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Echoes of Existentialism in the Works of Carlos Fuentes

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements

Introduction 1

Carlos Fuentes in Context 6

Carlos Fuentes: The Novels 17

Structure 21

Chapter 1 Existentialism 28

1.1 What is Existentialism? 28

1.2 Ethics and Themes 39

a. Authenticity 39

b. The Anonymous *Das Man* 43

c. Freedom and Choice 46

d. The Facticity of Existence 48

e. Time 50

f. Death 52

Chapter 2 Latin American Philosophers: The Search for Identity 54

2.1 Positivism 58

2.2 Is a Latin American Philosophy Possible? 61

2.3 Philosophers of Mexico: 67

a. Antonio Caso 67

b. José Vasconcelos 69

c. Samuel Ramos 71

d. Emilio Uranga 74

e. Leopoldo Zea 75

f. Octavio Paz 78

2.4 Conclusion 83

Chapter 3 *La región más transparente:* Nation and Revolution 85

3.1 Identity and National Character 92

3.2 Inauthenticity and 'Desilusión': Federico Robles 96

3.3 Existentialist Revolution 102

3.4 Freedom and Choice 104

3.5 Violence 109

3.6 Ambivalence and Alienation: The Role of Ixca Cienfuegos 112

3.7 Bad Faith 116

3.8 Conclusion 119

Chapter 4 Identity and Self in *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* 121

4.1 The Ubiquitousness of Death 128

4.2 Authenticity 131

4.3 Alienation and Interpersonal Paralysis 136

4.4 Time and Space 142

4.5 Coming Together 145

4.6 Conclusion 149

Chapter 5 *Cambio de piel*: Modernity and Violence 151

5.1 Existential Violence: The Crisis of the Alienated Man 156

5.2 Freedom, Alienation, Love 162

5.3 Authenticity and the Absurd 169

5.4 Conclusion 172

Conclusion 175

Bibliography 182

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis aims to document and analyze the trace of existentialist philosophy in selected novels by the Mexican novelist and essayist, Carlos Fuentes (1928-2012). This introductory section aims to provide a general overview of Fuentes's varied output, which included novels, short stories, philosophical reflections, among other forms, and locate it within its biographical and literary-historical contexts. While a preoccupation with the central tenets of existentialist thought lies at the heart of much of Fuentes's fiction, little scholarly attention has been devoted to its examination. Tracing the echoes of existentialism in Fuentes's work, with a particular focus on novels produced over a ten year period from 1958 to 1967, is, therefore, the primary aim of this thesis. By mapping the lineage of existentialist themes throughout this body of work, it is possible to see how Fuentes's deep engagement with them is evident at the levels of characterization, form, plot, and also, and perhaps most effectively, in his literary engagement with the complex issues of Mexican national identity. In this way, Fuentes follows in the footsteps of his philosophical forefathers in the Americas, including, for example, José Ortega y Gasset, with his insistence on the individual's location within a specific historical set of circumstances. Awareness of the importance to Fuentes of the framework of existentialist thought allows for a profound exploration of his engagement with questions of both personal and national identity in a series of seminal literary texts.

With the arrival of the so-called 'Boom' period in Latin American literature, it is widely acknowledged that the traditional realist novel was re-imagined and reconfigured.[1] Writers began experimenting with new concepts of fiction, with new narrative techniques and strategies stemming from Europe and the USA. Observing this new internationalism at

[1] For a detailed examination of the Boom, see, for example, Philip Swanson, *Landmarks in Modern Latin American Fiction* (London: New York, Routledge, 1989).

the heart of Latin American literature, Antonio C. Márquez isolates William Faulkner as a particularly significant influence:

> Los escritores que formaron la vanguardia llamada 'El Boom' – por ejemplo, Juan Carlos Onetti, Carlos Fuentes, Mario Vargas Llosa, Gabriel García Márquez – afirman que Faulkner dejó una huella innegable en el espíritu literario de Latinoamérica.[2]

Following debates about modernity conducted within philosophical frameworks derived from existentialism, post-structuralism and postmodernism. The Boom writers placed a new emphasis on the inner life and vicissitudes of the common man, realities which had previously been largely ignored in the canonical literary traditions of the continent. Fuentes may be located among this new circle of literary philosophers. His fiction carved out a new, distinctively literary terrain and employed innovative techniques that allowed him to express the vast complexities, ambiguities, incongruities and contradictions that he saw as being essential features of the Latin American, and, especially, the Mexican, experience. Fuentes has long been considered one of the most influential and erudite writers in the Mexican literary sphere, indeed, in all of Latin America, and was particularly assiduous in his reading habits. As Maarten Van Delden has observed,

> Fuentes has always been remarkable for the voraciousness of his intellectual appetites. He has displayed throughout his career an exceptional capacity for the appropriation of literary, cultural and ideological trends […].[3]

Fuentes's interest in philosophy has been well attested by scholars. He lived in Paris in 1950, during the apogee of existentialism and, as Van Delden has pointed out, was *au fait* with the various intellectual and literary trends of the period, both in Europe and elsewhere. Part of an intellectual circle that included the Cuban, Alejo Carpentier, the Argentine, Julio Cortázar and, of course, Octavio Paz, Fuentes revelled in the creative liberty

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[2] Antonio C. Márquez, 'Faulkner's Presence in Latin American Literature', *Revista Española de Estudios Norteamericanos*, 5 (1992), 11-25 (p. 15).

[3] Maarten Van Delden, *Carlos Fuentes, Mexico and Modernity*, (Tennesse: Vanderbilt University Press, 1998), p. 109.

offered by the French capital. Of his relationship with Paz, Fuentes remarked: 'I remember Paz in the so-called existentialist nightclubs of the time in Paris, in discussion with […] Albert Camus'.[4] Furthermore, Fuentes offers testimony of the richness of his experience in Paris in the character of Victor Heredia from his novel, *Una familia lejana* (1980):

> Las distintas perspectivas de análisis de la personalidad hispanoamericana se confrontan en *Una familia lejana* (1980). Victor Heredia, cubano de origen afincado en París, es el representante del proyecto *europeísta* que reniega de lo propio y vuelve sus ojos hacia el mito de la civilización occidental y su centro privilegiado: la capital francesa. Frente a Hugo Heredia pretende encontrar la auténtica identidad del americano en el pasado, en el 'mensaje de las piedras'. Se trata de un viejo planteamiento en el que Fuentes ahora se involucra personalmente al comparecer como un personaje más de la obra. El novelista se describe ante el lector como un hombre de educación cosmopolita, desarraigado físicamente de su país, que siente en su propia carne el dolor de las heridas aún no cicatrizadas del hombre americano y que ha encontrado en Europa, y más concretamente en París, su verdadero equilibrio espiritual; él mismo es también Heredia, es decir, parte activa de ese mundo dividido y desgajado y, como paradigma de la personalidad hispanoamericana, lleva a sus espaldas un fantasma que le recuerda las posibilidades truncadas, inconclusas, los caminos no tomados que – en un tema que aparecía ya en *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* –pudieron haber hecho de él otra persona.[5]

Gloria Durán emphasizes Fuentes's specific interest in philosophical ideas:

> Few critics would deny that Fuentes is a novelist with an almost obsessive attraction to philosophical themes. In one work after another his characters delve into the nature of history, of free will and of fate.[6]

This interest in the great themes of history, free will and fate, among others, will come to be seen as the hallmarks of Fuentes's understanding of existentialist thought, as expressed through his literary explorations. Although Fuentes did not elaborate at length on his understanding of existentialism as such, as a young writer, he published a little known article on existentialism in the popular magazine, *Hoy*, called 'La Autopsia del Existencialismo',

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[4] Leslie R.Williams, *The Writings of Carlos Fuentes* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1996), p. 19.

[5] Francisco J. Ordiz Vázquez, 'Carlos Fuentes y la identidad de México', *Revista Iberoamericana*, 58.159 (1992), 528-38 (p. 535).

[6] Gloria Durán, 'Carlos Fuentes as Philosopher of Tragedy', *Modern Language Review,* 81. 2 (1986), 349-56 (p. 349).

in which he flippantly refers to it as another of those literary fads from Europe.[7] In a discussion with Emir Rodríguez Monegal on the subject of existentialism Fuentes stated:

> Mira, creo que después de una historia tan convulsa como la nuestra, hay una especie de miedo a todo el fondo subyacente del país, a ese fondo expresionista, violento y barroco […].[8]

Fuentes would go on to use existentialism as a hermeneutical framework within which to investigate two of the themes of most concern to him overall, namely, the nature of Mexican society as a whole, and that of Mexican man in particular, and to make it the philosophical foundation of most of his work. In relation to existentialism itself, there are a number of references to his knowledge of the movement in interviews and in the fiction itself. In an interview with Monegal, he stated:

> También hay un existencialismo *avant la lettre,* y muy obvio, México es un país del instante, peligroso: te pueden matar en una cantina a la vuelta de una esquina, porque miraste feo, porque comiste un taco. Vives el hoy porque el mañana es improbable.[9]

In this passage, Fuentes links existentialism to violence, a connection that is explored in depth in Chapter Five of this thesis through the analysis of his novel, *Cambio de piel*. In the first novel under study in this project, *La región más transparente,* the main philosophical topic of conversation among pseudo-intellectuals at the parties of the local bourgeoisie is the influence of Heidegger.[10] As a current that pulsates throughout his work, then, Fuentes would use it in a masterful way as a framework for many of his novels.

Much distinguished critical work has been done on Fuentes's fictional output but, perhaps surprisingly, in light of these observations, there is to date no comprehensive study

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[7] 'La Autopsia del Existencialismo', 'Revista *Hoy*', Chile (September 29, 1949). (Despite best efforts, it has proven impossible to locate a copy of this issue of the journal.)

[8] Emir Rodríguez Monegal, *El arte de narrar* (Caracas: Monte Ávila, 1977), p.120.

[9] Rodríguez Monegal, *El arte de narrar,* p. 118.

