From *1984* to *Sueños digitales*:
The Dystopian Novel in the Age of Globalization

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In 1949, George Orwell's novel *1984* was received by readers and critics as both a reaction to the political, economic and social changes that had taken place in the world after World War II and a warning of their possible consequences. Fifty years later, José Edmundo Paz Soldán updated this classic dystopia with *Sueños digitales* (2000). Like *1984*, Paz Soldán's novel can be read as both a response to the changes that have taken place in the world since the end of the Cold War and a warning of the consequences these might bring. *Sueños digitales*, however, is much more than a simple rewriting of *1984*. Unlike Orwell's futuristic tale, Paz Soldán sets his novel in the present and, rather than warning us of what might happen in the future, he opens the reader's eyes to the contradictory effects of globalization and technological development on today's society. Hence, *Sueños digitales* is a poignant commentary on the socio-political situation of contemporary Spanish America and a wake-up call for the world at large.

I. Global Neoliberalism

As Francis Fukuyama observed in "The End of History?", by the end of the 1980s it was "hard to avoid the feeling that something very fundamental has happened in world history" (3). This "something" that he sensed was the end of the Cold War, which he

interpreted as the "unabashed victory of economic and political liberalism" (3). To Fukuyama, the end of the conflict between the Eastern socialist states and the Western democracies indicated "the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government" (4). Therefore he concluded that Western Civilization had reached the "end of history." Whether or not one agrees with Fukuyama's interpretation of history, it is undeniable that the globalization—or the global spread of neoliberalism—that has taken place over the last twenty years has profoundly changed the world, and especially Spanish America.

In his introduction to Noam Chomsky's *Profit Over People* (1999), political analyst Robert W. McChesney explains that "neoliberalism" is a term used by academics, politicians and economists to refer to "the defining political economic paradigm of our time" (7), which consists of neo-conservative politics and economic processes. It is a doctrinal system that was created as a response to the Spanish America debt crisis and was officially presented in the 1990s by Washington-based international financial institutions. When Latin American countries began defaulting on their foreign debt payments in the late 1980s, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank (WB) and "the bank's 51 per cent owner, the US Treasury" (Palast 50) agreed to provide emergency loans under the condition that the nations in trouble adopt a neoliberal structural adjustment (or austerity) program drafted by their economists. This model is also known as the "Washington Consensus" because, as Daniel Yergin and Joseph Stanislaw argue in *The Commanding Heights* (1998), although it was developed "by Latin Americans, in response to what was happening both within and outside the region" (236), at the end of the twentieth century, Washington was making policy for Latin

America. That is, given that "[m]any of [the Latin Americans experts responsible for the policy] had gone north to earn their PhD's at institutions such as Harvard, Stanford, and Chicago" (237) their ideas more closely resembled those of Washington's pundits than those of Latin American governments.

For Noam Chomsky, the "Washington Consensus" can be understood as a system that consists of "an array of market-oriented principles designed by the government of the United States and the international financial institutions that it largely dominates, and implemented by them in various ways" (19). More precisely, as former World Bank chief economist Joseph Stiglitz explained to investigative reporter Greg Palast during a series of interviews, the "Washington Consensus" is implemented through the "Country Assistance Strategy" for poor nations developed by the IMF and the WB, and basically consists of a four-step program. The first step is the privatization of state-held companies and industries. This means selling electricity, gas, water, telecommunications companies, etcetera, to foreign investors (and consequently eliminating a poor nation's most important sources of revenue). The second step is the liberalization of capital markets that, in theory, "allows capital investment to flow in and out" of a country (Palast 51). Yet the reality is that most often "[c]ash comes in for speculation in real estate and currency, then flees at the first whiff of trouble. A nation's reserve can drain in days, hours. And when that happens, to seduce speculators into returning a nation's own capital funds, the IMF demands these nations raise interest rates to 30 per cent, 50 per cent and 80 per cent" (51). Step three of the IMF's "Country Assistance Strategy" is "Market-Based Pricing" which, as Palast puts it, is "a fancy term for raising prices on food, water and domestic gas" (51). This, in turn, leads to what Stiglitz calls the "IMF

riots," such as "the Bolivian riots over water prices in April 2000 and, in February 2001, the riots in Ecuador over the rise in domestic gas prices imposed by the World Bank" (51-52). According to Palast, "[t]he IMF riots (and by riots I mean peaceful demonstrations dispersed by bullets, tanks and tear gas) cause new panicked flights of capital and government bankruptcies" (52). The fourth and final step of the IMF and WB austerity plan is free trade according the rules of the World Trade Organization (WTO). However, while North Americans and Europeans force poor countries to eliminate their trade barriers, they do everything they can to protect their own markets against Third World agriculture (52).

Notwithstanding the importance of the "Washington Consensus" and the "Country Assistance Strategy," experts agree that the global spread of neoliberalism would not have been possible without the technological progress achieved in the last two decades of the twentieth century. As Mark W. Wartofsky observes in "Technology, Power, and Truth," since the end of the Cold War, the entire planet is being revolutionized due to "the proliferation of a global and systematically-linked high technology, which is rapidly becoming a dominant motor force in the economic, political, military and social contexts, on a scale and at a pace hitherto unimagined" (15). For his part, in *Rebels Against the Future*, Kirkpatrick Sale argues that the "powerful and sweeping alteration of the industrial world" that has taken place in the past twenty years is the direct result of "technological changes that go to the very core of our lives, creating a revolution in work and thought, politics and markets, culture and leisure" (206-07). Likewise, in "La época de la cultura y la cultura de la época," Argentineans Mario Margulis and Marcelo Urresti underscore the importance of technology in the spread of

neoliberalism when they declare that in Latin America "[e]l desarrollo técnico en el campo informativo y comunicacional ha sido motor de otras transformaciones en el plano económico, financiero, cultural y político" (20). As Paz Soldán's *Sueños digitales* suggests, one noticeable cultural change is that young Latin American artists are increasingly using their work to address the important social issues that have arisen as a result of neoliberalism and technological development.

