

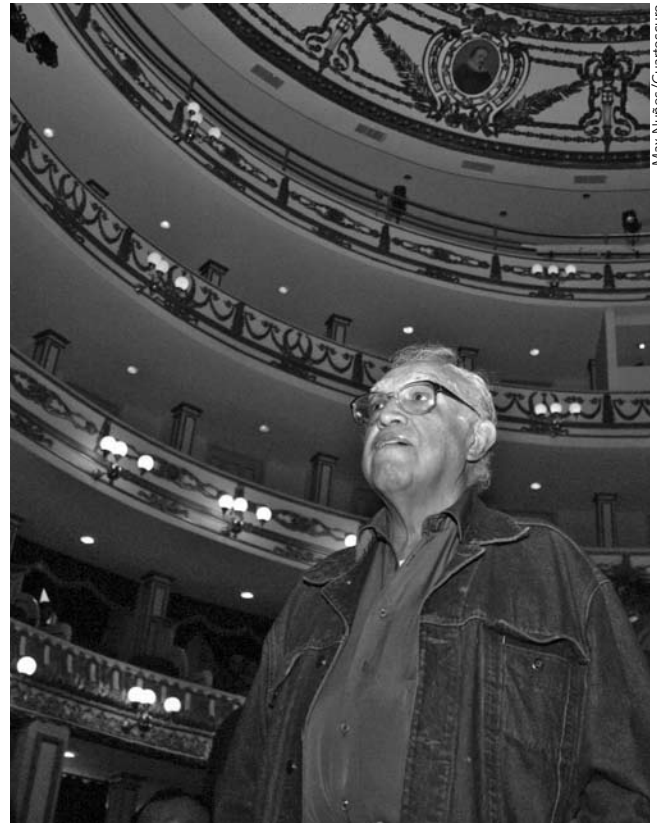
# Carlos Monsiváis Catechizing Mephistopheles<sup>1</sup>

Adolfo Castañón\*

“So, do you believe in God?” Monsiváis asked me.

“I don’t know,” I answered. “I only know that  
He believes in me and in you, otherwise  
we wouldn’t even be here.”

“Death is a fiesta and a day for staying in to observe it:  
an empty space on the calendar in  
whose void we all participate.”



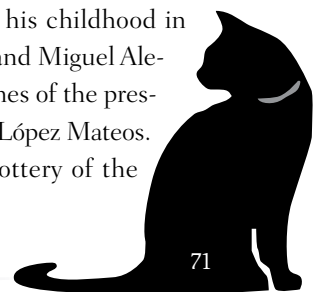
Max Nuñez/Cuartoscuro

A few weeks ago, Carlos Monsiváis participated in a colloquium about Alfonso Reyes at El Colegio de México. He said that Reyes was more widely known than his writings. As he left the conference, I told him that more than 60 anthologies had been published of Alfonso Reyes’s literary work. Now I think that, just like Alfonso Reyes, Carlos Monsiváis is very well known, but read very little. It is up to us, his readers and editors, to prepare the written road to re-transmit his legacy.

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\*Mexican writer and editor.

Monsi, Carlos, Carlos Monsiváis, Carlos Monsiváis Aceves (1938-2010), the prodigious son that it fell to Doña Esther to give birth to, was born in Mexico City when the Spanish Civil War was about to end and World War II was about to begin. Just like José Emilio Pacheco and Sergio Pitol, the other two musketeers of the threesome whose D’Artagnan would be Elena Poniatowska, he lived his childhood in the Mexico of Manuel Ávila Camacho and Miguel Alemán, and his long adolescence in the times of the presidents named Adolfo: Ruiz Cortines and López Mateos. It would fall to them to manage the lottery of the





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PRI's presidentialism—in allusion to Gabriel Zaid—indirectly consolidated by Marshall Plan proceeds/loans.

It is well known that thanks to his heroic, indestructible mother, nourished with the unleavened bread of Biblical culture, the child who was Carlos memorized a good part of the Bible, particularly the Old Testament in the classical translation by Cipriano de Valera and Casiodoro de Reyna.

