



Vol. 9, No. 3, Spring 2012, i-x
www.ncsu.edu/acontracorriente

Obituary / Obituario

The Death of Carlos Fuentes: an Impossible Silencing Act. In Memoriam (1928-2012)

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If death is nearly always a striking surprise, the passing of a public international intellectual whose everpresent opinions, interviews, lectures, and writings were constantly on display intensifies the astounding silence at the end of life. “Pero el silencio puede más que tanto instrumento,” wrote Miguel Hernández in his “Elegía Primera” to honor the popular poet and playwright Federico García Lorca, assassinated a few months before by a fascist shooting squad in his native Granada. The cascade of obituaries, homages, blog entries, articles—this one is just another drop in that stream—that has already surfaced after the sudden death of Carlos Fuentes appears to be a compulsive reaction to that enforced, all-powerful silence every death brings. As if collectively, we, an amorphous transnational wake party mourning Mexican-style, needed to defy the extinction of the voice that is no longer and maintain its echoes.



Carlos Fuentes at the Miami Book Fair International in November 1987
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In the case of such an influential and widely-read writer, however, complete silence should not be a concern: it is not difficult to see how his accent will continue to reverberate with every rereading of *The Death of Artemio Cruz* (1962), or *Christopher Unborn* (1987) in decades to come. García Lorca was purposefully shot to be shut up, to be silenced by his sworn mortal enemies. His assassins of course managed just the opposite, and Lorca is still today perhaps the most renowned of all casualties of the Spanish Civil War; today no one remembers the names of his killers, only their sickening murderous impulse. In marked contrast, Carlos Fuentes died a young-at-heart old man at 83, after having enjoyed literary prominence for six decades, having taught, talked, and written *ad nauseam*. He died after having gained a wide international readership, but also after having stretched the patience of even his most faithful admirers and readers, among whom I count myself. Carlos Fuentes famously wrote every day, for several hours every morning, with a Calvinist work ethics but a Counter reformist, baroque style, and an organic, historical worldview, as he boasted on several occasions. He had also frequently affirmed that in order to feel alive, he had to speak and write: for the writer, silence and rest

only came with death. Many reviewers of his most recent works commented on the apparent weariness of his prose, on the repetitiveness or the fractiousness of his works, a marked contrast with his earlier creative stages.¹

And yet, despite such criticisms, Fuentes kept writing literally until the last day of his life. He always had a new joke, a new play with words, a new image, new opinions and reactions to current events, most recently mocking the lack of intellectual integrity, the sheer ignorance displayed by the PRI presidential candidate Peña Nieto. His age, his immeasurable knowledge, and his historical acumen allowed him to put current affairs into a historical context which for him was lived experience: as he compared current-day Mexican politicians with the resounding figure of Lázaro Cárdenas, Revolutionary president *par excellence*, everything was suddenly reordered. A good example of the changes he witnessed as a Mexican citizen was also provided in his latest public speech, in Buenos Aires, when he described the transformation experienced by his country since he was born (though in Panama, the son of a Mexican diplomat): “Mexico City is my city. In my lifetime, it jumped from having one million people, to twenty million [inhabitants]. That’s the city. The country, Mexico, whose population was twenty million, today has close to one hundred and twenty million [inhabitants]. Today Mexico is the largest Spanish-speaking country.”²

Human, all too human: only two weeks before dying, Fuentes announced from the Buenos Aires Book Fair the forthcoming publication of his new, now posthumous novel, *Federico en su balcón*, a fictional conversation with Friedrich Nietzsche.³ Freddy Lambert, a madman and a visionary, a nihilistic beatnik, another avatar of Nietzsche had been already featured in the tortuous experiment, the narrative “happening” of *A Change of Skin* (1967)—seen here through Michel Foucault, the birth of the

¹ See for instance, Javier Murguía, Review of *La gran novela latinoamericana*, by Carlos Fuentes. *Revista de Letras*, October 9th 2011. <http://www.revistadeletras.net/la-gran-novela-latinoamericana-de-carlos-fuentes/> accessed May 16, 2012.

² “Fuentes en la feria.” Clarín Web TV. http://www.revistaenie.clarin.com/literatura/Feria_del_Libro_2012_3_6929607_08.html accessed May 16, 2012.