In *Globalization: The Human Consequences* (1998), Zygmunt Bauman explains the importance of information technology in the functioning of the neoliberal model of development and in the establishment of what has been called the "new global order." In the economic sphere, new and instantaneous information systems have given a new type of mobility to the world's corporations. Consequently, "the freedom to move, perpetually a scarce and unequally distributed commodity, fast becomes the main stratifying factor of our late-modern or postmodern time" (2). The development of computer systems, especially digital networks such as the World Wide Web, has allowed "information to travel independently from its bodily carriers—and also from the objects of which the information informed" (14). This is important because those who control the world's economy—the large transnational corporations, the investors in the international financial markets, the transnational financial institutions, etcetera—rely on the information provided by these systems in order to make investment decisions that end up affecting people across the world. The new information systems also present the opportunity for new forms of exploitation because, whereas the employees and suppliers of a given business or industry come from the local population—people that live and work where the plant is actually located—, the owners are in no way tied to the physical

space in which their businesses operate. A company belongs to the shareholders who invest in it, and it is their prerogative to move the company and their investment "wherever they spy out or anticipate a chance of higher dividends, leaving all others-- locally bound as they are--the task of wound-licking, damage-repair and waste-disposal" (8). The lack of attachment to space gives investors the freedom "to exploit and abandon [the local community] to the consequences of that exploitation" (9). As a result, although many have profited from the new business and investment practices made possible by technology, the majority of the world's population has not.

The neoliberal economic practices made possible by technological development have also led to some important social and political changes. As Argentinean critic Adriana Sarraméa explains in "Antropología de lo político," the new economic order "ha hecho anacrónicos los movimientos nacionales de los trabajadores y sus alianzas internacionales. Los sitios de producción se trasladan con facilidad y las políticas laborales son demasiado 'flexibles' para que los trabajadores organizados tengan éxito resistiendo al capital" (94). For his part, Bauman considers the combination of neoliberal economic policies and the development of new high-tech information systems the leading cause of the increasing disparity between the world's powerful and the poor. Thus, as Jacques Ellul declares in "The Present and the Future," "we must [. . .] realize that the true powers in our time are no longer the rich countries or the populous ones, but those possessing the technologies" (354). The countries that have real power today are "those that have the technological instruments that are capable of the technological progress that is confused with *development*. It is not real development, but simply growth, a growth of power" (354; emphasis in original).

Undoubtedly, together neoliberalism and technology have radically altered the world. On the positive side, they have provided the means for Spanish America and other formerly peripheral areas to enter the new global arena of political and economic activity. On the negative side, however, whereas they have led to the growth of certain sectors of the region's economy, recent reports—the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace's *NAFTA's Promise and Reality* (November 2003) and *The Economist*'s "Latinobarómetro" poll (August 2004) among others—reveal that they have not fostered real development. As Herman Daly explains in "The Role of the Multilateral Lending Agency," understanding the difference between the terms "to develop" and "to grow" is important when dealing with the industrialization or modernization of a nation because growth or "[t]he size increase has physical material dimensions, whereas development is a qualitative improvement" (14). That is, Daly defines the term "to develop" to mean "to expand or realize the potentialities of, and to bring gradually to a fuller, greater, or better state" (14), while the verb "to grow" means "to increase in size by the addition of material through assimilation or accretion" (14). A secondary yet also important consideration when speaking of these phenomena is that developing and growing are actions directed toward something, which is usually a standard set by the United States or Western European countries.

Furthermore, neoliberalism and technological development have not affected all Spanish American nations and their societies in the same manner.[1] Although some countries appear to have enjoyed a certain degree of economic growth in the past two decades, the area as a whole has not experienced significant development. The new

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[1] Although the political, social and cultural differences that exist between individual nations make it difficult to speak of Spanish America as a whole, the countries in the area share enough characteristics that allow for a certain degree of generalization.

information technologies have also been fundamental in the implementation of an economic model that has proven to be detrimental to most Spanish American societies. The disparity between rich and poor has increased because only the region's elites can afford the technologies required to actively participate in the global economy. The majority of Spanish America's population does not have access to the new and ever-changing technology and therefore is unable to take advantage of the new economic system.

This is why, in my opinion, the push for the globalization and technological development that took place at the end of the twentieth-century can be interpreted as a utopian scheme gone awry. As Margulis and Urresti observe, the term "globalization" suggests a certain equality; "subyace en este concepto una equidistancia e igualdad de oportunidades entre los distintos lugares del planeta, que se pondrían en acción en plano de lo económico, lo financiero, lo comunicacional y lo político" (23). As a matter of fact, the supporters of neoliberalism claim that its implementation on a global level will create a new and more just economic order in the world. Their reasoning is that it will lead to a never-before seen expansion of First World economic activity in the short run, with the benefits "trickling down" to the rest of the world in the long run. They present neoliberal policies as free market initiatives that are meant "to encourage private enterprise and consumer choice, reward personal responsibility and entrepreneurial initiative and undermine the dead hand of the incompetent, bureaucratic and parasitic government" (McChesney 7).