This training led him to being a precocious dissident: an already cultured, Protestant child in the midst of intransigent, nationalist Catholics. Very soon he arrived at the National Autonomous University of Mexico. He studied economics, law, letters, philosophy, history. He was fellow students and made friends with economists like Rolando Cordera, lawyers like Carlos Fuentes and Porfirio Muñoz Ledo, and a miscellaneous group made up of Javier Wimer, Rafael Ruiz Harrell, Margarita Peña, the Galindo sisters,<sup>2</sup> Marco Antonio Montes de Oca, Arturo Azuela, and Daniel Reséndiz Núñez, among many others. He collaborated in student magazines like *Medio siglo* (Half Century), of which he was the managing editor. Doctor—that's what they called him—Elías Nandino opened the doors of his magazine *Estaciones* (Seasons) to Carlos Monsiváis and José Emilio Pacheco. This is where young Carlos would publish some of

his first essays and articles. A little later, he collaborated at the University Radio and in the *Revista de la Universidad de México* (Magazine of the University of Mexico), edited by Jaime García Terrés and in the company of a brilliant generation of writers and artists like Jorge Ibarguengoitia, Juan García Ponce, Emilio García Riera, Vicente Rojo, Manuel Felguérez, José Luis Cuevas, José de la Colina, and José Luis Ibáñez, among many others.

Before he turned 30, his fine-tuned, refined vocation for letters led him to publish *Antología de la poesía mexicana del siglo XX* (Anthology of Twentieth-Century Mexican Poetry) (1966), which became an indisputable literary reference work. Film and criticism, poetry and

humor, politics and caricature, the novel and sociology, legitimate theater and *teatro de carpa*,<sup>3</sup> the visual arts, the history of art: all this and more seemed to interest this author who defies classification, a dedicated reader and curious wanderer, a son of the prodigious Portales neighborhood.

In 1968, his contemplative itinerary would become an activist one and the road to Damascus of the committed spectator. The 1968—and subsequent years'—experience of violence and political persecution would mature in Monsiváis a civic conscience and a incensed apocalyptic design *vis-à-vis* political institutions. That substantive experience would accompany him to the end of his days, as proven in his books about '68, published jointly with journalist Julio Scherer. His book of articles and essays, emblematically entitled *Días de guardar* (Days to Stay In and Observe) is a token of that moment. Emblematically: "to stay in," an allusion to fasting and a curfew, a tacit evocation of both abstinence and repression. Along with José Emilio Pacheco and Vicente Rojo, Carlos Monsiváis was invited by the charismatic Fernando Benítez to head a weekly literary supplement. He would end up accepting the editor's post in the weekly magazine *Siempre!* (Always), founded by José Pagés Llergo. There, Monsiváis would reveal one of his many virtues: that of editor and master of ceremonies, the shepherd of the words of others, and head-hunter (a term that had yet to come into vogue), importer and translator of esteemed and precious goods of the imagination and, above all, that of a surreptitious commentator on today's world. It would be in the pages of *Siempre!* that Monsiváis would launch a camouflaged, implacable "war machine" that was simultaneously both amus-



ing and critical —and critical because it was amusing: the section “Por mi madre, bohemios” (For My Mother, Bohemians), a kind of forensic *sottisier*. There, the committed audience could take comfort by dotting the “i’s” and the “j’s” of the silly, unconscious, or even intentional statements squandered on the political stage by different pachyderms, flatfoots, parasites, and sea-urchins that give voice to our country’s political and business class, and would ironically help to “document our optimism.” Carlos Monsiváis had found a vein whose course would lead him to the most out-of-the-way dives of the second-rate members of the dominant entrepreneurial and financial class. At the same time, in this famous, unforgettable section, Carlos would display his stylistic talents as the author of impeccable, parodies that bloodied their subjects, incisive vignettes and written portraits of both mentionable and unmentionable public figures —as Jesús Silva-Herzog Márquez said, his art as a portraitist is as impeccable as it is implacable.

Together with oblique denunciation, he gave himself up to the healthy exercise of the parody of manners, gestures, and affected displays of emotion. Monsiváis’s Protestant roots made him a kind of smiling, critical knight errant. He himself would say in his *Autobiografía precoz* (Precocious Autobiography) how passionately he had read John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* as a child. This reference is by no means trivial if we realize that Bunyan’s book is the root of the modern novel and that Franz Kafka’s *The Trial* can be read and taken apart in the light of this parabolic piece of fiction. Is it possible to read Carlos Monsiváis’s ebullient writing as a kind of echo of the books by Franz Kafka and John Bunyan?

Carlos Monsiváis’s coronation as the editor of *La Cultura en México* (Culture in Mexico) supplement —the place where this author met him in 1974— would confirm him as a kind of guru and —for some leftists— the successor of the Divine Voice that watches over children from the clouds. It would also help him open the doors to the media, radio and television, pseudo-sunlit places from which that never-rancorous spider named Carlos Monsiváis would greet his growing audience.

