

The Age of Innocence

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Postmedia 1995

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EDITED BY
DAN CAMERON
&
GIANNI ROMANO



PAZ ERRAZURIZ

Postmedia

COORDINATED BY
ADNAN ASHRAF
&
LEANDRO BOBADILLA

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GONZALO DIAZ

EUGENIO DITTBORN

ARTURO DUCLOS

PAZ ERRAZURIZ

NURY GONZALEZ

JUAN PABLO LANGLOIS

IVAN NAVARRO

CATALINA PARRA

JORGE TACLA

CECILIA VICUÑA

ALICIA VILLAREAL

Postmedia



Portamedia—1995

JORGE TINELLA

Art. 79. Si por haber perecido dos o más personas en un mismo acontecimiento, como en un naufragio, incendio, ruina o batalla, o por otra causa cualquiera, no pudiere saberse el orden en que han ocurrido sus fallecimientos, se procederá en todos casos como si dichas personas hubiesen perecido en un mismo momento, y ninguna de ellas hubiese sobrevivido a las otras.

CODIGO CIVIL - REPUBLICA DE CHILE



GONZALO DIAZ

Portamedia—1995



Serie de tránsitos cosidos. Yacimientos impresos en espacios de trapo. Manos como hu
alas de pelicano. Pies diminutos de plomo. Un conejo dándose a la fuga encandilado por
en una carretera a media noche. Lo que se teje de atrás para adelante en el lienzo de pi
rasmilla la piel del propio cuerpo como el sol rasmilla los huesos. Un manto cubre el cu
la ballena a la luz de la luna. Lienzo de pintura. Funerario.

NURY GONZALEZ

When you're off by yourself in Chile, you experience the essence of a kind of loneliness which is encountered in few other places on earth. The populace may cluster in urban areas just as they do elsewhere, but even in the cities visitors are made continually aware of the formidable distance between Chile and the rest of the world. It's not sheer geographical barriers — the cordillera, the Pacific and the desert — that cause this sensation so much as the cultural gaps created by these same distances. While generally described as a highly 'European' society, the peculiar way social space tends to be demarcated in Chile — in a formalized ritual surrounded by sizable pockets of ambiguous meaning — speaks volumes about the way European modes continue to be adapted into altogether different categories of human theater. It also suggests that the physical spaces which a visitor experiences as vast and uncharted are, to a citizen, filled to the brim with untranslatable codes of meaning.

Famed as the most hospitable country in South America, Chile is equally renowned for an exceptionally swift brutality, especially when it concerns maintaining these social institutions which have been so stringently copied from abroad. In certain cases, the drama of Chilean public life finds its spark in the incongruous frisson between an almost Victorian civility and the laying bare of the rawest forms of human experience. For example, what symbolic need does Chile have (its strategic need being negligible) for a strong, Prussian-styled military, if not as a way of convincing itself that all those open spaces can be placed under human control? And yet, what better symbol is there of the untameable hostility of open space (not to mention governmental impotence) than the torn ozone layer hovering over Punta Arenas, making it the most 'naturally' carcinogenic city in the world? And what nationalistic fear surpasses the vision of one's country being torn in half? A few months ago, the Chilean parliament voted to purchase a tract of land which could otherwise have fallen into the hands of an American philanthropist, in the process giving him a swath that would have connected the country's eastern and western borders. The fact that the man wanted to establish his holdings as a ecological reserve, to be eventually turned over to the state, was clouded by his refusal to declare his intentions publicly, thus leaving the legislature with no choice but to take action, as a way of averting possible damage to the national psyche.

My travels through Chile have tended to focus on the physical extremes that its geography has to offer. This is logical, if we consider that it is one of the few countries in the world whose political and geographical boundaries are the same, and which possesses a desert "where no plant or animal life has been found or has ever been known to exist." Since my first visit in 1991, I have made a pilgrimage out of visiting the piedras pintadas — fields of petroglyphs covering the arid land outside Iquique; standing on the churning Tatio geyser at daybreak; and wandering at mid-day in the Valley of the Moon, west of San Pedro de Atacama. On different visits, I have witnessed the sun setting over the Rano Rarako quarry on Rapa Nui, watched the smoking Pucon volcano reflected in Lake Villarica, and gaped at the majestic

Balmaceda Glacier, not far from the Straits of Magellan. It may be a lonely corner of the planet, but the intensity of its natural spectacles remains undiminished, as if the picturesque had travelled to the edge of the world and hung there.

In the company of this rather exalted gallery of natural phenomena, I am surprised by the human encounters that remain indelibly fixed in my mind. At the top of the list is the railway station market in Temuco, where dozens of Mapuche vendors hawk their wares on every block. There was the old seafarers' tavern in Valparaiso, where every order shouted across the room sounded like an ingenious word-play on a line from Neruda. Then there was Daniela the Santiago transexual, who loudly argued Cold War politics and plotted her impending escape to Amsterdam (I believe she married a dentist); and Maria the teenager living at the most remote point on the globe, torn between the cosmopolitan appeal of her mainland education and the starker needs of her fellow Easter Islanders. But then I think with equal fondness on the group of young artists in Concepcion, who pretended not to understand why I objected to their videotaping my extemporaneous comments on their work, nor even how a slide projector that functioned much like a Tinguely sculpture could dull the polish of my presentation on recent art from the U.S.

My colleagues in Chile continue to look somewhat askance on my fascination with their country, perhaps knowing intuitively that it reflects a number of unanswered (and even unasked) questions within myself, themes which must resolve themselves in their own way for life to carry on in a way that feels normal. This neither surprises nor bothers me, because in the meantime I have ventured to begin work on a new theory of human innocence, one which took root in the wake of last year's l'affaire Davila, when government officials took umbrage at the fact that Juan Davila's scandalous representation of Simon Bolivar — printed in postcard form with taxpayers' funds and mailed out internationally — had inspired some zealously patriotic Venezuelans to set fire to the Chilean flag in front of the embassy in Caracas. For one brief moment, it appeared as if the country was more interested in defending its reputation for prudishness than in protecting the right of its artists to work whatever way they please. But then, thanks in large part to an outcry within the intellectual community, the atmosphere shifted, and regular citizens began to regard the incident as a test of the newly restored democratic structure. From there, I began to extrapolate that whereas innocence, in the extreme, Old Testament sense, no longer offered itself as a relevant point of comparison with anyone's lives, there are historical moments when the awakening of a spirit of hope, in a particular place and among significant sectors of the populace, strongly influences the way in which these people respond to the circumstances around them. We may not be justified in describing this phase as an age of innocence, but it is probably not too much to suggest that there are times when nearly everyone seems to benefit from the knowledge of just how large a role our past experience with sin can play in its future prevention.

Dan Cameron