[10] Carlos Fuentes, *La región más transparente* (Mexico City: Alfaguara, 2005), pp. 52-53. Henceforth, in notes and within the text, the book will be referred to as *La región*.

of the presence of existentialism in his writings. Critical attention has concentrated on many features of his various works, but most especially on their structural aspects. As a result, Fuentes's attempts to elaborate philosophical ideas have largely been ignored by scholars, or else been subordinated to the analysis of such archetypal characters as Artemio Cruz (from *La muerte de Artemio Cruz*) and Federico Robles (from *La región más transparente)*. Scholars in this category include John S. Brushwood, Luis Harss, Barbara Dohrman, Robert Brody, Charles Rossman, Richard Reeve, Lanin Gyurko and Martin Filer.[11]

On the other hand, there are critics who have pointed to the existentialist substratum in Fuentes's novels. Mary E. Davis, for example, alludes to Fuentes's continuous meditation on the ambiguous nature of good and evil, on man within society, on identity, noting that these emerge as constant themes in all of his texts.[12] Leslie Williams has stressed the importance of the existentialist concern with individual choice in *La muerte de Artemio Cruz*, a novel which speaks of the modern Mexican man as an uprooted individual, who has lost any sense of the past, or of his identity.[13] In an article entitled 'Mexico Coming to Terms with Itself', George Irish points out that Fuentes's work evinces a concern with many of the defining preoccupations of existentialism: the absurdity of life, the finality of death, and the elusiveness of true happiness.[14] Ludmilia Kapschutschenko, likewise, highlights various existential themes in Fuentes's work, such as the freedom to make choices, the individual's responsibility for his actions, the absurdity of the human condition, the dif-

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[11] See Williams, *The Writings of Carlos Fuentes.*

[12] Mary E. Davis, 'On Becoming Velázquez: Carlos Fuentes' *The Hydra Head*', in *Carlos Fuentes; A Critical View*, ed. by Robert Brody and Charles Rossman (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1982), pp. 146-156.

[13] See Williams, *The Writings of Carlos Fuentes*.

[14] George Irish, *Caribbean Quarterly*, 23.1 (1977), pp. 31-49.

ficulty in communicating with others, solitude and the ambiguity of life itself.[15] Maarten Van Delden refers to Fuentes's subtle treatment of existentialist ideas in *La región más transparente*, and, as previously mentioned, points out that Fuentes was familiar with existentialist thought in the 1950s.[16] However, there is no full length study of the phenomenon of the existentialist presence in Fuentes's fiction nor any attempt to systematically chart its influence and impact throughout his long literary career. This study, therefore, attempts to fill this gap in criticism on Mexico's foremost intellectual of the twentieth century by offering a detailed examination of existentialist themes in three of his most important works.

Carlos Fuentes in Context

> […] la cultura, los mitos, la historia y la realidad actual de México son objetos de análisis permanente y debate en las obras de Fuentes […], claramente marcadas por las pautas teóricas del debate ideológico sobre la identidad del mexicano que en los años 40 y 50 se encontraba en el primer plano de la actividad intelectual.[17]

Carlos Fuentes was born to Mexican parents in Panama City on 11 November 1928 but he was a teenager before he set foot in Mexico City.[18] His father's ambassadorial duties brought him from one country to another so that the young Carlos spent his childhood in a series of different boarding schools, an experience to which he refers in his novel, *Zona sagrada* (1967).[19] Fuentes completed his second-level studies in Mexico and went on to study law at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), and economics at

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[15] Ludmilia Kapschutschenko, *El laberinto en la narrativa hispanoamericana contemporánea* (London: Tamesis, 1981) pp.103-04.

[16] '*La región* oscillates between two different perspectives on the nature of the self and its relations to history and the community. On the one hand, the novel outlines a view of the self that derives primarily from existentialist ideas found in the work of André Gide, Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus […]. On the other hand, the novel proposes a vision in which the self ceases to be a separate, distinct entity, and instead merges entirely with the communal past, specifically with Mexico's Aztec heritage'; Van Delden, *Carlos Fuentes, Mexico and Modernity,* p.11.

[17] Francisco J. Ordiz Vázquez, 'Carlos Fuentes y la identidad de México', *Revista Iberoamericana*, 58.159 (April, 1992), 527-38 (p. 528).

[18] For an excellent account of Fuentes's life as well as a comprehensive overview of his novels, see Williams, *The Writings of Carlos Fuentes*.

[19] 'Es un horrible y triste lugar común ser el único alumno que permanece en la escuela durante las fiestas. Y no porque este internado se pareciera a los que antes había frecuentado en Guadalajara y en México'; Carlos Fuentes, *Zona sagrada* (Madrid: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 1992), p. 71.

the Institut de Hautes Études Internationales in Geneva. He admitted to not being interested in sport and preferred reading serous literature.[20] Thus, he became a voracious reader not only of Latin American, but also of Spanish, and in time, European and North American literature, and, in the latter case, of John Dos Passos and William Faulkner in particular.

When he returned from Geneva he became involved in the literary life of Mexico City and in time became leader of the generation of young intellectuals who styled themselves the 'Generación de Medio Siglo'. In this way, he inhabited that 'geografía del intelecto' (to use the writer Carlos Monsiváis's term to describe the sphere of literary and cultural influence) that included the universities, the Palacio de Bellas Artes, the famous bookshops of that era, as well as the cafes that hosted numerous tertulias and other creative conversations.[21] Alongside other important figures such as Víctor Flores Olea, Sergio Pitol, Porfirio Muñoz Ledo and Emmanuel Carballo, as young students in the early 1950s, they felt themselves destined to play a major role in Mexico's cultural and political development. A powerful and influential mentor at this time was the elderly Alfonso Reyes. Fuentes and this group socialized regularly and their experiences provided Fuentes with much of the anecdotal material that would later appear in his first novel, *La región más transparente* (1958). These were the years when members of the group discovered the writings of D.H. Lawrence, Aldous Huxley, James Joyce, and André Gide. After Miguel de Cervantes and Jorge Luis Borges, these authors were profoundly influential in Fuentes's formation as a modern writer. Thus, by the time he came to write *La región más transpar-*

[20] 'Y no era muy bueno para los deportes'; Fuentes, *Zona sagrada*, p.16.

[21] Carlos Monsiváis, 'Notas sobre la cultura mexicana en el siglo xx', in *Historia general de Mexico*, 2 (Mexico, DF: El Colegio de Mexico, 1981), p. 13. See also Armando Pereira, *La generación de medio siglo* (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1997).

ente, Fuentes had assimilated many of the narrative strategies of the modernists whose work he had read as an adolescent.[22]

Fuentes's career as a professional writer blossomed between 1953 and 1957. In 1955, along with Emmanuel Carballo, he founded a prominent literary magazine, the *Revista Mexicana de Literatura.*[23] This publication was a conduit through which the influence of modern European and North American writers – from members of the T.S. Eliot generation to Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus – made itself felt in Latin America. Sartre's work in particular had an extraordinary impact in Mexico, and throughout Latin America in general, and his idea of the engaged writer became part of a new dogma that was widely embraced. The *Revista* represented an attempt to expand the Mexican literary horizon, opening it up to the wider world and responding to a discourse of universalism espoused by Alfonso Reyes.[24] Seeking a departure from the discourse of Latin American exceptionality and also underdevelopment, 'universalization' in this context also meant 'modernization'. It is widely acknowledged that Mexican fiction – indeed Latin American fiction in general – in the earlier part of the twentieth century, apart from some notable exceptions, was largely realist in nature and notwithstanding the enormous impact of Borges from the 1940s onwards, was still predominantly regional in its focus, exhibiting a strong commitment to social protest.[25] As Raymond L. Williams shows, Borges represented 'a paradigm shift for the Latin American writer who had been committed to social critique and the imitation of social and political reality in fiction'.[26]

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[22] Williams, *The Writings of Carlos Fuentes*, p. 19.

[23] For an interesting recent evaluation of the contribution of the *Revista* to intellectual life in Mexico at the time, see Ricardo Pozas Horcasitas, '*La Revista Mexicana de Literatura*: territorio de la nueva élite intelectual' (1955–1965)', *Estudios Mexicanos/Mexican Studies*, 24.1 (Winter, 2008), pp. 53-78.

[24] See Kristine Vanden Berghe and Maarten van Delden (eds), *El laberinto de la solidaridad: Cultura y política en México (1910-2000*), Foro Hispánico (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002).

[25] Ricardo Güiraldes's *Don Segundo Sombra* (1926) may serve as a good example.

[26] Raymond L. Williams, *The Columbia Guide to the Latin American Novel Since 1945* (New York: Colombia University Press, 2007).

Within the national context, too, Fuentes had a series of distinguished literary predecessors. Juan Rulfo's landmark novel, *Pedro Páramo* projected that author into a centre stage position within the Mexican literary sphere in 1955. The novel, a remarkable literary achievement, defiantly retained the stridently regional focus so criticized in the novel at the time while at the same time effecting a total rupture with the strategies and approaches of earlier regionalist novels. Agustín Yáñez's 1947 novel, *Al filo del agua,* was another important precursor. As Antonio C. Márquez points out, and as attested by Fuentes himself, *Al filo del agua* was a seminal work for the development of the modern Mexican novel.[27] Although they coincided with many of the central concerns of existentialist philosophy, the themes explored in *Al filo del agua* were not in themselves new. They included 'the conflict between social norms and personal freedom, the clash between outmoded institutions and human nature, the reactionary forces of church and government versus evolutionary change'.[28] Yáñez had approximated the structure of John Dos Passos's *Manhattan Transfer* (1925) and experimented with stream-of-consciousness narration. In 1961, Fuentes would go on to publish a similar novel, *Las buenas conciencias*, employing a similar narrative mode.[29] Salvador Novo's *El joven,* published in its full form in 1928, is another clear precursor of Fuentes's *La región más transparente*:

> Novo buscó su lugar en la historia literaria de su país para, desde allí acabar fundando la ciudad de México como 'nuevo' espacio en el que desarrollar la 'nueva' literatura mexicana […] una descripción detallada de la ciudad […] las calles, los anuncios, los medios de transporte, los nombres en inglés que acaban de invadir los letreros luminosos, los cafés, los restaurantes, los centros sociales de moda.[30]

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[27] For an excellent study of Yáñez, see Chris Harris, *The Novels of Agustin Yáñez: A Critical Portrait of Mexico in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Mellen, 2000).

[28] Márquez, 'Faulkner's Presence', p. 15.

[29] *Las buenas conciencias* (London: André Deutsch, 1961).

[30] Rosa García Gutiérrez, *Contemporáneos: la otra novela de la Revolución Mexicana* (Huelva: Universidad de Huelva, 1999), p. 87.