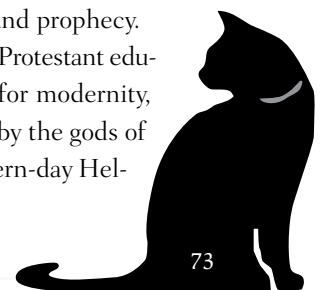
Little by little, Carlos’s style began to change and become cleaner and, if it can be put this way, classical: the baroque, the slight of hand, and the affected displays of emotion of a parody of consciousness began to turn into a transparent mask. The founder of the new Mexican journalism —a mix of mestizo, criollo, and “criollo-naco”—<sup>4</sup> began to transform himself, and the essayist of *Días de guardar* and *Escenas de*

*pudor y liviandad* (Scenes of Modesty and Levity) would give way to the prose-writer of *Entrada libre* (Free Admission), one of his most lucid books, *Aires de familia* (The Family Air), and *Imágenes de la tradición viva* (Images of the Living Tradition), works in which the author seems more concerned about the survival and staying power of his discourse than about closely conforming to the mannerisms of a suburban Oscar Wilde. Better known as a writer of journalistic articles than as the author of fiction and fables, Monsiváis also has an imaginative strain in him like the one oriented by the *Nuevo catecismo para indios remisos* (The New Catechism for Remiss Indians), in which the charming trickster who seduces with his flute is capable of sending all us lemmings, denizens of the library, over the cliff.

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Definitive in this process was his reading-based friendship with Daniel Cosío Villegas, a figure Monsiváis is not usually associated with, but with whom he does have affinities in his vigorous defense of secularism and civic probity, with Octavio Paz, and I would even say, with Gabriel Zaid, his loyal antipode. His simultaneous participation in the broadcast media and the press, his missionary vocation that prodded him to take the roads of a kind of shaman’s dance around its hounded prey —the press?— his undoubted asceticism and self-denial, his searing sense of humor and his vocation for the joy crystallized in a poem and in a work of art, his mania for libraries, his avid collecting that prompted him to set up a space like the Museo del Estanquillo (Corner Store Museum): all this made Carlos Monsiváis an enigmatic figure, tense and, like someone hung on a cross whose horizontal would be the instant but fleeting and forgetful movement of the media, and whose vertical would be represented by the line of community civic consciousness and of the written word in code that was both testimony and prophecy.

More than Christian, and despite his Protestant education, Monsiváis’s was a culture avid for modernity, thirsty for values like those personified by the gods of Greek mythology and inherited by modern-day Hel-





lenists —from Walter Page on— and very particularly by a handful of devotees of Greece who made up the Athenaeum group, headed by Pedro Henríquez Ureña and Alfonso Reyes. While his virtues as a disinterested spectator and teacher have already been pondered, his capacity for reading all the newspapers before eight in the morning, his sense of humor, and his almost instinctive ability to reduce to the absurd the plots and scenery of book-learned and political consciousness and the dust of the hours projected on cinema and television screens, the intellectual, creative vigor of that treatise-writer of practical and theoretical ease—both read and experienced—means that Monsiváis continues to be an enigmatic, charismatic figure in terms of what was easy and what was difficult for him, his faltering, temptations, and exaltations. An untranslatable figure, like cinema before Lumière, whose glow may have to be explained to future generations who are already peeking around the bend in the river. That won't be so difficult. In Carlos Monsiváis's alternative current are combined the Burrón-type comic book,<sup>5</sup> and theology à la Bultmann,

red-white-and-green gossip,<sup>6</sup> the unforgettable anecdote, and Ernst Bloch and Walter Benjamin's principle of hope. These are some of the reasons that feed the fire of that civic fiesta of the word that was and is his polymorphous writing. **MM**

NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> This article (ver con crisis)
- <sup>2</sup> The author refers to Carmen and Magdalena Galindo, currently professors at the UNAM —of literature and economics, respectively— and well-known journalists. [Editor's Note.]
- <sup>3</sup> *Teatro de carpa* ("tent theater") is a form of popular theater, particularly prevalent in Mexico City in the 1920s and 1930s, that mixes circus spectacles, political satire, and vaudeville-type acts. [Translator's Note.]
- <sup>4</sup> Criollo refers to those born in Mexico but of Spanish descent (whites) during the colonial period, while *naco*, originally used to denote indigenous people, has now become a more general disparaging term for someone who is crude and ignorant, with the obvious racist connotations. [Translator's Note.]
- <sup>5</sup> This refers to a very popular Mexican comic book, *La familia Burrón* (The Burrón Family) that depicts the lives and idiosyncrasies of a typical urban, lower-middle-class family. [Translator's Note.]
- <sup>6</sup> This is a reference to the colors in the Mexican flag. [Translator's Note.]

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