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ALTERNATIVE STRUCTURES OF TIME IN CARLOS FUENTES'S
CRISTÓBAL NONATO

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Although Carlos Fuentes affirms that “Lo que pasa con la literatura latinoamericana es que al poco tiempo las fantasías más extravagantes se nos convierten en realidad cotidiana” (*Territorios* 25), the landscape of disaster that he predicts in his 1987 novel *Cristóbal Nonato* remains outrageously hyperbolic. *Cristóbal Nonato* represents both real disasters, such as the devastating 1985 earthquake, and a series of fictional catastrophes that Fuentes anticipates in his novel for the quincentennial of the conquest. By 1992, vast tracts of land have been annexed to the U.S. and its corporations, while the capital “Make Sicko City” is engulfed in fires, plagued by overcrowding and violence, and enveloped by a grey cloud of smog. Fuentes appears to forecast a hopeless and dismal landscape, the origins of which he traces as far back as the conquest, and more recently to U.S. economic and political hegemony, the PRI’s failure to deliver on the promises of the Revolution, and the corruption and machinations of Mexico’s politicians. Criticism is directed at the PRI, “el único partido, el poder único” (484), because, as the new national slogan states, “LOS SEXENIOS PASAN, LAS DESGRACIAS QUEDAN” (261), while the President presides over a government “en el que nada de lo que se dice que se hace, se hizo o se hará” (301).

In *Cristóbal Nonato*, Mexico’s present and future are inextricably tied to its past, especially to the legacy of the conquest. The concept of time is central to Carlos Fuentes’s oeuvre as a whole, which he titles “La edad del tiempo,” beginning with *Aura* (1962, “El mal del tiempo”), and encompassing foundational, revolutionary, and political times, to name only a few of the organizing thematic categories of his novels and collections of short stories. According to the Mexican writer, time “es el eje mayor, digamos. Bajtín nos

hace ver que no hay novela sin tiempo y espacio, sin cronotopía. Yo iría más allá para decir que aunque quizás ha habido tiempo sin novela nunca ha habido una novela sin tiempo” (“Carlos Fuentes” 407). Time organizes the treatment of Mexico’s disasters in *Cristóbal Nonato* by emphasizing both continuity and rupture; real and imagined catastrophes unveil linkages across time and concomitantly signal a break in time.

In *Cristóbal Nonato*, the fantastical cataclysms construct two temporal paradigms for Mexico: cyclical time and the teleology of apocalypse. The novel weaves together apocalyptic time, which is linear and focused on an end-point, and carnival time, characterized by its cyclical nature and eternal return. By using imagery, language, and narrative structures that accentuate a one-way flow towards catastrophe or the cyclic return to myriad historical disasters, the novel seems to present a pessimistic vision of Mexico’s future.

I contend, however, that Fuentes deploys the metaphors of apocalypse and carnival without giving in to their fatalism. Ultimately, he undermines their temporal structures and the paired visions of doom or eternal stagnation that they imply, thereby giving vitality to a third option, the prospect of an ongoing struggle in the present with no guaranteed outcome. A critical perspective emerges out of the tension and inconsistency between cyclical and apocalyptic temporal frameworks that eventually moves to a dialectical resolution, giving rise to the third alternative: the metaphorical time of the spiral.

In *Cristóbal Nonato*, the cyclical construction of time is represented in the form of recurring disasters, subjecting the country to an endless pattern of invasion and disintegration. By the quincentennial of the conquest, history seems to be repeating itself; this time, the invading force is the United States. The new colonialism is felt throughout the republic, and especially in the Yucatan, where the federal government has sold off the entire state to the exclusive Club Med vacation resort in order to pay the foreign debt that has climbed to the symbolic figure of \$1492 million. For the same reason, the Chitacam Trusteeship was created, granting U.S. oil companies control of the southern states of Chiapas, Tabasco and Campeche, reversing the nationalization of Mexican petroleum that took place during the presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas. Repeating historical incursions into Mexican territory, U.S. Marines have invaded Veracruz, while the northern states have been annexed to a new independent country called Mexamerica.