In this way, alongside Rulfo and Yáñez, Fuentes yearned to create new forms of transmitting and exploring the urban national experience in a manner that Novo had pioneered thirty years earlier.[31]

Another writer whose work anticipated Fuentes to a certain extent was Mariano Azuela. In his novel *Los de abajo* (1927) he created the prototype of the modern novel of the Mexican Revolution through the use of such technical innovations as interior monologues, dream sequences, the representation of the subconscious in the manner of Joyce and Proust, and a new concept of time, not as linear, but rather as existing in the mind as an expression of memory:

> […] el yo interior, los nuevos cauces de existencia o realidad, encontrados en la memoria, la fantasía y el sueño […], tienen su origen en una manera distinta de abordar el ser como problema […] esta nueva ontología en la que el hombre moderno aparece como ser escondido, saturado de conflictos interiores.[32]

The novel recounts the exploits of Demetrio Macías and a band of like-minded individuals who take up arms to fight for justice during the Mexican Revolution. However, as time goes on, they forget what they are fighting for and turn to pillage, cruel acts of violence and drinking copious amounts of tequila:

> […] las turbas entregadas a las delicias del saqueo […]; la psicología de nuestra raza, condensada en dos palabras: ¡Robar, matar![33]

Carlos Fuentes would later echo these sentiments about the betrayal of the Revolution.

Like many young Mexican intellectuals of the 1950s who were writing in the shadow of Octavio Paz's powerful *El laberinto de la soledad* (1950), Fuentes was searching for an adequate conceptualization of Mexican identity at the same time as he was seen as the

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[31] Jaime Torres Bodet (1902-1974), another writer who belonged to this literary movement, also explored existential themes in his novels: 'Reconoció la obligatoriedad del novelista moderno de afrontar al personaje en el espectro amplio de sus complejidades y oscuridades, admitir la imposibilidad de conocer al otro, y aceptar las múltiples facetas de cada personaje'; García Gutiérrez, p. 322.

[32] *Los de abajo* (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1960), p. 10.

[33] Mariano Azuela, *Los de abajo*, p. 78.

leader of the new Latin American Boom in political and aesthetic terms.[34] Some of Paz's ideas had their origins, in fact, in already familiar conceptions of Mexican character and Mexican identity which had been set forth by Samuel Ramos in the 1930s in his *El perfil del hombre y la cultura en México* (1934).[35] However, Octavio Paz departed from Ramos's interpretation, arguing that the Mexican's sense of solitude was vaster and more profound than his sense of inferiority. He traced present-day Mexican identity to the period of the Conquest and concluded that in the mid twentieth century Mexico was still a country in search of definition. Referring to *La región más transparente*, Fuentes said that 'the excessive and somewhat mystical preoccupation over nationality, ancestry and patrimony' were 'rampant at that time in Mexico'.[36] And he continued:

> México sólo ha roto sus máscaras con la revolución. […] ha obligado a México a verse en su propio abismo, hondura de mitos latentes, palacios en ruina, miserias trágicas, asonadas bufas, traiciones dolorosas, muertes inútiles, sordos sacrificios.[37]

For Fuentes, the Revolutionary period at the start of the twentieth century gave Mexicans the opportunity to forge their own identity after a long period of foreign domination. This search for an adequate definition of national identity permeates his early work. In the opinion of Ernest Lewald,

> En *La región más transparente*, Fuentes se lanza a la búsqueda de su México […]. Al no encontrar otra cosa que una parodia de lo que, para él, debiera ser *lo nuestro*, vuelca en sus páginas una ironía ácida y mordaz, el resultado de la distancia […] entre […] lo que es y lo que debiera ser.[38]

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[34] In Fuentes's words, 'La amistad con Octavio Paz y el contacto con su obra, fueron estímulos originales y permanentes de mis propios libros'; see *Tiempo mexicano,* Cuadernos de Joaquín Mortíz, 11-12 (Mexico City: J. Mortíz, 1971), p. 59. See also Raymond L. Williams, *The Columbia Guide to the Latin American Novel Since 1945*.

[35] Samuel Ramos, *El perfil del hombre y la cultura en México* (Mexico City: P. Robredo, 1934) will be discussed in Chapter Two.

[36] 'So I think *La región más transparente* reflected – intentionally […] – the excessive and somewhat mythical preoccupation over nationality, ancestry, and patrimony rampant at the time in Mexico'; as cited in Luis Harss and Barbara Dohmann, *Into the Mainstream: Conversations with Latin American Writers* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), p. 292.

[37] Fuentes, *Tiempo mexicano*, pp. 65-66.

[38] Ernest Lewald, 'El pensamiento cultural mexicano en *La región más transparente*', *Revista Hispánica Moderna*, 33.3-4 (1967), pp. 216-23 (p. 219).

The search, as seen in this passage, is frustrating and leads to rather pessimistic conclusions about the future of Mexico and the inevitability of violence stemming from what he sees as a typically Mexican anxiety about identity:

> Desde la conquista hasta hoy, la historia de México es una segunda búsqueda de la identidad. Esta profunda inquietud acerca de su propia identidad […] es lo que hace de México un país peligroso.[39]

In 1954, Fuentes published his first book, a collection of short stories called *Los días enmascarados*. One of the stories, 'Chac Mool', deals with ancient Mexican mythology and responds to the post-revolutionary interest in indigenous culture present since the early 1920s. These post-revolutionary years of the 1920s and 1930s had witnessed a struggle for the identity and future of Mexican literature and culture. There were those who believed that the future lay in returning to Mexico's indigenous past, and those who believed that it lay in a closer contact with Spain and, hence, with its European origins and heritage:

> En estos años (los veinte) de búsqueda de la identidad mexicana, los enfrentamientos […] entre los indígenas e hispanistas eran […] agresivas y frecuentes.[40]

A group of young writers, mainly poets, called *Los Contemporáneos*, espoused the latter course of action under the guidance of Alfonso Reyes, a great friend and mentor of the young Carlos Fuentes:

> Pero ya antes de 1925 los Contemporáneos habían acudido a Reyes a modo de consejero espiritual, representante de un mexicanismo 'de sangre y alma' frente al nacionalismo politizado.[41]

The *Europeístas* or *Contemporáneos* argued for the need to honour and keep faith with the Spanish cultural inheritance as the only way to consolidate a truly Mexican literature. With their roots in the literary movement embodied by the magazine *Contemporáneos: revista mexicana de cultura* (founded in 1928), they wished to combine the cosmopolitan scope of

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[39] Fuentes, *Tiempo mexicano*, pp. 25-26.

[40] García Gutiérrez, p. 43.

[41] García Gutiérrez, p. 49.

the leading European literary periodicals with an appreciation of Latin American culture. Arrayed against them were the 'anti-hispanists' who advocated a 'pure' Mexican literature which excluded everything foreign:

> Lo que los indigenistas pretendían hacer en México a partir de la Revolución era 'dar salida a todas esas voces oscuras que subsisten en el alma nacional; hacer renacer la tradición prehispánica […] indigenizar a México, rechazar como extraño todo lo occidental'.[42]

Among the leading advocates of the *indigenista* position was Diego Rivera and the muralist movement of which he was a part, which represented the most extreme visual manifestation of this concern with the integration of past and present in Mexican identity. Their ideas were eagerly espoused by the then President Calles and helped to inform the discourse of Revolutionary Nationalism that led to the foundation of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional. As Rosa García Gutiérrez comments,

> El español-burgués, al haber monopolizado el gobierno de México desde la Colonia, no sólo ha aspirado a ser por entero […] sino que [ha] han intentado deformar y dominar la vida estética del verdadero México (el indígena).[43]

The prominent politician and intellectual, José Vasconcelos and leading philosopher, Samuel Ramos, on the other hand, were advocates of maintaining the links with Hispanic culture and an attitude of openness to European ideas. Ramos, for example, wrote:

> Debemos aceptar que nuestras perspectivas de cultura están encerradas dentro del marco europeo […]. Tenemos sangre europea, nuestra habla es europea; son también europeas nuestras costumbres, nuestro destino […]. Y es curioso que para formar esta cultura 'mexicana' el único camino que nos queda es seguir aprendiendo la cultura europea […].[44]

The central tension at the heart of the *Contemporáneos* project – to bring the European heritage and the American reality into creative contact – was sustained in the decades following the magazine's demise in 1931 and was keenly debated by those in Fuentes's intellec-

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[42] García Gutiérrez, p. 87.

[43] García Gutiérrez, pp. 77-78.

[44] García Gutiérrez, pp.171-72.

tual milieu. Indeed the presidency of Miguel Alemán (1946-1952) saw an explosion of renewed interest in the idea of indigenous heritage. Fuentes was outspoken in his view that the traditional novel was no longer capable of expressing the complexities of modern Mexico and the modern Mexican man. As Luis Leal states:

> The realistic-naturalistic fiction of the late 19th century degenerated into a documentary narrative in which the emphases fell more upon the historical documentation than on the aesthetic elements. Novelists were more interested in giving historical facts than in creating reliable characters […] 'Closer to geography than to literature', Fuentes said of these novels.[45]

Furthermore, in an interview with Alfred MacAdam and Charles E. Ruas in 1998, Fuentes argued that 'the Mexican' novel was locked into certain genres: 'Indian' novels, novels of the Revolution and proletarian novels'.[46] In her study of Fuentes, Wendy B. Faris argues that Fuentes 'hoped to bridge the gap between those who held […] that Mexican literature must reflect primarily Mexican realities, and those who preferred to look principally to Europe for inspiration'.[47] She goes on to say that,

> For Fuentes, the Mexican Revolution and the novels it engendered – Azuela's *The Underdogs* (1916), Martín Luis Guzmán's *The Eagle and the Serpent* (1928) Agustín Yáñez's *The Edge of the Storm* (1947) and Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo* (1955) have been essential in the formation of a lively tradition because they introduce ambiguities into Latin American fiction. These novels begin to break down the former stereotypes of the barbarous jungle and the barbarous dictator against the noble savage or the enlightened reformer.[48]

In this way, throughout his work, an insistence on ambiguity and creative innovation at the level of form is of paramount importance. Fuentes paid homage to *Los Contemporáneos* in *La región más transparente,* where he uses the characters, Ixca Cienfuegos and Manuel

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[45] Robert Brody and Brody Charles, *Carlos Fuentes: A Critical View* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1982), p. 4.

