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Aura: Ontological Materiality of Existenceand Fabulation

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*A*ura by the Mexican author Carlos Fuentes is a narrative of a story within a story: a novel based on a biography being re-written by one of the central characters, a student named Felipe—a detail that is mentioned only once in the first paragraph, then the plot continues without ever mentioning his name again. The biography that he edits and rewrites pertains to a historical character, and the intertextuality questions the ontology of existence and degrees of fabulation in discrepancies created based on the public image of a general, whose memories are recounted by those who knew him and others who did not. An attitude and configuration is being construed by those who have not known this individual personally based on the image staged for public consumption, creating discrepancies between the private and the public image.

Fuentes uses an effective writing technique, creating a ghostly ambience to point to the real versus unreal, using a character also named Aura who wanders in and out as the plot unfolds, making it difficult to distinguish what actually happens. Her role as mediator in essence guides us through such philosophical issues as: What is the true nature of existence? What fabulation has been created on the historical plane? The semi-real atmosphere in the plot points to what could be identified in post-modernity as the production of image. We are living at a time when virtual reality has its place, and many uses of technology create ways to represent presence that previously never existed, some of which are true and some of which are not. There is a departure from presenting facts as truth, confusing the perception of verisimilitude because globalization emphasizes fluidity, flexibility, and self-reinvention in the market place. The images are being marketed as products, therefore many individuals do not seem to care if they are truthful or not. The visual has taken prevalence over the written with

the increase of television marketing that has taken place in the last decades. There is a generation that has grown up with this process. The use of images has created a confused ambience in how things could be perceived that renders more significance to possibilities in a multiple and fragmented world reality. In the novel, one has to focus on the *imaginatio creatix*, the possibilities and differentiation being presented, over what actually happened.

The notion of what captures the ways of the world is now constantly changing in peoples' minds. What is truly real about what you think of yourself or what others perceive you to be is constantly blurred by shifts in identity perceptions enmeshed in the many technical advances and cultural changes. Consequently, an individual character as it is portrayed by mass media culture is affected and distorted by the same media that propels it. It is even more in reference to popular figures, since the more they get to be known, the more different perceptions about their images exist. Each human reality is always a direct project of metamorphosis: of itself and in itself. Individualization, with its range of variables and perceptions and the constant dispersal of ideas, aids to obliterate the establishment of any permanence in meanings. It is questionable where the true authentic self remains, as well as the public versus private separates in an individual existence.

The realm of modernity and imagination presents fantasy and denial as viable roles to play. The contemporary era has created a thin reaction to these issues and has underscored the understanding that relates to self and society. We see daily a multiplicity of cultures and identities co-existing at a given time and place in any of the world metropolis. Dislocation and dispersal are now prevalent characteristics of postmodern times, as are fantasy, denial, abandonment of fixed social status, and hierarchy of power relations. It is difficult to enable an understanding of the historical and practical dilemmas of life.

One of man's constant dilemmas is to bestow meaning upon the world and upon his own life. Sartre in *L'Etre et le Néant* deals with the risk in trying to overcome personal groundlessness and yearns to become what he names: "*En-soi-Pour-soi*" (J-P Sartre, *L'Etre et le Néant*, Paris, Gallimard, 1950), leading to the question of human reality (la réalité humaine), the awareness of the essential ambiguity of the human condition, and the boundless capacities for self-deception. We are both subjects that are world-related and world-constituting. There is an ontological gulf between historicity and the history that proves metaphysically unbridgeable. True knowledge and opinions should have reality as their object as opposed to appearance. If we give up truth as correspondence to reality, as seems to be happening now, we are left with conflicting opinions and no truth at all. The interpretation of lived experience tends, in a way, to constitute truth (Eugene T Gendlin, "Experimental Phenomenology," in N Nathanson, ed., *Phenomenology and the Social Sciences*, Evanston, Northwestern UP, 1973). This covers the arguments one uses for oneself and a whole range of discourses. The general aim is for persuasion and conviction whatever audience is being

addressed and whatever subject matter is dealt with, thus making it clear why Fuentes centered the novel on editing a biography; to present philosophical aspects in a nomos/physis debate, and to address ontological issues that ought to concern us since technology is affecting how we think and react to the main events in our lives.