In reality, however, "[d]inero, comunicación, conocimiento y poder se concentran en un puñado de naciones del Norte (simbólico y geográfico) que también son las sedes

de las empresas transnacionales más ricas" (Margulis and Urresti 23). As Jerry Mander explains in "Facing the Rising Tide," the beneficiaries of this new order—business leaders, First World governments, and a "newly powerful centralized global trade bureaucracy" (3)—offer the public a consistently positive vision of initiatives that, in fact, are nothing more than "large-scale versions of the economic theories, strategies, and policies that have proven spectacularly unsuccessful over the past several decades wherever they have been applied" (3). The reason for this, according to McChesney, is that under neoliberalism "a relative handful of private interests are permitted to control as much as possible of social life in order to maximize their personal profit" (7). And its consequences have been mostly negative for the majority of the world's population as it has led to "a massive increase in social and economic inequality, a marked increase in severe deprivation for the poorest nations and peoples of the world, a disastrous global environment, an unstable global economy and an unprecedented bonanza for the wealthy" (McChesney 8). Similarly, in *Patas arriba* (1998), Eduardo Galeano points out that the global economy has never been more undemocratic and more unjust: "[e]n 1960, el veinte por ciento de la humanidad, el más rico, tenía treinta veces más que el veinte por ciento más pobre. En 1990, la diferencia era de sesenta veces. Desde entonces, se ha ido abriendo la tijera: en el año 2000, la diferencia será noventa veces" (28).

Not surprisingly, as in the rest of the developing world, despite the utopian predictions of the "Washington Consensus," IMF and WB, neoliberalism and technological development have had some very contradictory effects on Spanish American society. The crisis that shook Argentina at the beginning of the twenty-first century illustrates this point. After the oil crisis of the 1970s, Argentina—like most Latin

American nations—began borrowing from abroad the money necessary to finance developmental projects (D'Agostino 81). With the recession of the 1980s, interest rates on its outstanding loans rose while, at the same time, demand for Argentina's traditional exports dropped. This drop in revenue left the country unable to make payments on its debt. As Thomas J. D'Agostino explains, "to prevent countries from defaulting on their loans, the international financial community responded to the mounting debt crisis by renegotiating debts and extending additional loans" (83). Unfortunately, this led Latin American governments further and further into debt and, a decade later, they found that they had no other choice than "to negotiate with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to receive emergency loans" (83). These were granted under the condition that the borrowing nations implement austerity plans, which in Argentina, as elsewhere, "proved as onerous as the debt crisis itself" (83).

Indeed, in "Soberanía monetaria o desempleo," Eduardo Conesa (an Economics and Finance professor at the University of Buenos Aires), explains that, at the turn of the century, Argentina experienced the worst economic crisis of its history and "quedó al borde de la desintegración nacional" (1). In 2001, its gross national product fell 5% and in 2002 it declined a further 11% (1). At the same time, unemployment and underemployment surpassed the 40% mark (1). Ironically, in a nation that is capable of producing 70 million tons of grain annually, the majority of the population was hungry, and Argentineans that could no longer afford to buy food resorted to looting supermarkets. Thousands more lined up at the doors of the Spanish and Italian embassies hoping to emigrate to prosperous European countries. For Conesa, two factors led to this crisis: "(a) la falta de comprensión por parte de la dirigencia política y económica acerca

de la esencia y la función de la moneda y (b) las implicancias de un régimen legal híbrido e incoherente" (1).   More precisely, to him, the problem was that politicians and economists continued to defend "a ultranza teorías novedosas en los años setenta en los Estados Unidos, pero que resultaron ser finalmente falsas" (1).

Realizing the failure of the neoliberal policies adopted by his predecessors, Néstor Kirchner, who was elected president in May 2003, is looking for a different path to development.   Unlike the right-wing Justicialist Party presidents of the past (such as Carlos Menem) who were neoliberals and favored close ties with the United States, Kirchner represents a move towards the left for Argentinean politics.   He objects to "Chicago-style" free-market economics and wants to establish closer relations with other South American leaders ("Nestór Kirchner").   With his Minister of the Economy, Roberto Lavagna, Kirchner resisted pressure from international financial institutions to accept yet another adjustment program and insisted on renegotiating Argentina's debt with the IMF.   This strategy, so far, appears to be successful.   By the end of his first year in office, "Kirchner achieved a difficult agreement to reschedule $84 billion in debts with international organizations, for three years, and this is paving the way for a solution to the $94 billion it still owes to private investors" ("Nestór Kirchner").   And in June 2005, Kirchner and Lavagna convinced 75% of Argentina's creditors to accept a settlement of 35 cents to the dollar (Kidd).   Now it remains to be seen what will happened with the 25% of creditors who did not accept the deal, and whether or not Kirchner will be successful in his search for solution to its country's socio-economic problems.

Given that Bolivia is the setting for Paz Soldán's *Sueños digitales*, a more fitting example of the failure of neoliberalism in Spanish America is the situation in which this

country finds itself at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The Andean nation's

problems came to the world's attention with the onset of the so-called "water war"—the

name given to the IMF riots that broke out in April 2000 in protest of the "35 per cent

hike in water prices imposed on the city of Cochabamba by the new owners of the water

system, International Waters LDT (IWL) of London" (Palast 54). The government

responded to the demonstrations with tear gas and bullets, which resulted in six dead and

175 injured. Following these killings, President Hugo Banzer, a former dictator that was

democratically elected president of Bolivia in 1997, "declared a nationwide state of siege,

setting curfews and abolishing civil liberties" (Palast 54). In October 2003, another wave

of anti-globalization protests ended with sixty dead and 142 wounded. After these

deaths, the then-president of Bolivia, Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada, stepped down from

office and fled to the United States ("El presidente").