[46] Interview with Alfred MacAdam and Charles E. Ruas, in 'Carlos Fuentes, The Art of Fiction No. 68', *The Paris Review,* 82 (Winter, 1981), pp. 1-18.

[47] Wendy B. Faris, *Carlos Fuentes* (New York: Ungar Publishing, 1993), p. 3.

[48] Wendy B. Faris, *Carlos Fuentes* (New York: Ungar Publishing, 1993), p. 3.

Zamacona as spokespersons for the opposing camps. He is especially attentive to their endeavours to modernize Mexican literature:

> En preparatoria encontré a aquel grupo de muchachos que también se interesaban por la literatura. Lo capitaneaba Tomás Mediaria y proyectaba una nueva revista que tradujera a todos los escritores europeos desconocidos en México.[49]

The reader of the novel may be surprised, following this, to hear the intelligent Cienfuegos advocating a return to the days of the Aztec gods as a way of establishing Mexican identity, and yet, at the end of the novel, he regrets having pandered to the whims of his mother Teódula and her Aztec beliefs and goes on to disavow the whole *indigenista* movement as a nonsense. It is obvious that Fuentes heeded the advice of his mentor, Alfonso Reyes, who said: '[…] los que quieran buscar y crear el carácter propio nacional, de una literatura, deben conservar la ventana muy abierta al paisaje exterior del mundo'.[50] According to this logic, to become a truly universally accepted writer, openness to the outside world was essential. What is certainly true is that Fuentes made only token references to ideas associated with *indigenismo* in his subsequent novels, except for *Terra Nostra* (1975) (The New World, Part II).[51]

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[49] As quoted in Wendy B. Faris, p. 7.

[50] As cited in García Gutiérrez, p. 50.

[51] In reference to the controversy about the future of Latin American literature in the 1930s and the criticism levelled at Fuentes by those who regarded him as writing to please a North American and European audience, Florence Olivier writes: '[…] la dissension, toujours latente dans les milieux littéraires, artistiques et intellectuels mexicains du XXe siècle, qui a régulièrement opposé les tenants d'un nationalisme culturel souvent obtus a ceux d'un cosmopolitisme des arts et des lettres, Alfonso Reyes le groupe des 'Contemporáneos', firent les frais de cette querelle qui connut des instants de polémique aiguë en 1932 mais la teneur profonde n'a cessé de réapparaître an cours du siècle et a affecté la reception des oeuvres de Carlos Fuentes a plusieurs reprises. En effect, le Romancier a été accusé de faire preuve d'un excès d'intérêt pour l'idée erronée d'un 'être du Mexique', condamné pour s'être égaré dans les vertiges séducteurs d'une vaine experimentation formelle empruntée a la littérature internationale […] il a été vilipendé parce qu'il s'adonnerait a une représentation du Mexique et de la mexicanité destinée a la seule faim d'exotisme de ses lecteurs d'Europe et des États-Unis'; *Carlos Fuentes ou l'imagination d l'autre* (Croissy-Beaubourg: Aden, 2009), pp. 359-60.

From a technical and stylistic point of view, Fuentes saw himself as moving away from the closed nature of the traditional novel to embrace modernism,[52] and latterly post-modernism, thus aligning himself with the new literary and philosophical trends (particularly, in the latter case, existentialism) stemming from Europe and the United States. Modernism remains a remarkably slippery concept; Jürgen Habermas summarizes it thus:

> […] the term 'modern' again and again expressed the consciousness of an epoch that relates itself to the past of antiquity, in order to view itself as the result of a transition from the old to the new.[53]

He continues by stating that the 'most recent modernism simply makes an abstract opposition between tradition and present'.[54] Postmodernism, on the other hand, 'may appear as a signature revision, if not an original *episteme*, of twentieth-century Western societies'.[55] The term embraces a very broad compendium of artistic expressions but, for the purposes of this introduction, I will focus on the philosophical manifestation of it that characterises Latin American novels. In this regard, Hans Bertens argues that '[…] the post-modern is characterized by a radical ontological doubt',[56] hence its relationship with philosophy. In a formal sense, postmodernism depends heavily upon technical feature such as fragmentation, paradox and questionable narrators. It creates a break from external reality in order to examine inner states of consciousness, especially by means 'stream of consciousness' writing.

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[52] Douwne W. Fokkema confirms that '[…] Modernism as a forceful code in literature history began in or about 1910, when, as Virginia Woolf noted, "human character changed" […]', and continues to describe its characteristics: 'The major convention of Modernism with regard to the composition of literary texts is the selection of hypothetical constructions expressing uncertainty and provisionality'; in Douwne W. Fokkema, *Literary History, Modernism and Postmodernism* (Harvard: John Benjamin, 1984). pp. 13-15.

[53] Jürgen Habermas, 'Modernity versus Postmodernity', in *A Postmodern Reader,* ed. by Joseph Natoli and Linda Hutcheon (Albany: State University of New York, 1993), p. 92.

[54] Habermas, p. 92.

[55] Ihab Hassan, 'Toward a Concept of Postmodernism', in *A Postmodern Reader,* ed. by Joseph Natoli and Linda Hutcheon, p. 274.

[56] Hans Bertens, 'The Postmodern *Weltanshauung* and its Relation to Modernism: an Introductory Survey', in *A Postmodern Reader,* ed. by Joseph Natoli and Linda Hutcheon (Albany: State university of New York, 1993), pp. 25-70 (p. 36).

Samuel Beckett was one of the fathers of postmodernism in fiction, which undermines traditional ideas of logical coherence in narration, formal plot, regular time sequences and convincing, psychologically developed characters. The work of Jorge Luis Borges also exerted a very significant influence on many postmodern writers of fiction. Another characteristic feature of postmodern fiction is its use of pastiche, that is, the juxtaposition of a multiplicity of styles that can be regarded as a representation of the chaotic, provisional nature of different literary genres such as science fiction, detective stories and fairy tales.[57] A further technical experiment involved the undermining of the traditional, linear concept of time by means of such devices as circularity and the juxtaposition or conflation of temporally distinct events. Located, therefore, within a literary context in which the reliance on realist narration was beginning to be rejected in favour of modernist modes originating from the USA and Europe, Carlos Fuentes emblematises this process of cultural change. In this way, he can be seen to emerge as a writer at an important crossroads in the development of the Latin American novel and to be a singularly forceful presence in terms of shaping its trajectory in the decades that followed.

Carlos Fuentes: The Novels

Following the success of *La región más transparente*, Fuentes published his second novel, *Las buenas conciencias* (1959), a traditional family story, written in a realist mode, which concerns the way in which the oligarchy in charge of Guanajuato in the nineteenth century exercised its economic and political power. The protagonist of the novel, Jaime Ceballos,

[57] We see the use of detective story genre for example in the following extract from *Cambio de piel*: 'Échate esta noticia: para asesinar a su segundo esposo la anciana Consagración Carranza de Gómez preparó cuidadosamente un plan que llegó a su culminación durante las primeras horas de pasado 9 de abril, a los postres de una cena en la que su marido, Abundio Gómez Loza, era el invitado de honor. El asesinato fue cometido por la anciana en complicidad con un hijo de su primer matrimonio, Rubén Darío, y con la ayuda de su hermano […]', p.102.

suffers because of the repressive atmosphere and hypocrisy prevailing in his native country. Jaime is a sensitive young man, with a pronounced social conscience and strong religious faith, who strives to achieve existential liberation from the repressive milieu round about him. However, in the end, he has to admit defeat and conform to the expectations of his family and class.[58] Remarkably, Fuentes published two novels in 1962, the haunting and enigmatic text, *Aura*, with its gothic atmosphere and almost complete absence of socio-historical context, as well as his monumental novel, *La muerte de Artemio Cruz,* published by the Fondo de Cultura Económica. The latter puts forward a profound and wide-ranging critique of the Mexican Revolution and attracted international attention as one of the early masterpieces of the Boom in Latin American fiction. It was also translated into more than twenty languages, further proof of its success. It fictionalizes several of the ideas about Mexican identity – ideas expounded by Reyes and Ramos in the 1940s – which Fuentes himself and Octavio Paz had been promulgating and popularizing since the publication of Paz's *El laberinto de la soledad* in 1950. As will be discussed in detail in Chapter Four, the question of the individual's existential choice is a central concern of this novel.

As early as 1962, Fuentes had set out in broad outline what he saw as the principal challenge facing the novelists of his generation: how to find a way to go beyond the realist or naturalistic thesis novel, which, in his eyes, had lost validity. The emergence, through the work of the modernist writers, Proust, Joyce, Dos Passos, Faulkner and others, of the modern novel in the late nineteenth and earlier twentieth century was a phenomenon that had a considerable impact on him. New narrative strategies involving fragmented structures, multiple points of view, stream-of-consciousness, and other innovative techniques, all became standard tools of the trade for Fuentes's generation. Later on, these techniques were supplemented with others more typically associated with post-modernism, such as

[58] We will encounter Jaime Ceballos again in *La muerte de Artemio Cruz*.

pastiche, temporal and spatial discontinuity, disruption, and dislocation. Fuentes proceeded to deploy these techniques in other novels published in the 1960s including the already mentioned *Aura* (1962), *Zona sagrada* (1967) and *Cumpleaños* (1969). Departing from the typical, overt concern with the national, they evince a newly evolving preoccupation with parallel lives and reincarnation, ghosts and magical spells. It is clear, then, that even in the first fifteen years of his writing career, Fuentes's style and approach was highly diverse and experimental.