³ “Fuentes en la feria.”

asylum, and against the backdrop of the foreseeable collapse of PRI hegemony in Tlatelolco a year later. While the novel was censored that year in Francoist Spain for being “pro-Semitic and anti-German,” David Gallagher dubbed Fuentes a Nazi apologist when reviewing it for *The New York Times Book Review* in February 1968.⁴ Only a year later, in March of 1969, Fuentes was barred from entering the US at San Juan, Puerto Rico and was publicly declared an “undesirable alien” under the McCarran-Walter Act for his alleged communist affiliations and his support for the Cuban Revolution.⁵ Two years later, the Cuban cultural apparatchik supreme, Roberto Fernández Retamar, would inquisitorially burn Carlos Fuentes in effigy as “the most conspicuous representative” of the “so-called Mexican literary mafia,” after he criticized the Cuban Revolution earlier that year.⁶ Fuentes and other writers of the Latin American literary boom, Julio Cortázar among them, had overtly dared to condemn Cuba after the poet Heberto Padilla was first incarcerated and then publicly humiliated and forced to recant of his critical comments, in what is still perhaps one of the most—and there are many—embarrassing auto-da-fes of that regime. Clearly none of the bureaucratic readers involved in all these processes were able to pin down Fuentes: they did not seem to comprehend his support for what he called in his response to the New York Times editor a New Leftist “critical revolutionism.”⁷ A critical act capable of questioning the undoing of revolutionary hopes by the stifling bureaucratic nightmares of the Soviet bloc, nightmarish even in its seemingly festive tropical adaptation, and also able to denounce simultaneously the marketeering model and capitalist imperial practices of the US military-industrial complex, and the so-called Western “democratic” bloc. In other words, he sought and practiced during the hottest years of the Cold War a critical questioning that would challenge the straitjackets of the two blocks, the two

⁴ David Gallagher, “Stifled Tiger” in *The New York Times Books Review*, February 4th 1968, 5-8. For the Spanish censor’s report see “Fuentes y la censura española”, *Mundo Nuevo*, 17 (1967): 90-91.

⁵ Henry Raymond, “Leftist Novelist Barred by U.S.”, *New York Times*, February 28th 1969.

⁶ Retamar, Roberto Fernández, Lynn Garafola, David Arthur McMurray, and Robert Márquez. “Caliban: Notes Towards a Discussion of Culture in Our America.” *The Massachusetts Review*, 15.1 (1974): 7-72.

⁷ Carlos Fuentes, “Letter to the Editor”, *The New York Times*, 3 March 1968.

political asylums of the long Postwar. All these critics missed Fuentes's pioneering, ethical balancing act in the context of the Cold War, and what would become Fuentes's very unique literary trademark: his radical, humanist self-determination. His elite critique of the elite, be it the Politburo, the PRI, the New England Brahmins, or the emerging NAFTA bourgeoisie, made Fuentes confront head-on institutional hegemony and their proclivity for intellectual co-optation.

Skip forward less than two full decades and Carlos Fuentes would be allowed into the US and would already be lecturing at the Harvard Commencement in 1983, symbolically sharing the podium with the absent Polish labor leader Lech Walesa, and would later become the recipient of the Premio Cervantes in 1987, the most prestigious literary award instituted in post-Franco's Spain. In both speeches Fuentes would exploit the occasion to challenge his audiences, to push them out of their comfort zones. At Harvard, he positioned Latin America and himself as a speaker in that non-aligned location he had been practicing for several years already defending "the universal trend away from bipolar to multipolar or pluralistic structures in international relations."⁸ He devoted most of his speech to critiquing U.S. intervention in Central America under the new Reagan administration, and was particularly acerbic and blunt when comparing the "brutal diplomacy" of the Soviet Union in Czechoslovakia with that of the US in Nicaragua and El Salvador.⁹ Reagan's Secretary of Defense was in attendance, seated in the front row.¹⁰ Fuentes climaxed his intervention by directly asking his U.S. audience: "Are we to be considered your true friends, only if we are ruled by right-wing, anti-Communist despotisms? Instability in Latin America—or anywhere in the world for that matter—comes when societies cannot see themselves reflected in their

⁸ Carlos Fuentes "A Harvard Commencement", *Myself with Others* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1988), 208.

⁹ Carlos Fuentes "A Harvard Commencement", 202-3, 211.

¹⁰ Marcela Valdés, "Novelist Carlos Fuentes Dies at 83", *The Washington Post*, May 15, 2012. <http://tinyurl.com/6oobhaq> accessed May 16, 2012.

institutions.”¹¹ How more audacious can you get as an elite critique of the elite?