Carlos Mesa took over the presidency of the Andean country promising to revise

his nation's economic policies. The cornerstone of his plan was a new "Ley de

Hidrocarburos" that, among other things, would raise the price of hydrocarbons exports

and require the foreign multinational companies that exploit Bolivia's rich natural

resources to pay higher taxes (Rojo). The new legislation was ratified by the Cámara de

Diputados in May 2005 but, instead of satisfying Bolivia's population, it sent the country

into a tail-spin. Thousands of Bolivians took to the streets of El Alto, La Paz and Santa

Cruz in protest, calling for a more equitable exploitation of the nation's oil and gas

reserves. Under the leadership of indigenous leader Evo Morales, representative of a

coalition of coca-leaf farmers and congressman for Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS)—

the second largest political party in Bolivia—and Abel Mamani, the head of the

Federación de Juntas Vecinales, highland indians, labor activists, miners, university students and coca-leaf growers joined together in the demonstrations and blockades of Bolivia's main cities. Yet, as Iratxe Rojo observes, "[n]ada tienen en común unos y otros manifestantes, que encarnan las fuertes diferencias sociales." In addition to demanding the nationalization of the oil and gas industries, the indigenous people, who make up 62% of the country's population and suffer from the most abject poverty, are asking for an end to racial discrimination and are demanding more economic opportunities. Others, especially Bolivians from the wealthier provinces of the nation, are seeking more regional autonomy in political and economic affairs. In other words, as Rojo concludes, "tras las reclamaciones del gas y el petróleo existe un deseo de reformas estructurales al modelo político y económico del país."

One could argue that the latest round of protests represent a victory for Bolivia's leftist movement. On June 7, 2005, unable to find an alternative to the neoliberal policies in place and a solution to the discontent that is plaguing his nation, Mesa resigned. Complying with the protesters' demands, the new president of Bolivia, Eduardo Rodríguez Veltzé, has called for early elections and is urging all groups that feel unrepresented by existing political parties to articulate "un proyecto político que les permita llevar su propuesta y visión del país al Parlamento" (Ortiz). Thus, Abel Mamani is proposing "unir bajo un solo proyecto a todos los sectores que se movilizaron en octubre de 2003 y junio de 2005" (Ortiz). On December 4, 2005, Bolivians will go to the polls to elect a new president, vice-president, senators and representatives. Again, time will tell whether or not this Spanish American nation can find a way out of the crisis and an alternative road to development.

Unfortunately, the experience of Argentina and Bolivia with neoliberalism is rather common in Latin America. And, in this context, Kirchner, Morales and Mamani can be seen as part of "a spectrum of new Latin American leaders, spanning from Chávez in Venezuela to Lula in Brazil and Tabaré Vázquez in Uruguay, who are actively searching for an alternative to the Washington Consensus, which in the eyes of many has proven to be an unsuccessful model for economic development in the region" ("Nestór Kirchner").

II. Sueños digitales

Not surprisingly, the social unrest, economic strife and political turmoil that have marked the recent history of countries like Argentina and Bolivia are now characteristics of the socio-political background against which many Spanish American writers set their stories. This is the case of *Sueños digitales*, a novel that takes place in a contemporary Spanish American country ravaged by the effects of neoliberalism. Its author, Edmundo Paz Soldán, is a young man who enjoys what can be called a double perspective: he is Bolivian (he was born in Cochabamba, Bolivia, in 1967), but has lived in the United States for many years (he received his Ph.D. in Hispanic Languages and Literatures from the University of California at Berkeley and is now a professor of Latin American Literature at Cornell University). Given his personal and professional situation, one could argue that Paz Soldán writes from the perspective of the wealthy society in which he lives and works—the United States—rather than from the position of a citizen of a developing nation. However, his continued connection to Bolivia, and Spanish America as a whole, is evident in the fact that his novels are often set in contemporary Bolivia—

or, more precisely, in the fictitious Bolivian city he calls Río Fugitivo—and that he writes

in Spanish. Therefore, a novel like *Sueños digitales* is an excellent medium through

which to analyze the state of the continent in the era of globalization and the reaction of a

young Spanish American intellectual to the changes neoliberalism and technological

development have brought about.

Paz Soldán is a member of the so-called "McOndo generation"--a group of

Spanish and Spanish American writers that earned its name by being featured in a

collection of short stories titled *McOndo* (1996). Among other shared characteristics,

these authors reject the traditional representation of the Hispanic world as

underdeveloped and rural. As they see it, the international image of their nations needs to

be brought up to date. The Spanish American members of the group are particularly

vocal about denouncing the stereotypical representation of their societies and cultures as

primitive, exotic and folkloric. This outdated image of the region is largely due to the

success of Gabriel García Márquez's *Cien años de soledad* (1967), which turned the

mythical town of Macondo into the preferred metaphor for the area. The Spanish

American writers of the McOndo generation recognize the exotic and colorful traditions

of their cultures, yet they refuse to accept such a limited view of the continent because, in

their opinion, it leads the public to believe that all Spanish Americans are quaint peasants,

wearing straw hats and living in trees (Fuguet and Gómez 14). They offer the urban

space of McOndo as a necessary addition to the representation of contemporary Spanish

America. As Alberto Fuguet and Sergio Gómez explain in "Presentación del país

McOndo,"

> el nombre (¿marca-registrada?) McOndo es, claro, un chiste, una sátira, una talla.
> Nuestro McOndo es tan latinoamericano y mágico (exótico) como el Macondo

real (que, a todo esto, no es real sino virtual). Nuestro país McOndo 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 <u>malls</u> gigantescos (15).

Echoing these ideas, in *Sueños digitales* Paz Soldán presents the reader with an image of a high-tech and modern country ruled by neoliberalism. However, it is not the fact that democracy, capitalism and technology are presented as part of the reality of Spanish America that stands out in this novel. Instead, the emphasis is on the manner in which globalization and technological development are changing Bolivia and its society.

