

# THE DEATH OF THE NARRATOR IN THE NOVEL *THE DEATH OF ARTEMIO CRUZ*

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## ABSTRACT

In this article we analysed the construction of the narrative voice(s) in the novel *The Death of Artemio Cruz* by Carlos Fuentes. Although this novel revolves around the last moments of the protagonist Artemio Cruz, it offers an innovative versatility of narrative personas which contributes to the modernity of this novel, part of the Latin American boom opus.

In the first part of this work we analysed the trifurcation of the narrative instance into three parts – the narrator's I, the You and the omniscient narrator, to show that Fuentes aim was not imitating the Freudian three-part model of the psyche but offering the lector a complete vision of the narrator's universe, obstructed usually by the opacity of the language. In the second part we discussed about the moment of agony that offers the author an opportunity to use simultaneously all three of his narrative personas. In the third and final part we stated the fact that the death of the narrator is in fact at the cost of the birth of the novel. The protagonist is dead, and so is the narrator; we are aware of it from the moment we read this novel's title. Their death is postponed in order to leave place to the language to create its own reality.

## KEY WORDS

narratology, death of the narrator, stream of consciousness, Latin American boom

## CLASSIFICATION

APA: 2610, 2340

JEL: D83, Z11

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## INTRODUCTION

Discourse about death and the afterlife has always held a special place in literature. Since the very beginning, death as a theme has aroused curiosity among readers and authors and has always had a touch of mysticism about it. The modern novel however, firmly directed towards elevating the simple human fate and a detailed description of everyday topics, has contributed to the demystification of death.

In the novel *The Death of Artemio Cruz*, the main and the omnipresent motive is the death of a fictional character. The novel recounts the life of Artemio Cruz, a corrupt war profiteer, from his birth to his final moments, linking life to death as an inseparable whole. The novel does not mystify death itself, but the moment prior to death, when the “I” of the main character, and of the narrator, separate; his consciousness is fragmented into several parts that will be reunited in death. This article analyses the figure of the narrator within this novel and explains his death from the perspective of contemporary narrative theories.

## THE DEATH OF ARTEMIO CRUZ AS A PART OF LATIN AMERICAN BOOM

Novel *The Death of Artemio Cruz* was published in 1961 in Mexico and gained incredible popularity almost immediately. Critics recognized in it numerous innovative narrative techniques for that time, and readers followed with interest the life of a thrilling media magnate, often compared to that of the legendary Citizen Kane.

However, Fuentes’ main goal was to show Mexico in the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution which left people with bitter-sweet taste of countless losses and hard-won victories. With the same intention he reminded us to think of the future in order not to forget the past. The novel *The Death of Artemio Cruz* was very easily included into the “poetics” of the *boom* and literary critics recognized literary methods that could easily be incorporated into the theory of the “new Hispanic-American novel”.

The first lines of *The Death of Artemio Cruz* pose a great challenge on the reader: “I wake... (...) I did not know that at times one can urinate without knowing it. I keep my eyes closed. The nearest voices cannot be heard: if I opened my eyes, would I hear them? But my eyelids are heavy, they are lead, and there are brass coins on my tongue and iron hammers in my ears and sometnig, something, something like tarnish silver in my breathing; metal, everything is metal; or again, mineral. (...) I tighten the muscles of my face and open my right eye and see it reflectes in the squares of silvered glass that encrust a woman’s purse. I am this, this am I: old man with his face reflected in pieces by different-sized squares of glass: I am this eye, this eye I am: eye furrowed by roots of accumulated choler, old and forgotten and always present; eye green and swollen between its lids: lids, eyelids, oily eyelids” [1; p.9].

The intermittent inner monologue with the technique of focusing on details, similar to the cinematic one, serves as an introduction to the entangled game of various types of focalization, narrative personas and tenses. Fuentes requires maximum engagement from his readers, but in turn offers the rarely accomplished fullness of the narrative universe.

Even at first glance, it is clear that *The Death of Artemio Cruz* does not fit into a common concept of the novel, which is largely based on the tradition of realism. The chapters as such do

not exist in this novel; a somewhat bigger gap between rows marks the beginning of a new chapter, which uses a different focalization. Some of the fragments are also marked by a date, but there is no classical chronological sequencing. The only existing orientation is the end of the novel, i.e. the death of the fictional character, for which the reader recognizes the rest of the novel as a gradual progression towards the “grand finale”.