From 1971 to 1992, Fuentes travelled extensively and lived at different times in France, Great Britain and the USA. He served as Mexican ambassador to France from 1975 to 1977 and taught at both the universities of Harvard and Cambridge from 1987 on-wards. Besides writing articles for newspapers and magazines and being active in political life, he had time to write such important works as *Terra Nostra* (1975) – a veritable *mag-num opus* – , *La cabeza de la hidra* (1978), *Una familia lejana* (1980), an uncharacteristic detective story in the style of Borges which purports to examine the links between France and Mexico, and *Gringo viejo* (1985), which deals with the involvement of two American citizens in the Revolution and is reminiscent of Mariano Azuela's *Los de abajo* (1915). As we have seen, the publication of *Terra Nostra* (1975), represented in many ways the cul-mination of Fuentes's life-long search for the origins of Mexican identity, and constitutes his most elaborate and complex meditation on the interactions between the Hispanic world and the indigenous cultures of the Americas. Technically, it bridges the gap between what critics usually categorize as his modernist and postmodern work. The historical setting for *Terra Nostra* encompasses the Spain of Philip II (1556-1598) (including the construction of El Escorial), the Holy Roman Empire, the European Renaissance, the Reformation, the Inquisition and the conquest of the Americas. In the opinion of Wendy B. Faris,

> Together with *Cambio de piel*, *Terra Nostra* is the most problematic of Fuentes' novels […]. Still, the intricacy of the conceptual patterns and the historical meditations and the richness of many individual images make it one of the most significant of contemporary Latin American works of fiction.[59]

Another of his works, *Cristóbal Nonato* (1987), is a caustic and at times humorous diatribe against the Americanization of Mexico and against his country's corrupt political system. *La campaña* (1990) has nothing to do with Mexico and deals with the fight for independence in Argentina and Chile during the late Colonial period. It does, however, showcase Fuentes's interest in literary form as a way of playing with history.[60] In *Carlos Fuentes* (2009), Florence Olivier, a distinguished French scholar of Latin American literature, offers a thorough analysis of Fuentes's later works. Concentrating on eight works published between 1985 and 1995, including the aforementioned *Gringo viejo*, *Cristóbal Nonato* and *La campaña*, she pays detailed attention to Fuentes's interpretations of Latin American history and of cultural expression in what he termed the encounters between 'the two Americas'.[61]

As we have seen, in the 1940s, Samuel Ramos and José Vasconcelos were attempting to define Mexican identity in a universal context. Fuentes inherited their concern for this problem and their approach to resolving it, and went on to make Mexico and the Mexican man central themes in much of his fiction.[62] In doing so, he had recourse to the new ways of looking at man opened up by existentialist philosophy and the new ways of expressing existential problems pioneered by modernist and post-modernist novelists.

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[59] Wendy B. Faris, *Carlos Fuentes*, p. 165.

[60] See Daniel Chávez, 'Ideología y juego textual en *La campaña* de Carlos Fuentes', *Mester*, 23.2 (Fall, 1994), pp. 32-43.

[61] The term 'the two Americas' is the title of a short story in Fuentes, *El naranjo* (Mexico City: Alfaguara, 1993).

[62] 'México para mí, era un hecho de violentos acercamientos y separaciones […] ¿Cómo hacerme partícipe de las grandes mentiras y las grandes verdades de este país […]? ¿Qué actitud tomar, en mi vida y en lo que empezaba a escribir, ante las contradicciones de ese desorden básico en el que México, es, crea y muere […]'; *Tiempo mexicano*, p.63.

Structure

My central purpose in this thesis is to explore the existentialist elements of Fuentes's work. Unlike Sartre and Camus, Fuentes did not set out to write overtly existentialist novels. Nevertheless, as has been pointed out, his work is suffused with existentialist themes such as alienation, lack of communication, inauthenticity, the role of making choices in the individual's life, and the absurdity of existence, among others. With this in mind, the thesis is divided into five chapters as follows: Chapter One provides a general overview of the development of existentialist thought and an analysis of some of the concerns which are central to it: authenticity, freedom and choice, the anonymity of *Das Man*, alienation, time, and death. Chapter Two outlines the principal foundational texts of the existentialist movement, placing them in their historical context: that of a time when the physical sciences were exploring the nature of the atom and of time itself and when philosophers were engaged in a parallel quest to decipher the very essence of man. Fuentes, as a man of intense intellectual curiosity, was well versed in the theories of Martin Heidegger, Karl Jaspers, Jean-Paul Sartre, and José Ortega y Gasset, among others. The chapter also considers the impact of existentialism within Latin America in general, and in Mexico, in particular. It explores the relationship between existentialism and the endeavours of Latin American thinkers to forge a philosophy that would be appropriate to the distinctive natures of their various societies. Freedom from colonial rule had been achieved early in the nineteenth century and the newly liberated people faced the challenge of nation building. Initially, during the nineteenth century, they had turned to Positivism, with its slogans of order and progress, as the ideology of choice. But the failure of Positivist ideas to help to define the identity of the peoples of the various nations gave rise to a counter reaction – most evident in the Mexican Revolution – which involved a turning to the Amerindian past

as a way of unifying and making nations out of very diverse populations. In fact, one of the most enduring challenges that the emerging nations of Latin America encountered was that of defining their identities as peoples made up of a great range of ethnicities and cultures – Amerindian, Iberian, European, African. These problems of identity are a consistent preoccupation in the work of Fuentes. Chapter Two also examines ideas put forward about the possibility of developing a specifically Latin American philosophy, a project which generated heated controversy throughout most of the twentieth-century: could there be such a thing as an autochthonous philosophy? This rich arena of enquiry yielded a variety of answers and the contributions of existentialist thinkers such as Ortega y Gasset as well as exiled intellectuals, such as Ramón Xirau, Eduardo Nicol, and Vicente Gaos were crucial in this regard.

The next four chapters are devoted to studies of the echoes of existentialist thought in three of Fuentes's early novels. The first of these examines early works by Fuentes: *La región más transparente* and *La muerte de Artemio Cruz*, long considered to be two of the most important works from his prolific output. It is probably in these novels in which existentialist preoccupations are most forcefully developed by Fuentes through both plot and characterization, whereby the more general concerns with man and being are set against and examined through a painstaking excavation of the idea of national identity. The final work to be examined in detail, *Cambio de piel*, also dates from the 1960s, and serves to underscore the way in which existentialist concerns remain present in his work throughout this decade, and a work in which he seamlessly weaves his preoccupations with and interest in 'man' as an individual with his thinking about wider questions of community and nation. There are many other works of his that showcase his interest in existentialism, but these novels have been chosen as the ones that best exemplify his deep engagement with the topic in a way that opens up ideas about national identity and enables them to dialogue

with wider debates in Europe and elsewhere about the nature of the human condition. In order to demonstrate that these concerns remained present in Fuentes's work, a brief consideration of *Cristóbal Nonato* (1987) that synthesizes how his relationship with existentialism evolved from the period of intensive engagement in the 1960s to the later periods of his literary career is included in the Conclusion. The following novels, *La región más transparente* (1958), *Cambio de piel* (1967) and *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* (1962), have been selected for consideration because – being among his first works – they most embody the unfolding of the existentialist quest that the writer set about to undertake. *La región,* particularly, has been seen as an attempt to sketch some type of Latin American existentialism. In fact, when describing the scene of Zamacona's death, Fuentes himself asserts that 'we should regard the scene as evidence of the instantaneousness of Mexican life, of its fundamentally existentialist quality'.[63] On the other hand, the rationale for choosing *Cambio de piel* has more to do with what the novel represents as a whole: that is, a reversal to the type of traditional literature that mostly aimed for rationalism and order.[64] Hence, *Cambio de piel*, as the title itself suggests, represents a renewal of identity, that is, Mexican identity, but is also permeated with universal existentialist echoes. Furthermore, the novel also deals with the prevalence of violence, one of the great preoccupations of existentialist thought, not only in Mexico, but worldwide. Finally, *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* has been selected because, as Van Delden confirms, it is 'a powerful study of the split condition of the self. […] his destabilised subjectivity is the results of the personal choices he has made in the course of his life, but things could clearly have been otherwise'.[65] In other words, the

[63] As cited in Van Delden, *Carlos Fuentes, Mexico and Modernity,* p. 17.

[64] Van Delden, *Carlos Fuentes, Mexico and Modernity,* p. 107.

[65] Van Delden, *Carlos Fuentes, Mexico and Modernity*, p. 52.

novel explores in depth another of the main existentialist themes: that is, personal responsibility for one's actions.

Chapter Three considers Fuentes's first novel, *La región más transparente* (1958), arguing that it is a work in which he analyses Mexican society in terms of the existentialist understanding of authenticity. What he sees is a society that, in all of its strata, from the lowest to the highest, has lost its moral compass and is focused instead on acquiring material goods and aping the life-styles of richer countries. It is a society that has both rejected its indigenous roots and failed to establish its identity as a modern nation. On this level, the novel functions as piercing social critique. It is also here that Fuentes's direct engagement with existentialist philosophy is most apparent through his self-conscious referencing of Heidegger. Through his incisive examination of Mexicanness and Mexican male identity, Fuentes follows in the footsteps of those other well-known intellectual precursors, Samuel Ramos and Octavio Paz, and connects with their post-revolutionary project of identifying a unifying concept of Mexicanness around which national identity might cohere.

Whereas the focus of *La región más transparente* is on the whole of Mexico as a country, in his third novel, *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* (1962), the subject of Chapter Four, Fuentes switched his attention to an individual, but one who is clearly intended to be seen as a microcosm of Mexico. In contrast to traditional, classical philosophy which speculated on mankind in the abstract, it was the life of the individual that was of supreme importance for existentialist thinkers. In the eponymous protagonist of *La muerte de Artemio Cruz*, Fuentes presents us with an individual who exhibits all the human characteristics that the existentialists most inveighed against. Thus, for example, he is overbearingly ambitious and corrupt (as a businessman and member of the Senate), deceitful (in the way in which he takes control of Don Gamaliel's estate and those of others), vindictive (in disposing of Catalina's boyfriend), selfish (in that he is interested only in amassing wealth), and not

averse to using violence (as exemplified in his use of his private gunmen and his implication in the assassination of the Labour leader, Librado Ibarra). On the brink of death, as the novel begins, he can only ruminate on the life that might have been if he had made different choices and followed different paths.

Chapter Five is devoted to a detailed analysis of *Cambio de piel* (1967). It is argued that, in writing this novel, Fuentes wanted to widen his international appeal and not be pigeonholed solely as a Mexican novelist writing about Mexico, and that, hence, the Mexican element in the novel is offset against a global context that includes consideration of the horrors of the holocaust among other significant historical periods and events. The main argument of the novel, it is shown, follows the traditional pattern of tracing human relationships and inter-reactions but then broadens out into a reflective meditation on the prevalence of violence in the world. In the course of this meditation, violence is portrayed in universal terms, not as something new or confined to Mexico, but as a phenomenon that has subsisted down the ages, from the persecution of the Jews in Medieval Europe, through the brutal conquest of Mexico by Cortés, to the cynical matter-of-factness of the Nazi holocaust of the Jews in the concentration camps. Fuentes wishes for a 'change of skin' on the part of human kind but is pessimistic about the possibilities of such an outcome. This novel, then, highlights violence as the central existentialist concern – a concept inherently linked to both death and alienation, particularly at the level of human interaction and communication.

