

Review

Reviewed Work(s): Carlos Monsiváis: Culture and Chronicle in Contemporary Mexico by LINDA EGAN

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mo dulzón que esconde un conformismo acomodaticio y trasnochado” (41–42). One wonders how many of the hundreds of stories the journalist Barangó-Solís actually read and whether there is much point in resurrecting a writer who sounds as limited as Vicente Díez de Tejada.

On the positive side, it is good to be introduced to short story writers one has not read: for example, Neus Aguado and Antonio Álamo, whom the authors of the panorama enthuse over. It is a pleasure to see that fine, versatile short story writer, Antonio Pereira, who has sometimes been unjustly neglected, get his due. Looking at the second part of the book, regarding the Spanish short story from 1939 to the end of the twentieth century, one has to say that the selection of authors for inclusion is, on the whole, judicious, though anybody knowledgeable about the field may feel that there are some unjust exclusions. I was saddened to find that there is no mention in the book of that pungent *cuentista* of the Generation of 1950, Daniel Sueiro, who wrote memorable stories. Sueiro died at a relatively young age but surely he does not deserve to be forgotten! Another unfortunate omission, to my mind, is that gifted writer, Lourdes Ortiz, who deserves to be singled out as much as several others included in the section on writers from 1975 to the end of the century.

El cuento español en el siglo xx is a splendid introduction to the subject, well-focused and full of interesting information. It is to be hoped that it will encourage readers to explore the neglected field of the twentieth-century short story, so rich, diverse and stimulating, so attuned to the inner movements of a century of Spanish social and psychological experience.

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LINDA EGAN. *Carlos Monsiváis: Culture and Chronicle in Contemporary Mexico*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press. 2001. xxvi + 278 pp.

If journalism is about impartiality, clarity, and self-effacement, then Carlos Monsiváis is not a journalist. He is brazenly partial, omnipresent in his own prose, and at times baroquely opaque – and yet he is arguably the greatest Latin-American journalist alive. This is only one of the several paradoxes characterizing Monsiváis’s life and career. He is as hard to pin down as the mercurial genre that he has helped define to the point where one can say that he embodies it: the contemporary *crónica*, Latin America’s signature brand of literary journalism. But even though Monsiváis has been a prominent Mexican writer, critic, and public intellectual for almost four decades, very few scholars, least of all literary critics, have dared to approach him in any rigorous manner. This fact alone makes Linda Egan’s book a ground-breaking work.

This monograph is divided in two main parts. The first explores Monsiváis's explicit and implicit theories of popular culture, as well as the characteristics of the *crónica* as a specific genre of literary non-fiction. The second part is a systematic review of his five principal collections of *crónicas*. Taken as a whole, this book is an indispensable reader's guide to Monsiváis's labyrinthine oeuvre. Egan provides a comprehensive assessment of Monsiváis's work, showing a clear line of development leading from *Días de guardar* (1970) to *Los rituales del caos* (1995). At the same time, she very skilfully demonstrates how to approach his difficult texts. Throughout her book, Egan produces an exemplary series of close readings of a number of key *crónicas*, in which she takes us, step by step, through the many modulations of Monsiváis's narrative voice, dissecting his discourse with painstaking patience and accuracy.

In order to read Monsiváis "properly" (83), Egan argues, one has to be aware of what the *crónica* means in generic terms, and how it is to be distinguished from "related genres such as the news article, the essay and the short story" (xv). Bearing this in mind, in chapter four and five Egan outlines a "poetics of the contemporary chronicle" (xxiii) that identifies the genre's principal traits. While belonging to the field of journalism and related to the essay, the *crónica* supersedes both; although the *crónica* mimics literary fiction in terms of technique (narration, dialogue, interior monologue), tone (irony, parody) and language (tropes, diglossia), it nevertheless claims to tell the truth; and this truth claim, supported by textual and paratextual markers (such as photos or connections to the daily news), is ultimately grounded in the *credibility* of the *cronista* as "expert witness" (6) and "ethical being" (6). The *crónica*, finally, is a critical and essentially progressive genre in so far as it registers and celebrates social change, particularly democratization, at the grassroots level.

For Egan the analysis of the *crónica* as a full-fledged genre of its own is closely linked to a defense of the *crónica as literature*. She convincingly argues that the *crónica's* non-fictional status should not prevent readers and critics from taking it seriously or including it in the canon. Egan compares her effort in this respect to John Beverley's vindication of *testimonio*, another notoriously undervalued Latin-American non-fiction genre. However, while Beverley posits the *testimonio* "against literature" as part of a more profound critique of literature as an institution, Egan chooses to "argue for inclusion of the *crónica* on formal (aesthetic) grounds" (xix). She thus ends up paradoxically strengthening the high-cultural institution Beverley aims to undermine. But canonizing the *crónica* on aesthetic grounds as "high" literature seems in some way to undercut the political force of Monsiváis's oeuvre, dedicated to pointing out the value, originality, and democratic potential of "low" cultural forms (77). It is true that Monsiváis has argued for years that the *crónica* should be taken more seriously, but one doubts he has meant for it to be read as "high art" (35).

To be sure – as Egan also points out – this paradox is to a large extent inherent in Monsiváis’s own work. He writes *about* popular culture but clearly not *for* a popular audience (78). His baroque, hermetic style, abounding in high- and low-cultural references, sometimes comes close to a journalistic version of *cultismo*. Egan’s competent readings only serve to bring home the mind-boggling complexity of Monsiváis’s texts. Although Egan devotes attention to the aspect of reception, this paradox remains unresolved in both Monsiváis’s work and Egan’s own, in so far as her precise recipes for reading Monsiváis “properly” presuppose an extraordinary literary competence on the part of the reader (28, 92, 119). One ends up wondering if Monsiváis has ever been able to reach an audience worthy of him. In a similar way, since Egan’s poetics of the *crónica* is almost exclusively based on texts by Monsiváis, the reader is left with the impression that “Monsi” is the only one that has truly mastered the genre.

The awe that Monsiváis inspires among scholars springs in part from the awareness that he is as “up to date” as anyone on cutting-edge academic research, while at the same time managing to transcend it. Indeed, one of Egan’s main arguments in the first part of her book is that Monsiváis, for all his wit, metaphor, and self-deprecating irony, is in fact a highly sophisticated theorist of Latin American popular culture. Although much of his theory is implicit, Egan “extracts” it to match it up with prominent names and currents of contemporary cultural theory, ranging from Walter Benjamin and Bakhtin to Foucault, Gramsci, Ong, Said, dependency theory, and feminism (50–59). In a way this aspect of the book is the least satisfying, because it gives the impression that Monsiváis’s credentials need to be validated by “proving” parallels between his work and fashionable scholarly theory. Likewise, there is something forced about Egan’s own confessedly eclectic theoretical apparatus – which, apart from her strong grounding in narratology, includes postcolonialism, postmodernism, structuralism, poststructuralism, deconstruction, New Historicism, and cultural studies (xxi-xxii). The theory sometimes distracts from Egan’s sharp textual analyses rather than informing them. Nevertheless, this is an important, original study worthy of its subject. It also has the great virtue of leaving the reader with an irresistible appetite for more Monsiváis.

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