Sueños digitales focuses on the life of Sebastián, a young man in his twenties who works as a digital artist for a weekly newspaper called *Tiempos Posmodernos*.[2] His talent draws the attention of the government and he is contracted by the Ministry of Information to work on a public relations campaign to improve the image of President Montenegro—a former dictator who recently has been democratically elected to the presidency.[3] Sebastián does not remember the hardships of life under the former authoritarian regime because he has grown up in a democratic, capitalist nation. His new job, which consists in digitally altering pictures of the president in a variety of compromising situations, gives him the opportunity to earn the extra money he needs to improve his lifestyle. However, this job will also lead to Sebastián's downfall as he will be punished for questioning the government's secret activities.

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[2] The name *Tiempos Posmodernos* is an apparent parody of *Los tiempos*, Cochabamba's main newspaper

[3] Montenegro is most likely a fictional reference to Hugo Banzer Suárez, who became the dictator of Bolivia from 1971 to 1978 after masterminding a coup d'état and president in 1997 after winning democratic elections. He ruled Bolivia until 2001, when he stepped down because of his declining health (Morales 186, 220-222).

In many ways, the experiences of *Sueños digitales*' protagonist are reminiscent of many horrific things predicted in futuristic novels written decades ago. This is a connection that Paz Soldán underscores when he declares that he actually conceived his novel as "una especie de puesta al día de *1984*, no con texto sino con imágenes" (Paz Soldán, qtd. In Pajares Toska 5). *Sueños digitales*, however, is much more than a simple a retelling of *1984*. Unlike Orwell's futuristic tale, Paz Soldán's text is a realistic representation of a Spanish American nation at the end of the twentieth century and its connection to Orwell's famous dystopian novel reveals the true consequences of many of the changes that have taken place in Spanish America as a result of globalization and technological progress.

Like Orwell, Paz Soldán presents the reader with a world that can best be described as a dystopia. Simply put, a dystopia is a literary construction in which socio-political institutions and human relationships are less than perfect. In contrast to the desirable societies of utopias, dystopias are "rooted in 'a basic distrust of all social groups' " (Malmgren 80). In *The Plot of the Future* (1994), Dragan Klaíc uses the term "dystopia" to refer to the "pessimistic type of predictive drama" he analyzes and defines the term as: "an unexpected and aborted outcome of utopian strivings, a mismatched result of utopian efforts--not only a state of fallen utopia but the very process of its distortion and degeneration as well" (3). Although Klaíc writes about the theater, his definition of dystopia is also applicable to novels.

The stories told in *1984* and *Sueños digitales* are rather different, yet, as dystopian texts, they share important characteristics. The first is that both novels are set in technologically advanced urban societies that are segregated. However, while *1984* is set

in a futuristic London, *Sueños digitales* offers the reader a panorama of what Paz Soldán describes as "una ciudad muy contemporánea de Latinoamérica" (qtd. in Pajares Toska 5). Like other older cities in the region, in the last twenty years the distinguishing historical buildings and architectonic traits of Río Fugitivo—the city in which in *Sueños digitales* is set—have been replaced with the same skyscrapers, giant television screens and neon lights that advertise the same businesses that are owned by the same transnational corporations that operate in all modern cities. As the narrator observes, new buildings are going up "como hongos hiperbólicos," and a banner announces the construction of a new fifteen-floor structure in lots "que sólo ayer albergaban a iglesias coloniales y casas solariegas" (*Sueños digitales* 21-22). Seeing the skyline full of billboards announcing new imported cars, computers and compact discs, Sebastián remarks that the city is suffering from "una fiebre de importación," and he sarcastically concludes that "vivimos de prestado, pronto a alguien se le ocurrirá importar toda una ciudad, *we'll be Fugitive River City*" (22). In other words, Río Fugitivo is the prototype of the modern Spanish American metropolis and a product of neoliberalism. Its growth is fueled by transnational corporations that are taking advantage of neoliberal economic policies that have forced the country to open its borders to foreign businesses. This, however, means that economic development is being imported rather than originating from local entrepreneurship or national development plans. Instead of fomenting local capitalism, sustainable development or even foreign investment in schemes that will ultimately benefit the nation and lead to its development, the businesses that have recently established themselves in Río Fugitivo are franchises of large transnational

corporations. The real benefits of the progress of the city, then, are for shareholders of the foreign companies rather than for Río Fugitivo's citizens.

Similar to Orwell's London, Paz Soldán's Río Fugitivo is made up of clearly separated areas that are identified by the quality of the buildings, the presence (or absence) of technological objects and, more importantly, the wealth and social status of its inhabitants. This is also characteristic of the type of urban development that has resulted from neoliberalism and represents the growth pattern that Beatriz Sarlo calls "angelinización" in reference to the urban sprawl that characterizes the city of Los Angeles, California. In *Escenas de la vida posmoderna* (1994), she argues that most contemporary Latin American cities lack a center and "[l]a gente hoy pertenece más a barrios urbanos (y a los barrios audiovisuales) que en los años veinte" (13-14). Like Sarlo, Bauman sees the contemporary city (and its society) as fragmented and he refers to Steven Flusty's work to explain the geography of today's urban spaces. He describes a typical city nowadays as one that is made up of a variety of zones that "supplement each other and combine into a new urban equivalent of the moats and turrets that once guarded medieval castles" (20). Examples of this are the gated communities, which are constructed to keep out anyone that does not own a property in a given area, and buildings in urban areas that are controlled by owner's association that actively keep out any persons deemed unworthy—often for reasons of social class.