Language, in its use and manipulations, plays a role in any truth being presented. All events, past or present, carry within possibilities of actually being real, and as such relate to the understanding of the projecting character, fictional or nonfictional. Experiences contained in understanding are interpreted as being. A person's capability knows its finitude and presupposes that it surrenders to signification without knowing what could be found. Hans-Georg Gadamer in *Truth and Method* asserts this without disputing difficulties in otherness for mediator and/or receptor:

> …that this kind of understanding does not at all understand the 'you' but rather the truth you tell us. (Hans–Georg Gadamer, Truth and Method, NY, Crossroad, 1989, xxiii)

The role Aura has as mediator points to the questioning of ontological issues. Postmodern ontological inquiries deal with what is significant, inferential, different, and coincidental, specifically referring to the personal in the world realm, which is more questionable when it includes virtual reality as part of the possible and credible image of a being. *Aura* produces an explicit attempt to holistically articulate the correctness of existence, materiality, and fabulation.

A historical figure is a life structured and expressed in a work, no longer understood or produced by the non-reproducible and idiosyncratic individual experience, but mostly by what others attain, articulate, and think of it. The reading of a biographical text is at best interpretational. (Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins UP, 1974). In *Aura*, the meta-language in the memories being edited adds several sequences to the plot and increases ambiguity focusing on new versions of events through other characters' perceptions, such as when Felipe revises the memoirs, or the widow's perspectives that contradict insights, and Aura, who creates more contradictions as we understand that she is non-corporeal.

> …all concepts hitherto proposed in order to think the articulation of a discourse and of an historical totality are caught within the metaphysical closure … (Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins UP, 1997, 99).

As readers we become aware of the duality when actions become more than the appearance of themselves, giving hidden, subterranean possibilities relating to main incidents or persons placed fragmentarily as information throughout the text. This fragmentation provides insight about the existence recalled, dwelling on images transforming under historical pressures. Images are literally being

created before our eyes and we are not sure of this transformation because through time views of history change. Every epoch has its ideals, taboos, and dissonances to which individuals are constrained.

The psychology and motivation of the general, the central character in the biography, become crucial structuring elements dealing with the historical consciousness of the given time. As events take place, references become convincing whether the referent is fictional or not: in both circumstances, they perform a similar function to create a credible and marketable image of who he was. Transcendentally, the structure of subjectivity makes it possible for all kinds of objects to present themselves to us. Aura, as connector of text, characters, author, and reader, forms part of virtual reality.

The image of Aura is a fictional creature in someone's imagination, created probably by the editor but we remain unsure of by whom. Her role of living metaphor does not follow a traditional logic and the narration schematically reflects on several contexts: it argues and thinks things through, suggesting that at the core of the reality in question lays a paradigm regarding the interrogative nature of practical reasoning. Facts are recorded as possibilities, as a video game, for they do not speak for themselves but are there to be interpreted (WJT Mitchell, ed., *The Politics of Interpretation*, Chicago, U of Chicago P, 1983). Consequently, the existential could be seen optimally as inevitable and insurmountable byproducts or derivation of the plot, precisely because it discusses, contrasts, demonstrates, seeks, and acquires wisdom. Existence is an answer to and for oneself, and in the age of information technologies it has its own adverse effect over and above the intended. In *Aura*, Felipe as well as the reader participate in constructing reality.

> Lees esa misma noche los papeles amarillos, escritos con una tinta mostaza; a veces horadados por el descuido de una ceniza de tabaco, manchados por moscas, El francés del General Llorente no goza de las excelencias que su mujer le habrá atribuido. Te dices que tú puedes mejorar considerablemente el estilo, apretar la narración difusa de hechos pasados… Nada que no hayan contado otros… (You read that same night the yellowish papers, written with a mustard colored ink; at times neglectedly pierced with ashes of tobacco, stained with flies. The French of General Llorente does not enjoy the excellence his wife had attributed it. You say that you can considerably better the style, tighten the diffused narration of past occurrences… Nothing that has not been told by others…) [Translation's mine] (Carlos Fuentes, Aura, Ediciones Era, S.A., México, 1988, 30).