In 1987 in Spain, he already foresaw the challenges and difficulties the centennial of 1492 would have to address five years later, and he explicitly questioned, in the midst of the post-Franco intelligentsia, the heritage of (Catholic) counter reformist Spain and he opposed it to Cervantes’s legacy. He reclaimed the Spanish language not as the language of Spain or the patrimony of empire, but as a multinational, multiracial language; not the language of power, but the “language of imagination, love, and justice.”¹² At that point Cervantes, *Don Quijote* and the truncated Erasmian tradition had become for Fuentes a central emblem of the ill-seated relationship of Hispanic culture with and within modernity. He had of course by that time already written a short essay on *Don Quixote or the Critique of Reading* (1976); there he summed up the Erasmian legacy in Cervantes’s work as “the duality of truth, the illusion of appearances, and the praise of folly.”¹³ Once again, Fuentes underscored the propositions of instability, anti-dogmatism, and a humanistic zeal for questioning and imagining reality. In the presence of Franco’s official successor, the Spanish king Juan Carlos I, he evoked the creative and intellectual work of Republican exiles in Mexico, their lasting memory and influence. Fuentes seemed to posit a recoverable Hispanicity based not on the authoritarian traditions of intellectual coercion, a thread he had deconstructed in depth in his totalizing novel *Terra Nostra* (1975), but on the therapeutic power of language, hybridity, and the aesthetic imagination. Fuentes would go on to publish a series of recreations of this alternate, critical-humanist version of Hispanic culture starting with *Christopher Unborn*, a novel embracing intrepid Joycean language games, and heightening the counter narrative *telos* to question and problematize the inevitability of historiography and of modernity. All these are also prevalent themes in his fragmentary *El*

¹¹ 207. See also Jacob M. Schlesinger, “The Return of Content”, *Harvard Crimson*, June 26, 1983. <http://www.thecrimson.com/article/1983/6/26/the-return-of-content-pbharvards-commencement/> accessed May 16, 2012.

¹² Carlos Fuentes, “Discurso”, Ceremonia de entrega del Premio Cervantes, 1987. <http://biblio.uah.es/BUAH/Webcat/Cervantes/87CarlosFuentes.pdf> accessed May 16, 2012.

¹³ Carlos Fuentes, *Don Quixote or the Critique of Reading* (Austin: ILAS, 1976), 34.

naranja o los círculos del tiempo (1993), a collection of related stories recreating and imagining an alternate archive of the chronicles of the conquest with dialogic stories such as “Los hijos del conquistador,” an exchange between Cortés’s two children, both named Martín: the son of Malitzin and Cortés, thus the first Mexican *mestizo*, and Cortés’s Spanish “legitimate” son.

This was the time of his most renowned work of expository prose, *The Buried Mirror: Reflections on Spain and the New World* (1992), which accompanied the five-part BBC documentary he hosted. Once again, his premise was that in its artistic hybrid practices, in its complex aesthetic realm, Hispanicity had founded a more ethical, more livable universe than in the political realm, and that the buried (transatlantic) mirror could be salvaged. Fuentes was a deeply critical, dialectical thinker, and as he was declaring and practicing the feasibility of this hybrid aesthetics which both questioned the bureaucratic assurance of mestizo nationalism and celebrated the diverse and complex reality of Mexico, Spain, and with them the rest of Latin America, he complemented his propositions with the theme of the “legal nation versus the real nation” in *The Campaign* (1991): here the abstract penchant for constitutional utopias of Creole Enlightened republicanisms and their rejection, their ignorance of the real, already hybridized societies ironically tainted their efforts as they set out to found independent nation-states throughout Spanish America in the 1810s and 1820s. As with many of his other novels, *The Campaign* can be read next to the collection of essays he had published the previous year, *Brave New World* (1990). The multiple couplings of novels, short stories, and essays in the summit of his productive life (*Cambio de piel-Tiempo mexicano; Terra Nostra-Cervantes; La campaña-Valiente mundo; El naranjo-El espejo; La frontera de cristal-Nuevo tiempo mexicano*) and the active, demonstrable exchange, citation, and crosspollination between these genres attest to his ambitious thinking, but also to his renowned intellectual haughtiness, to his rare combination of passionate, creative, and pedagogical approaches to his own craftsmanship as a writer.