Reflecting the pattern of development Sarlo and Bauman describe, Río Fugitivo is divided into three clearly demarcated zones. As the narrator of *Sueños digitales* points out, "[e]l río era una frontera que separaba la ciudad luminosa de la zona de sombra" (33). "La ciudad luminosa," or the bright part of the city, is on the side of the river where

the streets lights work properly. It is the area where the wealthy citizens live and where the shopping malls, restaurants, skyscrapers and other new structures are located. In contrast, "la zona de sombra," where "[el] alumbrado público carecía de fuerza," is made up of "[b]arrios de casas decrépitas, donde vivían aquellos que habían escapado de la pobreza pero no habían terminado de dar el salto a la seguridad económica" (33). The third zone that makes up of Río Fugitivo consists of the outskirts of the city, which are made up of "barrios de casuchas miserables que ostentaban con orgullo una antena de televisión" (135).

In addition to the state of the buildings, in Río Fugitivo as in Orwell's London, society is segregated along economic lines, which is evident in the uneven distribution of material goods and services. As the contrast between the bright and dark sides of Río Fugitivo illustrates, the level of development and the amount of technology present in a given zone of the city are directly related the wealth of its inhabitants. The protagonist of Sueños digitales describes his neighborhood on the dark side of town as a conglomeration of buildings with "[v]entanas azuladas por la luz de los televisores, Volkswagens brasileros estacionados en la calle, triciclos tirados en las aceras, perros insolentes y gatos advenedizos" (33). Showing similar signs of decay, his neighbors are depicted as "esposos borrachos y esposas golpeadas y adolescentes volando en cocaína" (33). Sebastián longs to get out of his "barrio de perdedores" (33) and move to the bright side of town, which is clearly associated with money and power. Yet, Sebastián knows that it will not be easy for him to improve his situation. "Había que trabajar para mudarse cinco cuadras, al otro lado del río y entre los anuncios" (33), he muses.

While Orwell's London was presented as a warning of what could happen to London were Great Britain (or Europe as a whole) to fall into the hands of an authoritarian regime, Paz Soldán's Río Fugitivo can be seen as an implicit criticism of contemporary Spanish America because it reveals the true nature of the development that has recently taken place in the region and the effects on its society. The divisions among Río Fugitivo's citizens indicate that the progress fomented by neoliberalism is only superficial and that its benefits are unevenly distributed. Although this is not new to Spanish America, in *Sueños digitales* it is evident that the recent economic growth of Río Fugitivo has not led to egalitarian development, but rather has deepened the historical differences between the rich and the poor. The new commodities and foreign consumer goods available in Río Fugitivo are only affordable to a small and privileged group; the rest of the citizens must accept that they will never have access to them and therefore will not be able to improve their situation. This is due to the fact that, whereas in the past the disenfranchised sectors of Spanish American society placed their hope for change in alternative political and economic systems—socialism, communism and populism among others—, today it appears that they have no options. Of course, individuals and groups still have the choice to follow the ideology they prefer, but the end of the Cold War and the global adoption of capitalism and liberal democracy have effectively discredited all other forms of economic and political organizations as viable national arrangements. Neoliberalism has become the only option—whether we like it or not.

In fact, a second dystopian trait that *1984* and *Sueños digitales* have in common is that they depict societies that have limited political choices and are ruled by authoritarian governments. In *1984*, the Party and Big Brother hold all of the political power. *Sueños*

digitales is set in a democratic nation that, ironically, has elected one of its former military dictators—and the most oppressive one—to the presidency. Still, in reality, it is also ruled by a single political party and a powerful authority figure whose image is omnipresent in Río Fugitivo. President Montenegro's smiling face graces a giant poster in the center of the city above the slogan "El presidente de todos" (*Sueños digitales* 28), and another billboard shows "una inmensa foto en blanco y negro del presidente Montenegro y el alcalde—abrazados, sonrientes, efusivos—al lado de un anuncio de Coca-cola y otro de Daniela Pestova luciendo sus senos en Wonderbra" (22). As this image suggests, Montenegro uses the media to associate himself with the recent economic growth of Río Fugitivo promoted by neoliberalism. Such an association is beneficial to the president because the majority of Río Fugitivo's citizens likes the foreign consumer goods now available in the city (despite the fact that it cannot afford them) and sees the growth of their city as something good. Ignoring the fact that Montenegro is not responsible for the adoption of the neoliberal policies that made it all possible, the citizens of Río Fugitivo—who see him firmly niched between two popular consumer products, a bottle of Coke and a Wonderbra—credit him for the (apparently) positive changes and give him the support he needs to stay in power.

As a matter of fact, the use of technology as a political tool is the third dystopian characteristic shared by *1984* and *Sueños digitales*. More precisely, for Montenegro, technology has become a tool of political manipulation, domination and repression. The government-sponsored short films that present the dictator-turned-president as a compassionate and generous man have greatly influenced the citizens of Río Fugitivo. As Sebastián observes in *Sueños digitales* "[g]racias a comerciales y encuestas, la

democracia prometía y permitía dictaduras más perfectas que las de aquellas cruentas cargas de infantería de tiempos pasados" (179). Indeed, having learned from his experience as a dictator, Montenegro uses the media to create a flattering image for himself as well as to control the public's opinion and suppress political opposition. Anyone who openly opposes Montenegro or his government is publicly (or "mediatically") accused of being a traitor who wants to destabilize the economy, and is therefore treated as an enemy of the state. A case in point is that when Montenegro is faced with striking teachers and their request for an increase in wages, and he does not hesitate to use violence against them. After repressing the strike, the president appears on television, "los llamó 'dictadorcitos' sin asomo alguno de ironía, y prometió no ser muy pacientes con ellos, 'el acelerado avance del progreso' no se lo permitía. Dispersó sus manifestaciones y sus huelgas de hambre con gases lacrimógenos. Dijo que serían filmados para tener pruebas de su acción desestabilizadora del gobierno. Luego sonrío para las cámaras" (132). Clearly, with the help of the mass media, the former dictator has successfully fabricated an image of himself as a peace-loving and benevolent leader that is looking out for the material well-being of society.