In the Conclusion, some attention is devoted to a fourth, much later, work by Fuentes, *Cristóbal Nonato* (1987). Set in Mexico of the 1980s, this novel sets out to show that, despite the Revolution and its lofty ideals, nothing has changed. The political system is the same, if not worse, after sixty years of one party rule by the PRI; the rich are still rich and the poor, poor, but now there are millions more of them, and the future seems

equally, if not more, bleak. When Cristóbal's uncle, Don Fernando Benítez, flies over the whole expanse of Mexico to assess what is left of the country, he sees that most of it has been sold off to foreign interests to pay off the national debt.[66] The 'sweet fatherland' has been dismembered and destroyed. This, then, is the particular reason for choosing *Cristóbal Nonato* to conclude the final analysis of this thesis. The novel represents, in essence, a sarcastic burlesque underpinned by postmodern literary techniques. The main theme is destruction, both mythical and actual. Mexico City is synonymous with acid rain, rubbish, hunger, crime, greed, corruption, all symptomatic of a city living on the edge of an existential abyss. Thus, *Cristóbal Nonato,* as we will see, can be understood as a consummation of all the existentialist themes found in the earlier novels of Fuentes and as demonstrating that 'su obra en conjunto se presenta orgánicamente conectada, una red de vasos comunicantes que enlazan una producción con otra'.[67]

> La novela *Cristóbal Nonato* entreteje preocupaciones que el autor enlaza desde su iniciación: la reflexión de las consecuencias de la revolución; la mirada al Distrito Federal Mexicano, todavía sombrado por el crecimiento anómalo; la indignación renovada por sentirlo asediado por la codicia de unos pocos […], las posibilidades de construir un sujeto mexicano plantado con seguridad.[68]

In the opening section of *La región más transparente* Fuentes presents a scene in which the character of an Argentinian existentialist philosopher, named Estévez, is giving a lecture to a group of women at a cocktail party. Estévez, based on a real-life figure who introduced Heidegger to Mexico, is speaking in the incongruous setting of a cocktail party organized by the elite of bourgeois society. It is one of the rare moments in his fiction where Fuentes makes explicit reference to the subject of existentialism:

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[66] Carlos Fuentes, *Cristóbal Nonato* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1994), p. 26.

[67] Estela Saint André, *El lenguaje que somos. Carlos Fuentes y el pensamiento de lo hispanoamericano* (San Juan: Servicio de Publicaciones de la FFHA, Universidad Nacional de San Juan, 2002), p. 93.

[68] Saint André, p. 93.

> En un rincón, las señoritas de gafas asentían urgentemente al nervioso hablar de Estévez: - El mexicano es este ente, anónimo y desarticulado, que se asoma a su circunstancia con, a lo sumo, miedo o curiosidad. El Dasein, en cambio, ha tomado consciencia de la finitud del hombre; éste es un conjunto de posibilidades, la última de las cuales es la muerte, siempre vista en terceros, nunca experimentada en pellejo propio. ¿Cómo se proyecta el Dasein a la muerte?
> Las señoritas de gafas tiraban de sus sweaters con alegría sudorosa.
> - … es un ser para la muerte; una relación entre el ser puro y la nada anonada … uuy, el argentino. Perdón; no se puede filosofar con la australidad abstracta.[69]

As seen earlier, in his interview with Emir Rodríguez Monegal, Fuentes had pointed to a Latin American existentialism *avant la lettre* that had somehow existed before it came to overwhelm European thought – a predisposition, arising from the colonial experience, to explore the individual's modes of choice before death. Needless to say, this sense of the 'existential' starkness and precariousness of life in Mexico, as Fuentes defines it here, will permeate all of his fiction.

[69] Fuentes, *La región*, pp. 52-53.

Chapter One

Existentialism

1.1 What is Existentialism?

This chapter offers a brief introduction to the principal tenets of existentialism as they developed in Europe throughout the nineteenth century. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to offer an exhaustive overview of existentialism and indeed, this has been comprehensively achieved elsewhere. Instead, it will focus on those of most immediate relevance to Latin America, and to the work of Carlos Fuentes, in particular by examining the central ideas expounded by Jean Paul Sartre and Martin Heidegger. However it will also include sections exploring the legacy of thinkers such as Soren Kierkegaard and Karl Jaspers as these too have contributed in significant ways to the development of existentialist philosophy in Latin America.

In the latter decades of the nineteenth century, philosophers such as Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) and Miguel de Unamuno (1864-1936) were sounding a note of alarm about what they saw as the gradual depersonalization of individuals within the increasingly industrialized societies of Europe. All equally expressed their dissatisfaction with the religious institutions and prevailing sensibility of their epoch. They aimed to reawaken man's consciousness of his unique individuality and urged him not to be satisfied with the social and religious status quo. They issued a call to arms for the rejection of the outmoded shibboleths of traditional philosophy and the cre-

ation of a more personal and subjective religion or philosophy of life. In time, this new philosophy came to be known as Existentialism.

Existentialism, like Cubism and Surrealism, is one those *Isms* that everyone has heard of, yet none of the great existentialist writings contains the word 'existentialism'. The term seems to have been coined towards the end World War II by the French philosopher Gabriel Marcel (1889-1973) as a label for the ideas of Jean Paul Sartre (1905-1980) and Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986).[70] The label was soon to be applied to many other writers, including, for example, the two German philosophers of *Existenz*, Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) and Karl Jaspers (1883-1969). At a later stage, it was applied, retrospectively, to philosophers such as Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, both of whom had strongly influenced Heidegger, Jaspers and Jean Paul Sartre.

The popular but not necessarily accurate understanding of existentialism is that it was a philosophical movement, born out of the Angst of post-Second World War Europe, out of the loss of faith – stemming from Dresden and Auschwitz – in science and in the ideals of progress and reason, that saw man as a being abandoned in an alien world, and proposed that the appropriate philosophy for man in this 'age of distress' had to be a subjective, personal one that would allow him to live a life that was true to his inner self. The hero for this age – the existentialist hero – would be the one who lived his life totally free from the constraints of discredited traditions and was committed to the demands of authentic living. In the words of John Wild,

> This philosophy is best understood as a rebellion against the abstract objectivism or essentialism of modern thought, with an intensive emphasis on the concrete subjective existence which it has consistently ignored.[71]

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[70] See, for example, Kenneth T. Gallagher, *The Philosophy of Gabriel Marcel* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1962).

[71] John Wild, *The Challenge of Existentialism* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1955), p. 28.

According to this conception, we are all existentialists: in practice, most people take things as they come; the man in the street loves to prattle about his joys, sorrows, his feelings of well-being and his frustrations, but this type of existence, characterized by absorption in the crowd mentality is precisely of the type which the existentialists tended to deprecate. The most exciting and lasting contribution of existentialist philosophy was its emphasis on the emotional life of man – on his changing feelings and moods, and on his anxiety. In rebelling against the abstractions of traditional philosophy, the existentialists devoted more attention to feeling, willing and acting rather than to the intellectual aspects of man's being.

David E. Cooper has summarized the features popularly associated with the existentialist conception of human life as follows:

> Existence, they will have you hear, is a constant striving, a perpetual choice; it is marked by a radical freedom and responsibility; and is always prey to a sense of Angst which reveals that, for the most part, it is lived unauthentically and in bad faith.[72]

In 1945, Jean Paul Sartre gave a lecture entitled 'Existentialism and Humanism' to an enthusiastic audience at the Club Maintenant in Paris. In this lecture, he rebutted criticisms of existentialism and outlined some of the salient features of the 'new' philosophy. The movement was like a long-smouldering fire that burst into flame amidst the post-war intellectual ferment of Paris. The social circumstances and the prevalent mood of disillusionment in Europe generally made it a fertile ground for the spread of this new, subjective philosophy. The political and social systems upon which men had previously relied had been discredited, fomenting a negative attitude to all the movements and systems of objective thinking that had been associated with them. Existentialism was now being discussed and analysed in the Parisian cafés. It had abandoned the ivory towers associated with tradition-

[72] David E. Cooper, *Existentialism: A Reconstruction* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), p. 132.

al philosophy and had become the patrimony of the 'ordinary', intellectually curious man. It is important to underscore, however, that existentialism, in its broadest sense, was not altogether new. It finds its roots in the Greek philosophers, in the Old and New Testaments, and in St. Augustine, but it was only in the nineteenth century that it crystalized into a formal philosophy. This was due in no small measure to the writings of the Danish philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard, whose work, unfortunately, and astonishingly, was not translated (into German) until the beginning of the twentieth century.

Since Kierkegaard was the seminal mind of the existentialist movement, the thinker who laid the foundations for a new and revolutionary philosophy, it seems appropriate at this point to offer a brief overview of his life and the development of his ideas.[73] He was born in Copenhagen in 1813, and pursued his theological studies at the University of Copenhagen, but soon became disillusioned with the traditional philosophy then being taught in the Universities. For a time, he thought of studying law and even of becoming an actor, but eventually took up the study of philosophy to give some grounding to his life. As Mairet points out, Kierkegaard was first and last a religious writer and, despite his rebellion against the Protestant church, his ultimate purpose was the rediscovery and vindication of the traditional faith.[74] For him, official religion had become meaningless and a merely perfunctory affair whereby the individual's becoming a Christian was a trivial routine. He writes of man as a being with a passion for an eternal happiness.[75] Kierkegaard's mission in life was, first of all, to examine his own way of life and then to 'convert' others to his

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[73] All subsequent existentialist philosophers, especially Martin Heidegger and Jean Paul Sartre, were indebted to the pioneering work of Kierkegaard and concentrated their efforts on a fuller elucidation of his ideas and especially on trying to decipher the nature of Being. In this respect, they were aided by the work of Edmund Husserl (1859-1938). The quest for essential knowledge is a fundamental preoccupation of the existentialists. From Kierkegaard they derived the notion of the richness and uniqueness of individual existence, and later looked to Husserl for a methodological justification of philosophy.

[74] See Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, trans. by Philip Mairet (London: Methuen, 2007), p.128.