Fuentes also incorporates cyclical time through a Bakhtinian carnivalesque language, with parody, satire, and wordplay mockery spilling over each page. Whereas *La región más transparente* (1958) explores the polyphonic nature of the megalopolis, in *Cristóbal Nonato* language has been utterly transformed, Humor in the novel derives from the mixing and reprocessing of languages and the neologisms that ensue. El Huérfano Huerta and the members of the rock band the “Four jodiditos” speak an invented language called Anglatl, a hybrid of Spanish, English, and Nahuatl. Even Mexico’s landmarks and

national heroes have undergone a phonetic and orthographic Americanization that is used to a comedic effect, as in “COLONIA WHATAMOCK, AVENIDA WAREHZ, JADINES FLOTANTES DE SUCHAMILKSHAKE, CALLES DE BUCK O’REILLY” (104). Here, language underscores and reflects Mexico’s disintegration, and this linguistic decomposition in the text is yet another way that Fuentes executes his critique of the cyclical return.

Critics such as Julio Ortega maintain that humor and parody also enact a kind of regeneration within the text,¹ and indeed, the reprocessed language of the novel is subversive and irreverent, undermining the sacred texts of the Spanish language, the literary canon, and the official discourse of the nation-state by drawing on the destabilizing humor of Mexican popular culture and its penchant for gruesome hilarity and the double-entendre. Fuentes incessantly mocks political rhetoric through puns and neologisms, unraveling the language that upholds the country’s institutions, political parties, and social movements. However, as Ricardo Gutiérrez Mouat asserts, “the question persists as to whether the novel goes far enough in the direction of political resistance through language or whether it is always going back to some inner circle of power lodged in the literary tradition and supervised by the authority of the literary intellectual” (90).

The carnivalesque language points to the problematic, temporary nature of carnival, which is suggestive of transgression and upheaval, but ultimately works to reaffirm authority and maintain the status quo. Therein lies the cyclical nature of the festival, its duality, fleeting inversions and eternal cycles of birth and death. Indeed, in *Cristóbal Nonato* the popular classes are not portrayed as enlightened enough to challenge authority; the masses are often depicted as lacking a sense of solidarity and the language of the popular is not a language of redemption or liberation. This is evident in the character of Mamadoc, a secretary who undergoes a pygmalian transformation into a mix of Mae West, Coatlicue, and the Virgin of Guadalupe, and is fashioned as a patriotic icon by the government strategist Federico Robles Chacón. Mamadoc is also a play on “Papa Doc,” the Haitian dictator who played to the popular masses and used his security forces to spread fear among his opponents and secure his power. In the novel, Mamadoc becomes a symbolic spectacle intended to create national unity and obedience through the use of popular culture, or “Circo con Circo” (316), and the dissemination of the message “Unión y olvido” (314). Both Mamadoc and the character of the populist leader Matamoros Moreno reveal how easily the people are manipulated and distracted from the poverty and injustice they suffer. Fuentes certainly condemns the politicians as corrupt, but the novel emphasizes that the language of the popular contains elements of both contestation and acquiescence. Fuentes sees the ambiguities of popular culture’s vital but not always coherent and unified resistance, since it has both regressive and recuperative tendencies.

There exist, however, pure moments that disrupt the eternal return, and one such instance is the brief passage that represents the 1985 earthquake in Mexico

City. This passage possesses clarity and directness—a moment of recognition of necessity rather than jocular resignation—in contrast to the carnivalesque language. Amidst the absurd, exaggerated, fantastical, and future-imagined disasters that Fuentes predicts for Mexico, the four pages that pay tribute to the spontaneous civilian rescue efforts and the display of solidarity represent a singular moment in the text: they describe in vivid detail and unadorned language the tragic loss and acts of courage of that fateful September day. This episode that depicts a recent historical disaster emerges as the only moment devoid of the dark, satirical tone or corrosive wordplay that characterizes most of the novel. In *Cristóbal Nonato*, this moving and compelling description interrupts the undertone of despair and expresses a guarded hope in the emergence of civil society and the spirit of collective action.

