.

### **Cross-cultural Crises**

In the novel, Beltrán is born in Chile but immigrates with his family to California when he is two years old, which means that English becomes his native tongue and North American culture his own culture. For the family the immigration means a social deroute. The father is from the comfortable middle class, his own father being a banker in Chile. When the whole family immigrates to the United States, they have to start from the

bottom again. The father starts cleaning airplanes and the grandfather becomes a taxi driver; the mother, who has to quit her university study of seismology, lives a life in isolation and depression on the outskirts of LA without being able to assimilate into American society. The family lives in Inglewood: “a run-down, semi-industrial neighbourhood, stacked with bodegas and Laundromats; an inexpensive, itinerant area that attracted immigrants fresh off the plane. (p. 61) (“un barrio chato, semiindustrial, atochado de bodegas y lavasecos; un sector de paso, barato, que atraía a inmigrantes recién bajados del avión.” (p. 71). In the alienated surroundings, the family comes to mean everything, but this ends up putting too much pressure on the family. Almost halfway through the book, Beltrán summarizes the situation in this way:

”Not having anyone besides family will end up breaking up that very family. If you put all your strength onto a single plate, it will have to give way. You don’t have to be a scientist to figure it out. And that is just what happened: the family cracked, and eventually the crack became a fault. Being left without a social class, without a circle of friends, the Solers had to invent new hatreds, angers, and fears to mitigate the fact that they had found themselves so far removed from the place that they once belonged to. (Or can someone ever really belong to a place? Don’t they have to accept the place they’re at?) The solution was as simple as it was drastic: stop being Latino. This, ultimately, condemned them doubly: it alienated them from those with whom they had a natural bond while at the same time precluding them from ever truly assimilating into the world of the gringos, who never considered them as equals.” (p. 113).

(”No contar con alguien más que la familia termina por fisurar a la propia familia. Si uno ejerce toda la presión en una sola placa, ésta necesariamente va a ceder. No ha que ser un científico para saberlo. Eso fue lo que sucedió. La familia se fisuró y la fractura terminó convirtiéndose en una falla. Al quedarse sin clase social, sin un círculo de amigos, los Soler tuvieron que inventarse nuevos odios, rabias y miedos que mitigaran la razón por la cual se hallaban tan lejos del lugar que les correspondía (¿a uno le *corresponde* un lugar?, ¿uno *tiene* que aceptar el lugar que le toca?). La solución fue tan sencilla como drástica: no sentirse latinos. Esto, al final, los condenó por partida doble al alejarlos de aquellos a

quienes los unía un lazo natural y al no ser capaces de integrarse en forma plena al mundo de los gringos, que nunca los consideraron como parte de ellos.” (p. 135))

The basic conflicts of this cross-cultural or intercultural situation keep undermining the unity of the family. For Beltrán, however, America is a sort of paradise. With his friends in the neighborhood, he enacts plots from American movies and he experiences all the thrills of the closeness to Hollywood. But suddenly, when he is 10 years old, in 1974, he is taken back to Chile. In Chile he never feels at home; he does not speak Spanish very well and does not understand the cultural codes of the country. He is haunted by the ghost of Oliver Twist (whom he has seen in a movie) and longs for the day when the family will move home to the States. This does not happen. Instead the family breaks up. His mother never felt at home in the States and will not return, and his father cannot settle down again in Chile, so he finally chooses exile instead of the family. In this de-familiarized Chilean home, the American pop movies become a channel for Beltrán's longing for his 'real' North American home. The American movies are thus not only a global culture but also a 'homely' culture for Beltrán.

In many ways, Beltrán is a typical migratory person who probably shares the pains of a double culture with millions of immigrants all over the world. What is interesting in this book is how Beltrán negotiates his identity between the double estrangement of his two national 'homes' by referring to international or even universal elements. Still there seems to be in the book a nostalgia for the real national home. I therefore ask Alberto Fuguet the simple question: if Beltrán would have been happier if he had stayed in the States? And why can't he be happy with having 'two cultures'?

