

## Krause's *Carlos Fuentes: Toward the Creation of a Myth*

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According to a recent article written by Enrique Krause, a Mexican biographer, and published simultaneously in English and Spanish as "The Guerrilla Dandy," and "La comedia mexicana de Carlos Fuentes," Fuentes is not a Mexican writer but an American actor: "The United States produces actors for movies, for television, for politics. Now and then it produces actors for literature, too. Carlos Fuentes is one of them."<sup>1</sup> This article also talks about Fuentes's fiction: "Fuentes writes works without a center: vast confused, formless, and oppressive literary happenings . . ." (33). The shock of these affirmations was felt on both sides of the border, as evidenced by the number of responses condemning them.<sup>2</sup> The purpose of this article is to put Mr. Krause's allegations into perspective and suggest they give a distorted view of the writer. Krause's commentaries, contradictory to the generally held belief that Fuentes is an outstanding Mexican writer, give us a new image of the writer. Independent of any merit of Fuentes's life or writings, they create the image of Carlos Fuentes, the myth.

Enrique Krause bases his characterization of Fuentes on: (1) a recent autobiographical account, *Myself and Others*; (2) hearsay from some of the author's acquaintances; (3) the introduction to the first and only volume of Fuentes's *Obras Completas* (*Complete Works*, 1973) and (4) a few well-known characteristics of Fuentes's writings. We are told that the writer is an American: "He was a gringo child of Mexican origin, born in Panama" (28). The reader is also informed that *Myself and Others* shows "Fuentes's lack of identity and personal history. From the very start, it's clear that he filled this void with films and literature . . . The key to Fuentes is not in Mexico; it is in Hollywood" (28). Because his roots are not in Mexico, and because of his American connections, "His work simplifies the country; his view is frivolous, unrealistic, and, all too often, false" (28). As evidence of these affirmations, Mr. Krause points out Fuentes's assertions that there is a lingering effect on Mexicans of the TTT, the "Tremendous Texan Trauma," and a blinding admiration of Mexicans for the United States. He then contradicts Fuentes saying: "No Mexican loses sleep over the TTT, and no one would say . . . that 'the world of North American blinds us with its energy'"(28).

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<sup>1</sup> Enrique Krause, "The Guerrilla Dandy," *The New Republic* 27 June 1988: 28-38. Further references are to this article and will appear in the text.

<sup>2</sup> Some of the commentaries condemning Mr. Krause's article, in English and Spanish, include: Marjorie Miller, "The Fuss Over Fuentes," *Los Angeles Times* 19 Sept. 1988, sec. 5: 1-2. The same writer cites three other such articles in *Excelsior* (Borge, Carcia Cantú, Aguilar Zinzer), one in *La Jornada* (Benitez), one in *Nexos* (Pérez Gay), and one in *La Cultura en México* (Monsiváis<sup>o</sup>. Jorge G. Castañeda's, "Mexico's Literary War is Political," *Los Angeles Times* 18 Sept. 1988, sec. 5: 2.6. Antonio Marquet, "El acercamiento de Krause a la literatura," *Plural* 204 (1988): 91-95.

Mr. Krause's proof of Fuentes's lack of credentials to write about Mexico, and of the distorted image of Mexico that he allegedly portrays, does not correspond with the facts. Fuentes may not have been born in Mexico, but he has never felt, according to dozens of interviews and accounts, to be anything but Mexican. His national and cultural roots are in México, a fact underlined by the content of his works. The metaphor "Tremendous Texan Trauma" is an accurate representation of how Mexicans feel about the loss of their territories to the United States. From grammar school on, children learn that the United States wrested these territories from Mexico. In spite of this, generally speaking, Mexicans admire the United States. It is a love-hate relationship similar to that of neighbors of different backgrounds and points of view who are forced to have close ties. There is a parallel between the manner in which Krause sees and treats Fuentes, and that which an omniscient "author" uses in the creation of a "character."