Thus the representation of the popular exists as a tension in the text: while Fuentes is critical of a manipulated, misguided, and false popular that he describes through playful language, he finds hope in the popular activism that arises in the aftermath of the earthquake. As Claire Brewster explains, an outraged Fuentes addressed the 1985 earthquake, but in contrast to other public intellectuals in Mexico, his response was more literary than essayistic or journalistic (103). Fuentes embeds this tragic event in the cacophonous humor of *Cristóbal Nonato* to show that the Mexico of civil activism is the true Mexico: it is uncovered only for a brief moment in the novel, but that instant is extremely powerful, and the author highlights its pureness through the careful use of language. Fuentes has stated that reprocessed language “permite variar infinitamente las versiones de la realidad” (*Territorios* 25). The linguistic play, with each new permutation of a word or concept, gives the reader a sense of the endless possibilities of interpretation, whereas the language purged of this wordplay presents a reality that is less multi-layered. There is no ambiguity or relativism surrounding this event; in the aftermath of the earthquake what stands out is an authentic popular that spontaneously organizes itself with compassion and determination to aid fellow citizens, not misguided by populist rhetoric or the mind-dulling strategies of the PRI. This singular moment in the novel stands as a reminder of civil society’s role in breaking the cycles of disaster and eternal stagnation.

The second temporal metaphor in the novel is the Apocalypse, a framework that structures the narrative and competes with cyclical time as a discourse for encompassing Mexico’s history. An apocalyptic fate seems to be descending on Mexico as ferocious coyotes devour cadavers in a devastated Acapulco, an angry earth unleashes storms of acid rain, and fires and massacres consume the capital. The characters themselves are conscious of the apocalypse that is upon them, as Uncle Fernando Benítez explains when he flees from the ruins of the city to live with the Huichol Indians: “Ojalá que todos salgamos bien de este remedo de apocalipsis” (452). Cristóbal internalizes the apocalyptic events that he has witnessed from the safety of the womb as his mother goes into labor: “Cuánto tiempo pasa entre cada temblor apocalíptico en el vientre

de mamma mia?” (555).

Essentially teleological, Apocalyptic time moves linearly toward a projected ending: after the definite end-time, the old world will cease to exist and a new age will dawn. Fuentes sets up an apocalyptic plot structure based on the gestation and growth of Cristóbal, the fetus who narrates the novel from his mother's womb. Cristóbal's due date is the anniversary of Columbus's arrival to the New World, and if he is the first child born on October 12, 1992, he will win the contest of the “Cristobalitos,” which will bestow honor and power on the newly proclaimed son of the fatherland. The novel is narrated chronologically and spans the nine months from conception to birth, preparing the reader for the momentous occasion of the birth of the savior amidst the disintegration and mutilation of Mexico. According to linear, apocalyptic Jewish and Christian Messianism, there will be immense suffering on earth, both in the form of natural disasters and man-made cataclysms, before the Messiah appears to usher in a new period of happiness. The novel centers on the arrival of Cristóbal as such a figure, and the text indeed seems to move in a steady progression towards its anticipated conclusion; however, in the end there is no radical transformation of society. Instead of presenting the reader with the definitive and anticipated apocalyptic ending in which the current society is destroyed and replaced by a new, utopian world, Fuentes's novel ultimately diverges from the expected finale. There is no ending of total destruction, nor do Ángel and Ángeles embark with their baby for the New New World in an act of millenary faith.

Faced with a homeland mired in catastrophes, Ángeles and Ángel contemplate leaving Mexico and setting off for a new land of utopian promise. The couple is invited to board the ships bound for Pacífica and abandon “su viejo mundo de corrupción, injusticia, estupidez” (544). Nevertheless, Ángel and Ángeles turn down the enticing invitation to set off for Pacífica and, despite the dismal environmental, social, and political landscape, they decide to stay in Mexico:

tampoco quiero un mundo pacífico que no mereceremos mientras no resolvamos lo que ocurre acá adentro, nos dice mi padre, con todo lo que somos, bueno y malo, malo y bueno, pero irresuelto aún; mujer, hijo, llegaremos a Pacífica un día si antes dejamos de ser Norte o Este para ser nosotros mismos. (555)

The young couple's resolve to remain in Mexico finally gives an affirmative answer to the question that Cristóbal repeats as his mother goes into labor: “Vale la pena nacer en México en 1992?” (557). Fuentes stated in an interview that the Mexico of *Cristóbal Nonato* has a future, since Ángel y Ángeles “Se dicen vamos a terminar lo que hay que hacer aquí, vamos a hacer no la utopía, sino la posibilidad, simplemente” (“Carlos Fuentes” 403). The narrative structure of the text sets up the reader for a conclusive ending of tumultuous destruction and utopian, Messianic promise, but in the final chapter all that the characters are left with are unresolved, persistent problems that they confront and commit to changing.