The literary critics summoned to the conference on “Carlos Fuentes” are unable to make the key distinction “where does the man end and where

do his books start” in César Aira’s satirical sci-fi novella *El congreso de literatura* (1997). The evil scientist first person narrator is planning a cloned proliferation of Carlos Fuentes, a perfect model of a human genius, to attain world domination. But he first needs to get hold of one of Fuentes’s cells with the help of a cloned wasp. Alas, the wasp, like the academics, also mistakes the outside “Fuentes”, his elegant silk tie, with the inside, the “real” genetic Fuentes, and all the projected swarming clones turn out to be monstrous oversized blue silk worms. For the wasp, as well as for the professors and critics at the literary conference, “it was all the same, all of it was ‘Carlos Fuentes’.”¹⁴

Paradoxically, Fuentes’s constant criticism, his endless flow of controversial political opinions and social critiques occurred within the context of his own increasingly canonized and “superstar” standing as a literary author and self-appointed public intellectual.¹⁵ It is this difficult, sometimes untenable position of the organic intellectual both hegemonic, but also exilic outsider, that makes the figure of Carlos Fuentes particularly difficult to approach and assess in fairness. His access to influential people and to political and cultural power outlets as demonstrated in his regular participation in conferences, international fora, TV interviews, and literary prizes both as jury and as recipient, turned him into a ubiquitous “opinionator,” a member of the chattering class, a pundit. The ultimate insider of the post-national Latin American literary field, one of its inceptors, he is credited with having acted as a key promoter of the Latin American literary Boom of the 1960s and 70s. His polyglot access to literary agents in New York, Paris, Barcelona, London, his large rolodex of writers, translators, and editors, his diplomatic *élan*, and his overpowering charisma all helped to pull many of the required strings behind the dramatic internationalization of Latin American literature in that period.

At home everywhere and yet nowhere entirely settled, Fuentes’s restless searching spirit should be remembered for his independent style,

¹⁴ César Aira, *El congreso de Literatura* (Barcelona: Editorial Anagrama, 1997). 111.

¹⁵ Jean Franco, “Narrator, Author, Superstar. Latin American Narrative in the Age of Mass Culture” in *Critical Passions: Selected Essays by Jean Franco*. Mary L. Pratt, and Kathleen E. Newman Eds. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 147-68.

his humanistic promotion of critical thought, his unrestricted rebelliousness against conventions, stifling fashions, bureaucratization, and dogmatism. He will also remain the Cosmopolitan Mexican, the “Guerrilla Dandy” who wrote and closed most of his novels at two or three different locales, living intensively the life of the international jet-set, but still writing extensively about the universal and tragic humanity of Mexican rural migrants in Texas or California (*The Crystal Border*, 1994), the social violence of Mexico’s ongoing narco war (*Destiny and Desire*, 2008), or his unwavering obsession with the simultaneity of times and cultures in Mexico City already portrayed in his early short story “Chac Mool” (1954) and his first masterpiece novel *Where the Air is Clear* (1958) to his most recent if still unappreciated literary gems *Todas las familias felices* (2006) and *Adán en Edén* (2010).

He recently announced, in characteristic fashion, that he planned to start writing his next novel from his house in Mexico City on Monday, May 7th: a now unfinished novel provisionally entitled *El baile del centenario* exploring the revolutionary decade of 1910. A week later on Tuesday 15th he died in Mexico City. Within the following week he would be honored everywhere and buried in Paris next to his two deceased children, Carlos and Natasha Fuentes Lemus. Carlos Fuentes’s transnational presence, vast creative output, and dizzying constant travels even in death sketch the contours of his most lasting figure: a nomadic intellectual who felt at home in many places and who was bound to dispute the strictures of official, institutionalized nationalism, constantly countering it with the contradictory histories and diverse spaces of the country, and with the sounds and smells of intimate Mexico. At once nostalgic and proud of an ungraspable vanishing homeland, but now permanently buried in his Parisian exile. As if even in death he needed the critical distance he so constantly sought and cultivated.

Carlos Fuentes is all of this and of course much more, as in Aira’s novel, “all of it ‘Carlos Fuentes’”. As the torrent of his ideas, connections, comparisons, situations, ironies, satires, language games, opinions, and jokes seems to have stopped, we can content ourselves with a Cervantine rereading: a more critical, more distanced, but perhaps fairer and more

rewarding reading of his works, both old and new. Readers will be time and again amazed and enlightened, as they explore the depths of his unassailable *oeuvre*, as they read in the shadow of his permanent silence, in the light of his enduring voice.