Some of Mr. Krause's objections to Fuentes's writings are in effect well known "idiosyncracies" of the writer, and they are not in themselves representative of any particular work or works. Fuentes's propensity to enumerate, to play cunningly with language, to imitate and parody other novels and his own, might perhaps be construed by some readers as constituting an "oppressive literary happening." However, these are also some of the characteristics found in writers which Mr. Krause finds worthy of praise: Joyce, Balzac, Paz, among them. By focussing on a few stylistic characteristics and addressing only selected texts, the biographer sets out to create Fuentes, the would-be-writer.<sup>3</sup>

Enrique Krause says that, "Fuentes's first book [sic] presaged the character of his entire work. The characters had no life of their own: they simply acted out fashionable philosophical theses" (29). Since "Fuentes lacked the practical knowledge of social life that may be found in Balzac . . . In *Where The Air Is Clear* common people do not work; they reflect philosophically on poverty" (30), similarly, a "ruined banker does not consult a lawyer but discusses the essence of the Mexican spirit" (30). Citing Fuentes's extensive life abroad, and in reference to *Where The Air Is Clear*, Krause says that "there was something chimerical in his attempt to write the social novel of a reality he had not lived" (30).

The assessment of *Where The Air Is Clear* reveals literary expectations akin to nineteenth-century realism where the characters had to talk and act according to their social status and given situation. Not only is the biographer, "author," informing us that Fuentes, his "character," does not know how to create believable characters and that their actions are illogical, but he is also telling us why. Krause manipulates Fuentes as an angry omniscient narrator would do with his character. If there was anything chimerical in Fuentes's attempt to write a novel about something he did not know well enough, then

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<sup>3</sup> Mr. Krause does not talk about Fuentes's other four novels (*The Good Conscience*, *Hydra's Head*, *Distant Relations*, *Christopher Unborn*), his other two volumes of short stories (*The Masked Days* and *Song of the Blind*), his plays, nor about his collection of essays, *Casa con dos puertas*. It is significant to note that the only work Krause finds worthy of praise is *Burnt Water*. Most of the stories in this volume were first published separately in *Vuelta*, the review in which Mr. Krause serves as managing editor.

because of his success, we are obliged to consider Fuentes, a larger-than-life figure. *Where The Air Is Clear* was, and is, hailed by the majority of Mexican critics as a successful and innovative novel depicting life in their city.<sup>4</sup>

Two of Fuentes's acts which seem immoral to his biographer are: (1) the paradox between his revolutionary rhetoric and his failing to join the Mexican guerrilla movement in the 1970s, and (2) the fact that he did not publicly condemn his friend, President Luis Echeverria for his role in the student repression of 1971 and in the "takeover" of the daily *Excelsior* in 1976. Though few would argue that there is a discrepancy between the writings and lifestyles of most leftist thinkers, to say that such persons are immoral is an allegation that needs to be backed with concrete data. In reference to *Burnt Water*, 1981, it is significant to note that Mr. Krause did not take into account "The Son of José Aparicio," a story which among other things, condemns the government's paramilitary group known as Los Halcones (The Hawkes) which crushed the student uprising in 1971. Another important omission is *La cabeza de la hidra (Hydra's Head)*, 1978) in which there is an exposé of the government controlled press, and of the overwhelming power of the Mexican President. The evidence in support of Carlos Fuentes's alleged immorality does not correspond with the facts and implies the biographer's expectations of him. Krause expects his "character" to be better than an average human being; he expects him to be bigger than life.

Ignoring, or perhaps unaware of, the many scholarly articles which talk about Existentialism and character development in Fuentes's works, and in reference to *Terra Nostra* but alluding to all of Fuentes's prose, Mr. Krause states that, "its essay characters do not really live their desires and their ambitions. In Fuentes there is no existential exploration" (36). An obvious contradiction to the above statements is Artemio Cruz, a fully developed personage, besieged by guilt feelings and existentialist anguish.<sup>5</sup> Failing to find any Existentialism in the fragmented and tormented lives of the characters in *A Change of Skin*, he calls the novel, a "cunning catalog of names" (32). Consciously or not, a new and distorted image of Carlos Fuentes is being developed.