Montenegro's tactics are more common than one might think. Not only did Big Brother use them before him, so did real dictators of decades past. In Hybrid Cultures (1995) Néstor García Canclini explains that in the 1970s and 1980s, Latin American dictatorships "suspended political parties, unions, and other mechanisms of grouping and collective cooperation" and attempted "to reshape the public space by reducing social participation to the insertion of each individual in the benefits of consumption and financial speculation" (211). This strategy was successful in effectively limiting

traditional modes of social mobilization and protecting the dictator's power and, in the last twenty years, the use of the media for political purpose has become a common practice among the region's governments.[4]   According to García Canclini, in Latin America, to appear in public today means "to be seen by many people scattered in front of the family television set or reading the newspaper in their homes" (211).

   While García Canclini is only speaking of Latin America, I believe that his observations are also valid for many countries of the so-called First World. As Langdon Winner argues in his introduction to *Democracy in a Technological Society* (1992),

> for a great majority of the population in many nation states, politics has become a minor subdivision of a much more captivating institution—television. [. . .] In this setting the content of public opinion and of electoral communication has become a carefully managed contest of video symbols and increasingly hollow slogans. Indeed, as candidates for public office are finding out, the most effective stance may be simply to project a pleasant image and avoid talking about specific issues at all (5).[5]

Ironically, then, as Paz Soldán suggests in *Sueños digitales*, rather than spreading radical democracy, neoliberalism and the technological development that accompanies it have made possible the continuation (and proliferation) of undemocratic practices.

   This idea is illustrated by the fact that Montenegro's government keeps the population of the country under constant surveillance. As indicated above, the police film the schoolmaster's demonstration in order to identify and, the reader assumes, to punish the opponent to the regime. Sebastián also points out the video cameras that are located in all the public areas of the city, "registrando sus pasos en los bancos y en los

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[4] For a historical perspective on the Spanish American dictatorships of the 1970s and 1980s see Thomas J. D'Agostino's "Latin American Politics" and Paul Zagorski's "The Military," both in Richard S. Hillman's *Understanding Contemporary Latin America*. Boulder & London: Lynne Rienner, 1997.
[5] For a more detailed explanation on the use of the mass media in political discourse, see Neil Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. New York & Toronto: Penguin, 1985.

centros comerciales, observándolo y haciendo un espectáculo de su rutina" (110). Moreover, the Ministry of Information where Sebastián works in the afternoons, is protected by the latest technology available. In addition to the metal detectors at the entrance of the building, there are cameras strategically located throughout the halls, offices and meeting rooms. Thinking about the security measures in the Ministry, Paz Soldán's protagonist rhetorically asks himself whether they are not excessive for the activities that were going on in the building,

> ¿O es que el poder se había movido subrepticiamente y ahora su núcleo sólido se concentraba detrás de las paredes de los individuos que manejaban las estadísticas, que a través de encuestas conocían al dedillo las reacciones populares al más mínimo gesto del líder, y que planeaban la forma de vender la imagen del gobierno, las campañas publicitarias que harían ingerir lo indigesto? (94)

That is, Sebastián is finally realizing what Montenegro has known all along: information is power, and technology is a means to get both. Thanks to technology, the government can keep track of the opinions of the citizens of its nations. With this knowledge, Montenegro can adjust his image to reflect what the population wants to see in a leader, and thus avoid losing support. The information received by spying also allows him to identify dissidents and take the necessary actions to neutralize them before they manifest themselves publicly.

In addition to serving as a tool for domination, in *Sueños digitales* technological progress has also provided Montenegro with the power to manipulate (and even change) history. The work Sebastián does for the Ministry of Information consists of altering pictures of the president's past (when he ruled as a dictator) while other people work on altering his recorded speeches and public appearances. Of course, the proofs of this manipulation—the negatives of the pictures and the original recordings and videos—are

destroyed and the altered records are made public under the claim that the press originally

presented manipulated material provided by Montenegro's enemies. The end result is

that, although some question the government's allegations, the majority of the

population—unaware of the manipulations—accepts the new material as real and

Montenegro's version of history as true.

Surprisingly, in spite of the nature of his work, at first Sebastián does not suffer

from an ethical dilemma. He does not question the legitimacy of Montenegro's

government and simply accept the status quo. Apparently, the reason he can work for an

oppressive organization without feeling any sense of guilt is that he is an apathetic and

apolitical individual. That is, unlike the protagonist of *1984*, Sebastián is not the victim

of some hidden control mechanism. Instead, he tolerates Montenegro's ruthless practices

and policies because he believes that they will not affect him negatively. As long as he

gets to enjoy a relatively comfortable lifestyle—new computer, eating out regularly and

going on vacation once a year—, Sebastián simply does not care what others are doing or

feeling. His lack of social engagement and general passiveness is typical of a young

person from a neoliberal society. It is also characteristic of a white, middle class

professional who would never consider joining a protest movement that is composed

mostly of blue-collar workers, miners and indigenous peoples.[6] Although many young

people remain committed to worthy social and political causes, in my opinion, many

more are increasingly disconnected and indifferent to the rest of society. This is due to

the fact that, as Winner claims, in today's capitalist world, people see themselves "not as

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[6] One could also argue that Sebastián's passim is a reflection of Paz Soldán's own class position and his distance from the important events that have taken place in his country over the past decade.

citizens, not as public persons in any meaningful sense, but as human components in ongoing processes of technology-centered production and consumption" (4).