In this way, instead of a trajectory whose ending is predetermined, time becomes a product of human praxis. In the chapter “Tiempo,” Ángeles explains that the new concept of time in the modern urban culture of Mexico City is not only faster-paced, it also places responsibility for the past and future in the hands of the people, stressing that time and history are man’s work and not divine providence:

antes el tiempo no era nuestro, era providencial; insistimos en hacerlo nuestro para decir que la historia es obra del hombre; y mi madre admite con una mezcla de orgullo y responsabilidad fatales, que entonces tenemos que hacernos responsables del tiempo, del pasado y del porvenir, porque ya no hay providencia que le haga de nana a los tiempos: ahora son responsabilidad nuestra: mantener el pasado; inventar el futuro. (307)

Ángeles affirms that Mexicans cannot give up on the struggle of everyday life, and that people must remember the past but work in the present to forge a future. In this way, the representation of time reveals a less pessimistic note about Mexico’s experience of disaster than one might initially imagine.

Fuentes’s literary response to the problems that plague contemporary Mexico is the metaphor of the spiral, signaling his engagement with a process that advances at a slow pace, marked by forward movement as well as a constant circling back. In *Cristóbal Nonato* Fuentes envisions a persistent struggle that progresses in a spiral-like shape, a geometric metaphor that Cristóbal uses at the end of the novel in a comment to the “Elector”: “nada es lineal, gracias a Dios todos somos observadores espirales” (560). In her seminal book *Writing the Apocalypse* (1989), Lois Parkinson Zamora identifies a similar pattern in *Terra Nostra* (1975), and she traces the metaphor of the spiral to Fuentes’s interest in the Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico. Zamora writes, “In Vico’s vision of history as a spiral, Fuentes finds the historiographic mode by which to integrate the linear and circular times that meet in Mexico” (151-152).

Clearly Fuentes was thinking of Vico while writing *Cristóbal Nonato*, since there are direct references to the Italian philosopher in the novel and it dates roughly from the same period as *Valiente Mundo Nuevo* (1990), in which Fuentes explains that Vico rejected a linear concept of history in favor of a theory of history as the movement of *corsi and recorsi*. In *Cristóbal Nonato*, the exclamation “Para vico me voy!” appears twice (491, 304) and Fuentes specifically mentions the shape of Vico’s spiral when speaking of Cristóbal’s conception. Fuentes even prints a spiral-like graphic in the center of the page to represent the “sierpe de espermas espirales, el vícolo de la historia, estrecha vía de vicogénesis” (150). Vico’s concept of *ricorsi* is not merely a cyclical recurrence of cultural stages; although historical phases contain the traces and memories of preceding civilizations’ achievements, failures and unresolved problems, no two phases are identical. Instead, as Fuentes asserts, Vico’s *corsi*

and *ricorsi* “ascienden en forma de espiral. No son, propiamente, parte de un tiempo circular como el imaginado por Borges, ni el eterno retorno evocado por Carpentier, sino el presente constante” (*Valiente* 33). Vico’s concept of history contains both retrogressive *and* progressive elements, looking back at the past while also considering forms that may come in the future. Less hopeless than the cyclical return and less definitive than the end-time of apocalypse, the form of the spiral suggests the open-ended challenges of everyday life that many Mexicans face.

Though critics generally maintain that Fuentes is more hopeful about civil society and social change as an essayist than as a novelist,² my reading of *Cristóbal Nonato* finds a note of resilience in the novel. Mexico is not caught in an eternal return, nor is the nation progressing along a linear trajectory towards a moment of total, qualitative, rapturous, or messianic discontinuity; rather, as the shape of the spiral suggests, the move forward occurs at a slow pace, marked by many returns, a constant negotiation between past and future, and the construction of outcomes through praxis. The author has deliberately created an inconsistent novel, part carnivalesque with its appearance of fun and its undertone of despair, and part apocalyptic, with its sense of disaster and its essence of redemption. This apparent duality is in keeping with a dialectical movement toward a conception of time that transcends both of these partial frameworks, revealing in the metaphor of the spiral Fuentes’s commitment to praxis, perseverance, and dedication to positive change and action in the present.

NOTES

1 See Julio Ortega’s article “Christopher Unborn: Rage and Laughter” in the *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, p.290.

2 See, for example, Maarten Van Delden’s *Carlos Fuentes, Mexico and Modernity* (1998).

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