[75] We find similar sentiments expressed by the Spanish philosophers, Ortega y Gasset and, especially, Unamuno, who wrote of his passionate longing to become absorbed into God, as, por example, in his *The Tragic Sense of Life* trans. by J.E. Crawford Flitch with an introductory essay by Salvador de Madariaga (New York: Dover, 1954)

own philosophy. He was sufficiently financially well off to be able to lead a leisurely life and survey the behaviour of society around about him. Though melancholy by nature, he still liked to communicate with the people he encountered in his constant walks through the winding streets of Copenhagen. In an ironic, self-deprecating comment on his *modus operandi* and manner of living, he remarks:

> If Copenhagen was ever of one single opinion about someone, I dare say it had been of one opinion about me. I was a street-corner loafer, an idler, a flâneur, a frivolous bird […] but I lacked 'earnestness'. I represented the worldly mentality's irony, the enjoyment of life […] but of 'earnestness and positivity' there was not a trace.[76]

He admits to finding a satisfaction in that way of life which he later defined as the 'aesthetic life' and which he describes in great detail. But then came his Pauline conversion. After this, he says, when he reflected on his earlier life, he was filled with despondency and anxiety about its purposelessness, and determined to remedy the situation: 'What is going to happen? What will the future bring? I do not know [….] This life is turned around and dreadful, not to be endured'.[77]

This feeling of anxiety led him to take the first step towards remedying his problem and to rebuild his life on a firm philosophical foundation. As John Wild points out in his excellent book on existentialism, unlike Heidegger and Sartre, Kierkegaard did not attempt to formulate a general theory on being, an ontology.[78] Rather, he was an ethical thinker concerning himself with the description and analysis of human existence and the world of man. His profound knowledge of Greek philosophy and the Christian religion equipped him admirably for this task, and allowed him to mould the two strands into a unified whole. He was critical of the non-descriptive and speculative method of modern philosophy and its neglect of practical awareness and personal ethics. Thus, for example,

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[76] As cited in Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (eds), *The Essential Kierkegaard* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 472.

[77] *Either/Or: A Fragment of Life* (1846); as cited in Hong and Hong, p. 39.

[78] Wild, p. 32.

Kierkegaard was the first to discern the unique character and significance of that strange emotion of dread and to analyse it in its phenomenological manifestations of anxiety, boredom, melancholy and despair, phenomena which had been almost completely neglected by modern thought. His aim, therefore, was not to create a philosophical system but to outline to others the concrete possibilities of human existence. In his student days, having rejected Christianity, he had devoted himself to Hegel, but

> […] disillusionment with speculative philosophy and his continuing despair sent him back to the question of Christian faith and founded his settled hostility to objective system– building as a distraction and a delusion, ruinous to truly philosophical thinking and living because it provides a life-long escape from the real problems of individual existence.[79]

His major works, *Philosophical Fragments* and *Concluding Postscripts*, appeared in the 1840s.[80] In these, he explores themes which subsequently became central to existentialist thought, such as freedom, authenticity, angst, alienation, the individual as 'becoming' rather than 'being', responsibility for one's own self and existence, and the necessity to choose one's life. The distinction between existence and 'real existence', its authentic and inauthentic modes, is common to all existentialist philosophers. The distinction is ultimately rooted in ancient, classical philosophy but is also characteristic of Christian thought. Kierkegaard's aim, then, was to chart the way to authentic living.

One must remember that Kierkegaard was an intensely passionate Christian despite the fact that he repudiated Official Christianity: 'But one thing I will not do. I will not participate […] in what is called Official Christianity […] and I thank God that he mercifully has kept me from entering it too far'.[81] He came to the conclusion that following Christ involved self-denial, suffering and humiliation and that accepting these conditions was

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[79] H.J. Blackham, *Six Existentialist Thinkers* (London: Routledge & Keegan Paul, 1952), p.3.

[80] Hong and Hong, especially the following Chapters: 'Philosophical Fragments' (p. 116), and 'Concluding Postscripts' (p. 187).

[81] Kierkegaard, *Faedrelandet Articles* (1872); as quoted in Hong and Hong, p. 431.

about the furthest thing possible from the mind-set of institutional Christianity. To choose oneself before God and to commit oneself to faith, he concluded, is like losing oneself and throwing oneself into the abyss. But if a man risks all and takes the leap of faith, he finds himself and thereby chooses his true authentic self:

> We can now understand what Kierkegaard means by 'existence'. It does not mean simply being there, not even simply living […] There are many who exist but who at the same time do not 'exist'. That is to say, they drift along, following custom and convention without even becoming individuals in anything but an ontological sense. To 'exist' means choosing one's true self […] Kierkegaard can therefore speak of it as a process of 'becoming' and as a 'striving'.[82]

As already mentioned, Kierkegaard had outlined all the basic concepts of existentialism long before it became a recognized philosophy. Subsequent philosophers such as Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, to mention a few, took on board these concepts and developed them further and thus the contribution and influence of Kierkegaard is incontestable. In this way, it is not surprising that he has been called the 'father of existentialism'. Be that as it may, Gordon Marino argues that Kierkegaard did not seek to provide an absolute philosophical account of the world since this would distract from what primarily interested him: the life of the individual, which is rooted in everyday living and looks to the future:

> [He] argues for a different way of thinking, a new kind of engagement, which begins with the individual's reflection on his or her own existence and not as an abstract philosophical category, but as something which the individual is right in the midst of.[83]

Furthermore, Jeff Collins and Howard Selina point out that:

> Essentialists took up Kierkegaard's call for a philosophy centred on the 'existing individual'. Against the rationalistic philosophical systems, they searched out the personal, subjective dimensions of human life; ethical and religious choices, emotional response, self-affirmation, committed action in the world.[84]

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[82] Frederick Copleston, *Contemporary Philosophy* (New York: Newman Press, 1972), p.154.

[83] Gordon Marino, *Basic Writings of Existentialism* (New York: The Modern Library, 2004), p. 45.

[84] Jeff Collins and Howard Selina, *Introducing Heidegger: A Graphic Guide* (London: Icon Books, 2010), p. 86.

It may seem strange that existentialism – which is so often associated with atheism – had its origins in the work of a philosopher whose thought is deeply rooted in a conception of the individual's relationship with God and how we might live in a world where God is absent or even dead. However, for Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky and Nietzsche, writing in the deeply religious nineteenth century, the place of mankind and the individual with respect of God was central to all their philosophical theorizing.

Thomas Flynn, in his work, draws attention to the fact that existentialism is a philosophy of freedom and that Nietzsche's project was to bring humanity back to earth and away from its illusions about the transcendent and eternal.[85] Instead, Nietzsche emphasized the human dimension of existence, its irrational instincts and drives and what he called the 'will-to-power'. Indeed, both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche focused on subjective human experience rather than the objective truths of mathematics and science which they believed were too detached and observationally objectified to truly reveal the nature of human experience. They were more interested in people's quiet struggle with the apparent meaningless of life. They also considered the role of making free choices regarding fundamental values and beliefs. Kiekegaard's 'knight of faith' and Nietzsche's *Übermensch*, then, are representatives of people who exhibit freedom, in that they define the nature of their own existence.[86]

In *Man in the Modern Age*, Karl Jaspers argued that philosophy had become the foundation of man's true being and that man, deprived of his faith by the loss of religion, was devoting more decisive attention to the nature of his own being: 'Instead of studying man as an individual, we must study the social institutions of mankind, and these will lead

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[85] Thomas R. Flynn, *Existentialism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 37.

[86] Kierkegaard, *The Essential Kierkegaard*; Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil,* trans. by Helen Zirmmern, (New York: Dover Publications, 1997).

us to a knowledge of man's being'.[87] He called this new and revolutionary philosophy 'existence philosophy'. Jaspers points out that as we question reality we confront boundaries that the scientific method cannot transcend. At this point, the individual faces a choice: to sink into despair and resignation or to take a leap of faith towards what he calls Transcendence. In making this leap, individuals confront their own limitless freedom, which he calls *Existenz*, and can finally experience authentic being. Transcendence, paired with the term 'Encompassing' in later works, is, for Jaspers, that which exists beyond the world of time and space.

To return, then, to the question of what existentialism is: it is clear that it is not easy to provide a precise or concise definition. Most scholars conceive of it as an amorphous philosophical-literary movement that concentrates on the condition of man – his joys and sufferings. It is a philosophy that takes as its starting point the individual's existence. Hence, what sets it apart from most other philosophies is that it begins with the 'particular' rather than the 'universal'. It addresses the most fundamental concerns of human existence: suffering, loneliness, dread, guilt, conflict, spiritual emptiness, the absence of absolute, universal values, the fallibility of human reason, and the tragic impasses of the human condition. When so much in modern thought seemed sterile and removed from ultimately important issues, the existentialists asked people to consider again an array of searching questions: Who am I? What is my purpose in existing? How should I live? These are questions that can unsettle individuals to the core of their being, awaken them from the somnambulism of their lives, and direct them to assume responsibility to create meaning out of our situation in the world.[88] At the heart of existentialism was the refusal of its proponents to belong to any school of thought, the repudiation of the adequacy of any body, and, espe-

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[87] Karl Jaspers, *Man in the Modern Age*, trans. by Eden and Cedar Paul (London: Routledge, 1933), p.173.

[88] See Steven Earnshaw, *Existentialism: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London; New York: Continuum, 2006), pp. 1-2.

cially, system, of beliefs and a marked dissatisfaction with what they saw as the tendency of traditional philosophy to be abstract, academic and remote from life.

There is no single existentialist position on any question: rather, existentialist thinkers are characterized by a series of common attitudes, among them the kind of skepticism about the classical philosophic tradition just referenced. Their major and differentiating idea is that 'existence is prior to essence', whereas in the established tradition, 'essence is prior to existence'. What this means for the existentialist is that human nature is determined by the course of life rather than life by human nature. They rejected systematic discourse in favour of a more spontaneous mode of expression in order to capture the authentic concerns of existing individuals. According to Sartre, man, by his own choices, defines his character, his essence and the person he is becoming. His choices determine his make-up. Thus, there is no such thing as human nature, and there is no God to conceive it. Not only is man what he conceives himself to be, but he is also only what he wills himself to be after being thrust into existence.[89]

A core tenet of existentialism is that the individual is a responsible, conscious being rather than the sum of the labels, roles, stereotypes, or preconceived categories ascribed to him. Thus, human beings, through their own consciousness, create their own values and determine the meaning of their lives. As Carole Bland has written,

> One of the major concerns of twentieth-century literature has been to explore the plight of man in a dehumanised universe. The steady encroachment of modern technology, with its concomitant secularisation of the environment, has left man alienated and rootless, with his life bereft of transcendent values and meaning. Themes of solitude and isolation permeate the writings of today's authors, and they are frequently engaged in examining the psychological, existential, and mythic implications of modern life.[90]

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[89] As Sartre put it, 'I am condemned to be free. This means that no limits to my freedom can be found except freedom itself or, if you prefer, that we are not free to cease being free'; *Being and Nothingness*, trans. by Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Pocket Books, 1966), p. 567.