AF: “Who knows? I guess that is the million dollar question every immigrant asks himself. What if...? It's a question that will always haunt him or anyone and that means that in many cases the country left behind is in a way turned into a myth. I'm not sure if Beltrán is or is not happy, that is not something I don't even know. I guess it's a mix. As in almost everyone. But I do understand that to live in two cultures is, on one hand, a blessing but on another, a sort of damnation since it leaves you in between, in a liminal

state, and to have two cultures makes you more adept to judge and criticize and have opinions about the other culture. A person who only has one cannot since he or she only sees what's around them.”

Alberto Fuguet's idea of the critical potential of the cross-cultural experience is similar to what Salman Rushdie once proclaimed to be the hallmark of the person in exile. However, while the writer Fuguet seems to believe in this critical potentiality, his literary protagonist Beltrán does not embrace it. He keeps longing for a community. In fact, his international life can both be seen as an attempt to escape the intercultural conflicts and the pains of not belonging to one specific culture *and* as an intent to establish a cosmopolitan community beyond any specific cultural identity.

Beltrán is constantly on the move, and one of the most significant meetings in the book is his meeting with Lindsay, whom he meets very shortly in an airplane. She shares his interest in movies and they have one of the most meaningful and engaged conversations in the book. Lindsay is the person who initiates Beltrán's *Bildungs-* project of remembering his life through the remembrance of movies. He feels a great sympathy and attraction, yet they never meet again. However, the novel's description of the meeting with Lindsay opens a glimpse of an international sense of community. Such meetings may be accidental and rare, but when they happen, they give us a feeling that the world is one and not divided. Also, when Beltrán flies, he flies with "LanChile" that welcomes the passengers on board by saying "Welcome to LanChile, member of the One World Alliance". This makes Beltrán think: "*One World*. Once we really *were* one single world. One continent: Pangea. And one ocean: Panthalassa." (p. 27).

("One World. Una vez fuimos un solo mundo, Un solo continente: "Pangea". Un solo océano: "Panthalassa" (p. 36) I therefore ask Fuguet if Beltrán's cosmopolitan lifestyle is a way of making the world one?

AF: "I have no idea. Perhaps. I believe it's a valid reading; I also believe it's slightly reading too much into it. As I've said before, I believe anyone can read a book the way they want and extract the conclusions they want. But, that said, I don't necessary need to agree to validate that reading. A writer writes and doesn't know exactly what or why he

or she is writing that.”

One of the reasons that my interpretation is perhaps “reading too much into it” is exactly that the cultural crisis, the ironies of being between two cultures, keeps haunting the protagonist. The relation between the universal, the cosmopolitan and the local never comes into balance.

### **Language and literature**

Language is an important tool for expressing identity. In the original version of *Las películas de mi vida*, English words and sentences are regularly incorporated. I ask if this is an intended strategy of creating a meeting between languages and cultures within the novel or a way of creating local (North American) flavor, but Fuguet denies this:

AF: It just conveys the way some people talk. All languages have words that have crept into theirs or to their particular regional language. In Chile we use, for example, *kuchen*, a German word to refer to a certain pie. We actually use it more than “pie.” But since English is the global language, also the language of mass media, mass culture, etc, it’s no wonder that my characters have a language that is a hybrid. It’s amazing to see how many Spanish words are now inside the English. I wrote the book in Chile, in Spanish, about a Chilean who grew up in the US. If I would have written it about a French-Chilean, I’m sure it would have had a French touch to it.

The mixing of languages thus testifies to a culture which in itself is a hybrid. He continues:

AF: “My native tongue is or was English but my language is Spanish, and it’s the language I think and feel and write. [Alberto Fuguet was born in Santiago Chile but lived the first 11 years of his life in Los Angeles, just like the protagonist, ed.]. Perhaps I’d like to do as a challenge or fun a screenplay. In fact, I did one: *Musica Campesina*, a bilingual movie I did in Nashville that will be ready for 2011. But language is what makes who you are and molds you. I really don’t believe people are bilingual at the core. You can



know many languages fluently but at the end, one wins. In my case, it's Spanish, by all means."

Language is thus a kind of homeland for the writer. But when I go on to ask about the local flavor of the book, he is insulted (though with a tongue in the cheek). After all, his rebellion against the branding of magical realism as a truly Latin American mode was a rebellion against the taste for exotic localisms. He polemically asks: "Would you ask a Swede if he is more than his local politics and his local flair or folklore. I believe people are people. The local is the universal: their fears, their joys, their day-to-day-routine. I can read. I'm not writing about aliens! I do hope you can relate to Beltrán and eventually forget where he is from."