Nevertheless, Sebastián eventually becomes conscious of the gravity of his acts and of the government's manipulations. As his assignments become increasingly sinister, he starts to understand the real implications of the work being done in the Ministry of Information and slowly grows aware of the consequences of his job for Montenegro. He realizes that the president not only has the power to pass manipulated historical records for the originals, he also has the power to get rid of the proof of all of the manipulation. Once Sebastián realizes the possible ramifications of his actions, he decides to rebel against Montenegro. In order to leave proof of what is going on in the Ministry of Information, he begins leaving his signature in the pictures he alters by marking them with a minuscule "S" that is only visible when the image is greatly amplified. As he sees it, each photo with his mark is like a message in a bottle that will some day be found. Nonetheless, Sebastián fears that Montenegro knows what he is doing and he grows paranoid.

His fears are not unfounded. The government is aware of his doubts and subversive behavior. Sebastián becomes *persona non grata* but he is never arrested, nor is he reformed. Instead, he is erased out of history in the same manner as he erased so many others. One evening, Sebastián notices that he is missing from his wedding pictures and, looking through photo albums, he discovers that all photographic proof of his life his gone. The next day, his wife disappears and a week later his entire house vanishes. As fantastic as it may seem, Sebastián returns home after work only to find that his house is not there. The narrator reports that: "el porche no estaba, como tampoco

estaba la casa: no quedaban vestigios ni de su piso ni del de la Mamá Grande [su vecina]: alguien se los había llevado [. . .] en la esquina había, en su lugar, un lote baldío, de tierra apisonada y todavía húmeda" (236-37). Across the street, the graffiti against Montenegro has also been removed. Reading the writing that is no longer on the wall, Sebastián finally realizes that he is up against an enemy more powerful than he ever imagined, an enemy powerful enough to make all proof of his existence vanish. Facing this reality, and in a way finishing the job that someone else started, Sebastián jumps off the "Puente de los Suicidas" and erases himself out of history.

The dramatic end of *Sueños digitales* underscores the dystopian nature of the world represented in the text. It can be read as the final victory of neoliberalism over anyone who opposes it because, by taking his own life, Sebastián is also committing political suicide. That is, in Paz Soldán's version of a contemporary Spanish American nation in the age of globalization, it is obvious that insubordination to the new political and economic order is not acceptable. The violent repression of the schoolteachers' strike and Sebastián's death are clear indications that in Río Fugitivo an individual must accept and cooperate with the new status quo or run the risk of disappearing. Furthermore, the fact that Sebastián's neighbor, Mamá Grande, shares the protagonist's tragic fate can be seen as a commentary regarding the state of Spanish America under neoliberalism. The woman's name is an obvious allusion to the mythical town of Macondo given that in Gabriel García Márquez's short story titled "Los funerales de la Mamá Grande," a character with the same name is described as "soberana absoluta del reino de Macondo" (277). In Sueños digitales, however, Mamá Grande no longer represents the traditional political and economic elite of Spanish America. On the

contrary, in Paz Soldán's novel, she is a poor, fat woman who, as Sebastián points out, "casi todas las noches hacía bulliciosamente el amor con su esposo" (35). The incorporation and disappearance of this character, then, not only demystifies the colorful, folkloric and traditional Macondo, it suggests the final symbolic victory of McOndo. In this context, Montenegro can be seen as Mamá Grande's successor (or replacement) because, like García Márquez's famous character, he has successfully taken advantage of the political and economic paradigm of the times—neoliberalism—to create a new and more powerful form of dictatorship.

In 1949, *1984* was presented as a warning against the dangers and the potential abuses of an authoritarian political organization that offered its population no alternative. As Frances Stonor Saunders explains, with his novel "Orwell was inveighing against the abuses that *all* controlling states, whether to the right or left, exercise over their citizens. Although its targets were complex, the overall message of the book was clear: it was a protest against *all* lies, against *all* tricks played by governments" (emphasis in original; 295-96). Still, given that Orwell (despite first aligning himself with the political left) was a notorious anti-communist who worked for the British Foreign Service and as a CIA informant during the Cold War years, *1984* was (and is) most often read as a depiction of post-World War II Soviet Union (Saunders 296). Ironically, today, the events depicted in the novel no longer remind the reader of the old communist regimes of the world. Instead, they are associated with the new crop of right-wing neoliberal governments that have replaced them.

In *Sueños digitales*, Paz Soldán illustrates this idea by presenting the dystopian future predicted by Orwell half of a century ago as the present of a contemporary Spanish

American nation. Rather than placing his story in a nation ruled by an extreme right- or left-wing dictator, Paz Soldán shows that abuses of power predicted in *1984* can happen in a country with a democratically elected government that is fully integrated in the new global economic and political arena. That is, in his representation of Bolivia, the blurring of the boundaries between economic and political interests inherent in the neoliberal system has allowed the creation of a new form of government—one that can be described as "democratic dictatorship" or "neofascism." Neoliberalism has also led to the creation of more profound social divisions, while the technological development that has resulted from it has given rise to new ethical and moral conflicts for individuals and society as a whole. This way, the young Bolivian author warns the reader that, when left in the hands of people who do not have the population's best interest in mind, technology can become a tool of control, repression and death. In the end, then, *Sueños digitales* is more than a mere repetition (or even an update) of an old warning; it is a wake-up call for the world at large. It tells us that, rather guiding the world towards utopia, globalization and technology are leading us to dystopia.

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