In the novel, we can easily distinguish three groups of fragments: the first, in which the narrator is the first person, the second, in which the narrator narrates in the second person (the time and the place of the action are the same as in the first group of fragments, but the narrator separates himself from his own body and address himself) and the third, in which the storyteller is omniscient and narrates in the third person the most important moments from the life of the fictional character. The novel’s opening sequence depicts a moment in which Artemio Cruz, the main character in the novel, is unconscious and tries to collect himself while lying in bed in a hospital room. A multitude of decontextualized sentences, repetitions, anticipation of motives that will only later prove to be more or less important and dialogues which make it difficult to identify who the speakers are, introduce the reader to a chaotic vision of a simple image – a man in his death bed.

Instead of the explanations, the following “you” sequence raises further doubts; the narrator is now double, he addresses himself to his other “I” and leads him through the process of perceiving and points, just like conscience, to his own wrongful acts.

For the reader accustomed to novels of realistic type, the usual literary experience starts with the sequences told in the third person where the narrator describes the events from Cruz’s near or distant past. However, these reminiscences (always dated, to be easily found) are not chronological, but mixed by importance given to them by the narrator himself. This section invokes the classical Christian motif of the last confession, whose purpose is to “question history, exhume the past, consider the flow of time, and give importance to the present moment” [2; p.3]. It is also important to note that the last narrated reminiscence is the one about Artemio’s birth. By using this motif, Fuentes reminds us of a cyclical vision of the time and Mexican popular beliefs in the eternal return.

As the narrator’s consciousness is split into three parts, two of which are mutually communicating, and the third is exterior and untouchable, we could conclude that Fuentes shapes his narrators by using the generalized Freudian division of the consciousness in ego, superego, and id. But in this novel, the unconscious, or at least semi-conscious is the narrator’s very ego. Fuentes uses a range of innovative techniques such as simultaneous scenes, anticipations and “film framing” to describe Cruz’s psychic world more realistically. This process is, however, twofold because, although Fuentes uses it to make the narrator more connected to the Here and Now in the novel, the lack of external descriptions causes the narrator’s perception to assume the characteristics of something sublime, otherworldly. The narrator in the second person could be interpreted as a conscience, and the omniscient one in the third person as a short glimpses of the past, something like the shredded pages of a journal.

Literary critics have attempted to describe this kind of narrative and structuring of the literary work as the syntagm of “auto reflexive monologue”. This name is suitable for the fragments narrated in the first and second person in which Cruz dissects his own psyche with no regard for the external stimuli. That part of the testimony does not presuppose the public; the narrator exists just because he thinks. However, parts narrated in the third person are, in our opinion, not only used to illuminate the narrators, but also to lighten up the identification of Fuentes’ novel with

the popular “novel of the current of consciousness”. Fuentes’ goal is to show the fullness of the narrator’s universe, rather than to minutely describe the parts of his psyche. We will discuss this further a little later.

## MAURICE BLANCHOT AND CARLOS FUENTES

In the essay entitled *Demeure (Dwelling)*, Jacques Derrida offers a narrative analysis of the novel *L’instant de ma mort (The instant of my death)* by Maurice Blanchot. In it, the narrator recalls the moment in which he saw death, but managed to avoid it by chance or by the providence of God. Fuentes’ novel however, *The Death of Artemio Cruz*, recounts the life of the main character, and the death itself occupies only the last few lines: “Artemio Cruz... Name... hopeless... heart massage... hopeless... You will not know now. I carry you inside and with you I die. The three, we... will die. You... die, have died... I will die” [1; p.254]. The similarities between these two novels are immediately noticeable; they both occur between two deaths. “Imminence, the instance of what will already have taken the place, will be in question in *The instant of My Death*. Death will come, there is a suspension, a last suspensive delay, an interruption of the death sentence. But what will come, what is coming at me, this is what already have taken place: death has already taken place. I can testify to it, because it has already taken place. Yet this past, to which I testify, namely, my death itself, has never been present.(...) Already from the incipit there is a division of the subject. And more than one age. Aside from the presumed author, there are two, and number, two instances: the narrator declaring that he remembers another, and the other; until the end, the story announces itself as the narrative of what happened to the third person, as what happens to him, “he”, the third party. Until the end, until the “I” returns at the end, and the “you” [3; pp.49-53].

Cruz dies the very moment we take the book into our hands; his death is announced on the very cover of the novel. The moment we start reading the novel, we already know how it ends; Fuentes’ discourse is placed between the virtual, postponed, but at the same time inevitable death of the main character and his “real” death.

Cruz’s final confession could be perfectly described by the Derrida term of indecision (l’indécidabilité). The twisting of “the ego” into three separate, independent parts converts the text into the inconsistent sequence of reflections of consciousness to which the reader himself associates the meaning, and the dialogues into a tangled coil of voices whose source is difficult to determine. Fuentes’ text exists on the vague border between the automatic writing, the confession and the chronicle.