And Alberto Fuguet goes on to underline the fact that he sees himself as a contemporary writer with international inspirations:

AF: "I consider myself a contemporary writer, late 20<sup>th</sup> century, early 21<sup>st</sup>, that writes in Spanish and from Chile, books that are quite local but also – I hope – universal. For me the local can't just be flavor or political topics. I don't feel the need to be exotic, just true to what I see and live. I guess my biggest influences are American – both North and South. From Hemingway and Bukowski and Carver and Irving to Puig and Vargas Llosa."

### **American movies: global or local culture**

As already mentioned, one of the successful aesthetic strategies of the book is to organize Beltrán's remembrance of his life around almost 50 movies, almost all of them American Hollywood movies, from *The Jungle Book* (1967) to *An Unmarried Woman* (1978), with a clear preference for catastrophe movies like *The China Syndrome* (1979), *Towering Inferno* (1974), *Earthquake* (1974), and not least *The Poseidon Adventure* (1972) about a tsunami which overturns a boat, drowning almost everyone in it, a scene which is later enacted by the boys in the neighborhood. Beltrán lives close to Hollywood, and the movies form a huge attraction for the children and are part of their daily life, in the sense

that one movie is shot nearby, an actor, Edward Everett Horton from *Lost Horizon*, lives next door to Beltrán, and one of the prestigious boys in the neighborhood, Drew, transforms his garage into a setting from a scary movie.

The strategy of making the movies structure Beltrán's remembrance works extremely well since it allows the narrator to connect details of his everyday life with the fantasies and dreams of his life. The question is what effect this has on the narrative in general and on the discussion of cultural identity. I therefore ask Fuguet why he has chosen American movies as inspiration for the structure of the book. He answers:

AF: They are not all American, but yes, almost 99%. The reason is simple: to be truthful to the facts. American movies dominate the world and in the time the novel is set, even more so. Perhaps now we are able to see more variety, but that is due to cable, internet, etc. A boy and a teenager in Latin America does not go to see local films or European art films. And as I said, in those days there were very few local movies (one every 4 or 5 years) and not that many European films that were aimed at young people. America is in a way the predominant media culture down here. Globalization in a way has meant that local production has grown, but in the '70s-'80s, it was all US stuff

KS: Interesting that you think that globalization has meant that local production has grown. Can you elaborate a little on this?

AF: Not only I think, it's a fact. Of course, in the last few years, the traditional outlets for local production and for more art or non-blockbusters have closed (I mean, cinemas) but new ways of exhibiting visual products have exploded: TV, cable, VOD, streaming, illegal torrents, DVDs, etc, etc. At least from what I know, in every Latin American country they are filming and making movies and shorts like crazy. Everybody is more concerned with globalization and less with the digital revolution."

Here Alberto Fuguet makes a reference to his homepage [www.cinepata.com](http://www.cinepata.com), which is a homepage for free downloads of new, experimental movies, and he continues:

“ Of course, to produce more does not mean to have more spectators. That is another matter but as is the case in any place in the world, every now and then a local movie strikes a chord and does commercially well. My first movie was a box office success. *Velodromo*, my second, did very good considering that we decided to show it for a week in one theater but we went on the road with it and it worked. The idea of bad Hollywood killing and eating all the local filmmakers sounds great as a horror story but it’s not true.”

KS: What is the status of the novel, as compared to the movie, in Latin America?

AF: Striving I believe. Again: perhaps not commercially. There is no Latin American Stieg Larsson but Vargas Llosa won the Nobel and Roberto Bolaño is a hit everywhere. More important, many novels and voices and aesthetics are taking place in Spanish.”

So in the end, Alberto Fuguet seems quite optimistic about the consequences of globalization. Though there is no naïvité concerning the mechanisms of the world market, he seems to envision a cultural situation where any ‘local’ culture has a chance of playing a role on the global scene. Indeed, he challenges the very distinction between local and global. Yet in his novel *Las películas de mi vida*, all the cultural ambivalences of global processes come to the fore. In this sense, McOndo land is ambiguous: in McOndo land we are all potential global citizens, but we may also feel the tension between the different cultural identities that we have made up for ourselves and the dilemmas inherent in the cultural hybridity which is also one of the consequences of globalism.