The narrative achieves a time inversion, past as present, with factors creating a historical convergence punctuating history, and what is being re-written will remain certain for posterity.

According to Jean-François Lyotard we face an open space-time, a recombining intersection of prelude and absence. (Jean-François Lyotard, *Peregrinations*, NY, Columbia UP, 1988, 31-6). These are transmutations in spatial

and temporal coordinates that have political, individual, and social implications, obvious in the attention lavished on identity in post-modern culture, commonly concerning celebrity figures. The transfiguration marks a delegitimization of the deep structures of experiences and subjectivity of the self. Products of human agency tend to surpass what individuals merely intended; self-understanding cannot itself be merely understood in terms of what was consciously intended.

> Dudas al caer sobre la butaca, si en realidad has visto eso; quizás sólo uniste esa imagen a los maullidos espantosos que persisten, disminuyen, al cabo terminan. (You doubt as you let yourself fall in the armchair whether in reality you saw it; maybe you only united the image to the horrific miaows that persist, diminish, and finally end.) [Translation's mine] (Carlos Fuentes, Aura, Ediciones Era, S.A., México, 1988, 31).

One is confused to the point of questioning which events took place, non-existent facts transformed into real ones. Hermeneutical truth is rhetorical, essentially historical in nature, and context-bound.

The text discloses fundamentals about the significance of existence and the possibilities that can exist, including the virtual possibilities that have resulted from rhetorical transformations. An intense storyline lucidly explores the nature of the characters' essences. As fictional entity, Aura seeks the believable, while she might not be able to live to expectations. Some of the images purposely created are studied and polished to set in motion the public image, based on wishes and distortions that takes us to fabulation as an integral part of the intentionality for public consumption. Felipe and, later, the widow re-write events to emphasize optimum behavior. In *The Gravity of Thought*, Jean-Luc Nancy presents the question of existence as a construed reality that lies not in the basis of essence but in the answer given to and for oneself. The telling of partial truths can at times facilitate personal freedom as well as damage it. Fuentes questions ontological validity, using virtual images forming a new present, diminishing the value of what was known or said.

The past is treated as otherness, distancing or freeing itself from reality, creating a historical horizon addressing alterity. There is an attempt to conceptualize reality, although the notion that we could arrive at a conclusive interpretation about the essence of life seems nonsensical at best. The world presents itself as the subject of multiple insights and our own expectations of its meanings.

> A truly historical way of thinking has also to keep in mind its own historicity. Only then will it give up pursuing the phantom of a historical object, the topic of linearly advancing research, learning instead to recognize in the object the Other of its own, therewith bringing to recognition the One and the Other. The true historical object is not an object, but rather the unity of the One and Other, a relationship in which the reality of history consists just as much as the reality of historical understanding. (Hans-Georg Gadamer, "On the Circle of Understanding"

in *Hermeneutics Versus Science?*. trans. and ed. John M Connolly and Thomas Keutner, Notre Dame, U Notre Dame P, 1988, 70).

There are competing views of the world rather than one; no main narrative or universal claims but rather knowledge as multiple, content-dependent, and fragmentary, recounting what exists out there. Reality is not definite or a fixed criterion at which to be arrived, when it seems that the ultimate judge is the interpretative community to which one belongs. Gadamer in *Truth and Method* hypothesizes that one has to place oneself within the historical horizon from which a tradition presents itself in order not to defeat historical understanding. Each one relates to others as subjects of inquiry under the rubric of human nature, under the form of self-relatedness, and in a relation marked by openness. We are binding interpreters seeking understanding in a given situation. The message at the height of hyper-reality is that there is no reality that counts but the image. Fiction and reality are not metaphysical opposites. In human affairs and in the reality being lived, the real is many times brought into being by means of imaginaries, especially in the media where the public image exists, providing the concrete reason for Aura's existence in the novel. A possibility exists for fiction to function in truth and to induce effects of truth in order to bring about a true discourse on existence, to intuit or discover and represent the true nature of things.