This moment of indecision is precisely the decisive factor in the ability to write a novel such as *The Death of Artemio Cruz*; the novel is possible thanks to the process of trifurcation of the narrative instance, which causes imprecision and uncertainty in the narration. “Nothing is certain in this testimony, nothing is described, nothing is observable: everything only may be. A random virtuality that is less than ever opposed to the actuality of the act or presence” [3, p.69].

The narrator’s three “I”s finally reach peace in the moment of death. Before Artemio’s illness, these three “I”s could not come to the fore because the ego, the id and the superego, as in the mind of every normal person, were uncontrollably intertwined. The agony, i.e., the period between the two deaths, is the only moment in which all three “Artemios” receive a “gift of speech”. After death, the narrators disappear; the death of Artemio Cruz is actually the destruction of the narrative voice and the logos. The rest is silence.

By the technique of dissolving the “I” Fuentes wants to achieve a kind of “mental realism”; his goal is to show the comprehensiveness of a man’s mental processes, the fullness of his mental life. Because of the nature of literature as art, it is impossible to put into paper the coexistence, the intertwining and the randomness of processes in the human psyche. Fragmentation is the only way in which the simultaneity can be expressed in literature. By choosing a narrator in the first, second, or third person, the author directs his attention to only one part of the narrator’s psyche, to only one part of the testimony, to one-third of the narrator’s voice and thus abandons the attempt to represent the human psyche in its entirety. Regardless of whether the work has several narrative voices or just one, it will never be able to perfectly mimic human nature; the language is once more shown as an inadequate and discouraging means of expression. Consequently, we conclude that every literary work actually represents the death of narrators themselves; the narrator must break away from a part of his “I” and ignore all the other parts if he ever wants to exist.

## **THE DEATH OF THE NARRATOR**

In the previous chapter, we spoke of the instance of the narrator, to whom readers and literary theory attach human traits such as voice and the ability to think. Having emphasized the inability of narrators to credibly imitate human nature, it is time to ask ourselves whether the narrator as such even exists in the text.

Barthes murdered the author by proclaiming him “a modern phenomenon, a product of our society which, having emerged from the Middle Ages, with English empiricism, French rationalism and personal faith of reformation, discovered the prestige of an individual or, as it is more noble to say, “human person”. The general readership tendency is to attribute a multitude of narrative voices to the literary work to a single, anthropomorphic entity called the narrator. But why do narrators appear as one of the sources of texts, and not just as a means to help shape it? [4; p.143].

By adapting Barthes’ text to our arguments, we could say that the narrator is, just like the modern scriptor, “born simultaneously with the text, is in no way equipped with a being preceding or exceeding the writing, is not the subject with the book as predicate; there is no other time than that of the enunciation and every text is eternally written here and now” [4; p.145]. Fuentes’ mischief in the perfect, comprehensive representation of human psyche is yet another proof that trying to find the source of the text and its fitting into the dimensions of our world is completely impossible. The text is a vivid, unstable creation that is impossible to fit into categories known by the reader, such as a category of time and place, or to graduate that text accordingly. The text is a mixture of countless multitudes of narrative voices that unite in the instance of the reader. “... writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin. Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing. (...) To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing. (...) Let us come back to the Balzac sentence. No one, no ‘person’, says it: its source, its voice, is not the true place of the writing, which is reading. “The death of the narrator is the re-birth of Barthes Reader as the ultimate instance that, at each reading, shapes the text in an unprecedented way” [4; pp.142-147]. The death of the narrator is the re-birth of Barthes Reader as the ultimate instance that, at each reading, shapes the text in an unprecedented way.

## CONCLUSION

This article, inspired by Derrida's essay of *Demeure. Maurice Blanchot* on the possibility of the testimony in literature, and Barthes' essay "Death of the Author", is an attempt to analyse the function of the narrator in the literary text. By studying the most famous novel of the Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes, *The Death of Artemio Cruz*, we analysed his complex narrative technique, which is denominated in the theory of literature as the auto reflexive monologue. Fuentes' technique consists of the separation of the narrator's ego into three independent, coexisting parts, each of them presenting its version of the narrators (auto) biography. Yet, even such a complex narrative technique proved inadequate in the presentation of the human psyche, which once again rejected the possibility of a perfect artistic mimesis. The narrator will never be able to imitate a human person, because every literary work actually implies its splitting.

Accordingly, we cannot attribute human traits to the Narrator. Numerous narrative voices, present in every literary work, come from a multitude of different narrative sources, and are therefore impossible to attribute to one instance in the text. The pluralism of the aforementioned voices can only be united in the instances of the reader who, by the act of reading creates each time again the text.

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