After stating his own position toward history, "historical truth was for us a matter of life or death"<sup>6</sup>, Mr. Krause says that the presentation of inaccurate historical facts in *Gringo viejo* gives a distorted image of Mexico. "Fuentes transports the peasant revolution of indigenous southern Mexico to the northern border" (37), because in Chihuahua there were "no problems

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<sup>4</sup> Some of the articles which appeared in Mexican journals praising *Where The Air Is Clear* include: Edmundo Domínguez Aragonés, "La región más transparente: novela de apertura," *La Gaceta* 15.5 (1958): 8-9. Manuel Durán, "Notes al margen de *La región más transparente*," *Revista Mexicana de Literatura* 1 (1959): 78-81. José María García Ascot, "La región más transparente, un libro de gran importancia . . ." *México en la Cultura* 478 (1958): 2, 10. Salvador Novo, "Carlos Fuentes una revelación," *Novedades* 5 Jun. 1958: 4. Salvador Reyes Nevares, "Notas sobre *La región más transparente*," *Estaciones* 3.10 (1958): 165-77.

<sup>5</sup> Some of the Existential characteristics in *The Death of Artemio Cruz* are pointed out in the English version, but they do not appear in the Spanish version.

<sup>6</sup> Enrique Krause, "La comedia mexicana de Carlos Fuentes," *Vuelta* June 1988: 16. The translation is ours.

concerning land . . . no peasants in ponchos, no people drinking mezcal" (37). To expect that a novelist, or a historian for that matter, adhere to historical truth, necessitates a definition of the term: a definition which few would dare to advance. A prose fiction writer is by definition a creator, and cannot be limited by anyone's definition of "history." Again, the expectations of the biographer are not what might reasonably be expected of a novelist.

Mr. Krause's relationship to Fuentes, that of an omniscient author toward his character, is further developed. He gets inside his character's creative process in order to explain it: "Fuentes has very little intellectual curiosity. He looks for the script in an author or an ideology" (32). "His procedure may simply be an imitation of a popular writer . . . a presentation of a popular theory . . . or an awkward attempt at fiction based on other people's fictions" (33). The only possible explanation that the biographer finds in his character's voluminous *Terra Nostra* is that these 800 pages were, "expressly accumulated in order to impose his majestic self [Fuentes's] on the reader" (36). We are also informed about the character's attitude toward language: he is "A macho, a stud, an Artemio Cruz who treats words as whores" (34). However, this same character does not know Spanish well enough, because he is "deaf to certain nuances, expressions, themes" (29).

The "author" not only informs us of his "character's" shortcomings, but he also offers solutions. It is implied that if Fuentes had written *Where The Air Is Clear* like Balzac wrote *The Human Comedy*, he would have succeeded. Fuentes searched for the essence of Mexico in the wrong place: the city. "He did not see the need, therefore, to go deeper into the countryside, where the reality of Mexico was more profound" (29). Had he done this, he would have found it. It is also implied that the prolific Fuentes does not have time to reflect on his creations, and that if he would take his time, like Joyce did, he would be a better writer: "Joyce worked at an extremely slow and steady pace, in inspiration" (36). Finally, if he were to write lyric poetry, he would be more successful because "he has not seen himself for what he really is: a lyric poet lost in the novel and the essay" (34). Mr. Krause's interpretation of literature, questionable as it might be, is not as significant as is the "author's" attitude toward his "character," that of an omniscient, "deus ex machina" narrator.

A final, but no less important, consideration in the creation of Carlos Fuentes, the myth, is that it was conceived as a joint effort to discredit Fuentes. "Irritated by Fuentes's outspokenness, [*The*] *New Republic* literary editor Leon Wieseltier said he commissioned the article from Krause a year before it finally appeared".<sup>7</sup> In a telephone interview Mr. Wieseltier explained his irritation: "I had thought for a long time that Fuentes was overrated in his politics and his writing. He's incredibly slick and superficial" (Miller 1).

Enrique Krause ends his article by saying that Carlos Fuentes "has created only one extraordinary character: Carlos Fuentes" (38). However, by talking about Fuentes's life in terms of his books, and vice versa, by focusing on a few

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<sup>7</sup> Marjorie Miller, "The Fuss Over Fuentes," *Los Angeles Times* 19 Sep. 1988, sec. V:1. Further references are to this article and appear in the text.

of his works and leaving out the better part of them, Mr. Krause has created Carlos Fuentes, the American actor and would-be novelist. By freely quoting Fuentes and others and not documenting his sources nor their contexts, Krause, the historian, unknowingly becomes what he dislikes in Fuentes: a creator. The two versions of his article read more like the fiction of an emotionally involved narrator, than an objective annotated critique.