The notion of transcendental consciousness is basically the immediate self-presence of a waking life. In the realm one calls one's own, concepts find a systematic unity (Husserl's account of language). In the text, comments by Felipe alert us to philosophical inquires inextricably linked to editing. At the heart of human subjectivity and in facing reality are passions and representations of unconscious creations as well as truth. Duality, fragmentation, and multiplicity have become contemporary media in our time. Postmodernity, with its proliferation of media simulations, unleashes a multiplicity of identities and cultural paradigms without central or authoritative coordination. Cultural experience generalizes media communication while information technologies are at the core of importance in any symbolic exchange.

The fundamental issue of fracturing knowledge in postmodernity has produced conceptual displacement related to the creative and self-instituting capacity of the unconscious imagination. It explores the foundation of the physicality of life and creates a specifically modernist tension between rationality and imagination. The argument develops on ontological issues, interpreting webs of signification through the meaningful actions that have spun them and in which the characters find themselves caught up. Each of us as humans daily integrates our experiences into the texture of our psychic world.

Ousted from an established terrain of theoretical and practical reason, identity and subjectivity in a postmodern context are positioned within a politically and culturally variable social contingent, in linguistic and discursive practices that are always coordinated in space-time zones. What goes along with the

current postmodernist tendencies effectively endorses and promotes ideological mystification. In an age of hyper-reality, truth conditions vary from one specific context to another, involving criteria according to evidences, and in most cases, there is no established form of generalized theory for facts. *Aura* discloses an unchanging fundamental for existence, pointing to the possible in the real and fabulated, to an ontological gulf between historicity and real history that proves metaphysically unbridgeable.

There is a difference between Being and beings when one intelligibly questions what happened when the past shapes the future due to individual limitations from previous conditioning. It is very hard to escape from ideas, myths, and conditions that have been established in one's own time.

> I am myself and my circumstances, and if I do not save them, I cannot save myself. Benefic loco illi quo natus es. (José Ortega y Gasset, *Meditaciones del Quijote, ideas sobre la novela*, Madrid, Revista de Occidente, 1960, 8)

As Ortega y Gasset articulates, it is impossible to extricate oneself from the environment of which one is a part, and this ought to be considered in ontological questionings.

A notion that captures the meaning of existence changes constantly as more and more images are being produced through media outlets. The transformation that embodies Aura, sometimes undecipherable, becomes helpful to differentiate relationships. Felipe and the widow, who commissioned the editing, are manipulating the events being written. Aura transforms as quasi-cinematic presence into a metaphor of functionality questioning the meaning of presence. The evolution of the biography and the technology of simultaneous communication undermine the notion of reality, as truth and fabulation are intrinsically intertwined here, historically and individually.

In an age of hyper-reality, fiction more and more displaces reality, and simulacra reign supreme, showing a vital concern about credulity. One is aware that there is more than one way to interpret reality. One abstains from judgment because of the evident conviction of fictional truth in the unfolding of presence and the conviction that descriptions of life are directly constitutive to communicating and the use of language between individuals.

> Al despertar, buscas otra presencia en el cuarto y sabes que no es la de Aura la que te inquieta, sino la doble presencia de algo que fue engendrado la noche pasada. [When awakening, I look for the other presence in the room and know that it is not Aura that unsettles me, but a double presence of something to which birth was given the night before] (Carlos Fuentes, *Aura*, Ediciones Era, S.A., México, 1988, 31)

The narrated history, the content of the representation, and internal meanings are perceived to be connected to visual effects more than words. Interpretative reality

plays here with what is existence within the historical, rendering consequences and confutations by reconstruction. Existence becomes a testimony of the self-suspending significations, including singularities that inscribe in them one and the same historicity. One ends with the conviction that in the realm of human understanding in a postmodern world, most of what seems real is left to speculation, that there is no specific answer to ontological questions, but rather a phenomenological approach to understanding that facilitates asking the right questions.

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