[90] Carole C. Bland, 'Carlos Fuentes' *Cambio de piel:* The Quest for Rebirth', *Journal of Spanish Studies: Twentieth Century*, 4 (1976), pp. 77-88 (p. 77).

Continuing this line of enquiry, it becomes clear that rejection of reason as the supreme tool for uncovering the source of meaning is a common theme in existentialist thought, as is the focus on the feelings of anxiety and dread that we experience in the face of our radical freedom and our awareness of death.

Existentialism is concerned with the only entity it considers to have no predetermined essence, whose being consists in pure possibility. The human being never coincides with himself: he is not what he is and he is what he is not, since he projects himself and surpasses himself at every moment. This then is the source of the famous existentialist anguish.[91] Thus, what best defines existentialism from a historical perspective and what allows one to understand its contribution to alternative thinking is not a doctrine but rather an emphasis on rethinking the human condition, and not in terms of essentialist, atemporal concepts but from the perspective of its historical peculiarity.

In this chapter it is proposed to explore the slow, incremental expansion of existentialism in the nineteenth-century through to its full flowering in the mid twentieth century. In order to do this, the bases of the movement will be examined by means of a general overview of the contributions made by the various philosophers associated with it, from Kierkegaard to Sartre. It should be emphasised that this precludes an exhaustive analysis of existentialist ideas; however, all the philosophers discussed made their own distinctive contributions to existentialist philosophy and in so doing built up a corpus of thought which still exerts a powerful influence on contemporary ways of conceiving the human condition. It is also proposed to examine the spread of the movement to Latin America and

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[91] 'Putting myself under question occurs because I am not predefined in any way; although I find that I exist there is nothing to say that defines that existence, there is nothing to say who I am. This means that I am free, therefore to define my existence, to make or determine myself. But this in itself is a source of "anguish" since it conflicts with the desire to simply "be", the desire of the "for-itself" to coincide with the "in-itself"'; Earnshaw, pp. 82-83.

to evaluate its impact on the philosophy and literature of that continent, and especially within Mexico.

1.2 Ethics and Themes

a. Authenticity

Traditional philosophy was theoretical and abstract and not concerned with the individual as such. According to Jaspers, the most characteristic symptom of the philosophy of what he considers to be the multifariously named traditional philosophical schools is that most of their exponents knew nothing of Kierkegaard.[92] However, all this changed with the advent of the new 'existence-philosophy' which concentrated on the individual and his concerns in a world that appeared indifferent if not hostile to his very existence. Existentialist thinkers aimed to lay down a road map for the individual, a guide to how best to lead his life and to overcome all the obstacles to a fuller existence. As Jaspers points out when referring to Kierkegaard,

> He cannot show his contemporaries what they ought to do, but can make them feel that they are on the wrong road.[93]

All the existentialists accepted the distinction between authentic and inauthentic modes of existence as one dividing men at the root of their very being and as manifesting itself at every level of their concrete existence. Kierkegaard was the first to offer an in-depth analy-

[92] Jaspers, *Man in the Modern Age*, p.141.

[93] Jaspers, *Man in the Modern Age*, p. 20.

sis of the subject and was eminently qualified for the task as he was writing from first-hand experience. He saw his early life as typifying inauthentic existence.[94] Kierkegaard referred to this way of life as the 'aesthetic', one characterized by its frivolous nature and its avoidance of commitment to any long-term purpose. [95] It involves no decisive choices and is committed only to the pleasure of the moment. Such a life lacks structure and continuity. The world is revealed to the individual as a vast array of passing objects or events. And yet he has no ultimate contentment in this way of life and consequently becomes unsettled and full of anxiety.

Over against this is the 'ethical life', the life of the authentic individual, who commits himself to long-term purposes through decisive choices which accord with his own essential humanity and responsibility to a universal moral law. The authentic person knows himself as a limited existence, which must soon die. He realizes that he has already chosen and must go on choosing. He knows the risks and feels the dread of this responsibility:

> […] there is not one single human being who does not despair a little, who does not secretly harbour an unrest, an inner strife, a disharmony, an anxiety about an unknown something or a something he does not even dare to try to know, an anxiety about some possibility in existence or an anxiety about himself.[96]

Martin Heidegger was greatly impressed by Kierkegaard's concept of authentic and inauthentic existence, so much so that he incorporated it into his own philosophy and developed it further. Hiding from oneself in the many forms of impersonal existence is, he believed, inspired by dread. Kierkegaard had analysed the 'concept of dread' in order to penetrate into the deepest layers of human feeling and Heidegger uses it for the same purpose:

> The decisive character of dread is that it cannot be localized, except for the fact that by emptying everything in the world of all interest for the individual it invests everything alike with a common restlessness. 'Dread' withdraws one from one's

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[94] Hong and Hong, p. 472.

[95] Hong and Hong, p. 472.

[96] Hong and Hong, p. 357.

> preoccupations, encloses one in a solitude in which one is forced to choose, whether one will be oneself, or not. For 'dread' separates one from the interest and meanings of one's life in the world and isolates one in this recognition that one can either continue this impersonally determined unauthentic existence or by a heroic effort take personal charge of one's own existence.[97]

All human beings are oriented towards their own potentialities, among which are the possibilities of authentic and inauthentic existence. For Heidegger, authentic existence can only begin when individuals arrive at the realization of who they are and grasp the fact that each human being is a distinctive entity and is responsible for himself and his own life. There is a tendency, Heidegger believes, to cede to others the power to decide who and how we should be.[98] Sartre and the French existentialists were deeply influenced by this notion of Heidegger's, as shall be examined in a later section. Man, then, according to Heidegger, is not an isolated individual, but is interrelated with the world of things and persons. From this conception of 'being-with-one-another', it follows that man can never escape from the impersonal, anonymous form of existence which is rooted in 'the one'. He can acquiesce in his membership of 'the one' to the extent of becoming absorbed in the crowd-consciousness, thus gaining supportive assurance but at the expense of personal responsibility. This is an inauthentic form of existence. Or, he can, within limits, assume personal responsibility for his destiny and achieve authentic existence.[99]

In his study of existentialism, John Mcquarrie points to an important element in Heidegger's concept of authenticity: existentialists use the term 'facticity' to designate the limiting factors in existence; existential awareness of one's own being is a fact that is to be

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[97] Blackham, pp. 94-95.

[98] '"They" can be anybody or everybody or nobody. They are the "others", but they are not definite others […] But Heidegger does make an interesting new point about the relation of the individual in his everydayness, to the "they". Everyone is the other, and no one is himself […] the entanglement of the individual with the others […] deprives the individual of his true selfhood'; John Macquarrie, *Existentialism: An Introduction, Guide and Assessment* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), p.120.

[99] 'This opens to me two decisively opposed modes of being: authentic being rooted in the explicit sense of my situation; and inauthentic being, moving automatically in the established ruts and routes of the organised world'; Blackham, pp. 92-93.

accepted. No one has chosen to be. People simply find themselves in existence. There is almost surprise, even shock, that we find ourselves 'there' as a fact to be reckoned with. Furthermore, each person has been born into a particular situation and all kind of forces operate to shape his life and limit what he can become.[100] Heidegger uses the expression 'thrownness' for man's facticial condition – in the sense of man being thrown into existence. Human possibilities, therefore, are set within a framework of facticity. On the one hand, man is open and projects his possibilities; on the other, he is closed by the factual situation in which he finds himself. Thus, man's struggle for authentic existence is circumscribed and limited by forces beyond his control.[101]

For existentialists, authenticity is a mark of the true individual. To be truly authentic is to have realized one's individuality. The person who avoids choice, who becomes a mere face in the crowd or cog in the bureaucratic machine, has failed to become authentic. As Thomas R. Flynn explains:

> No existential category is better known in Sartrean existentialism than 'bad faith'. It certainly has wider usage than 'good faith'. This is probably because it is more widespread in its relevance. Sartre seems to agree with Heidegger that our usual inclination is to deny responsibility for our situation, that is, to be in bad faith.[102]

'Bad faith' consists in not accepting one's responsibilities and in seeking to blame someone or something for what one has done freely oneself, in choosing to assert one's freedom only where it is expedient, and, on other occasions, in seeking refuge in determinism. It is to pretend that one is born with a determined self instead of recognizing that one spends one's life pursuing and making oneself. It is the refusal to face the anguish which accompanies the recognition of our absolute freedom.

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[100] Macquarrie, pp. 191-92.

[101] 'But this construction is limited by the nature of things; not everything is possible, it is not a dream world, but a world of brute existence already elaborated and organised into routine possibilities by the realisation of others'; Blackham, pp.92-93.

[102] Flynn, p.70.

According to this logic, in the absence of a Creator, the individual feels abandoned and is left harbouring a sense of anger towards the universe. Anger and despair lead to a tendency to embrace bad faith' – a self-deception whereby the person views himself as an object, and not a person with free will. As an object, a person is without responsibility. This type of 'bad faith' involves resignation to the pattern of life laid out in advance and over which one has no control and, hence, is free of responsibility. It counsels dull resignation to one's fate. In connection with this, it is interesting to note that Karl Jasper's doctrine of 'boundary situations' is now widely accepted among existentialist thinkers.[103] The most important of these are: suffering, change, guilt and death. These constitute limits in the sense that we can do nothing to alter or transcend them but there is an authentic and an inauthentic way to face them. The inauthentic person accepts the everyday world as basically sound and thinks of himself as a relatively stable object within this world, whereas the authentic person accepts the everyday world but not as basically sound. He feels the strangeness of things as they are.

b. The Anonymous 'Das Man'

According to David Cooper, a persistent theme in existentialist writings is the contrast between the life of the authentic individual and the life which is immersed in the anonymous 'public', 'crowd', 'herd' or 'mass'.[104] All the existentialist philosophers are united in pointing out the dangers to authentic existence and the influence of mass psychology which

[103] 'Certain situations serve to bring man's efforts at achieving autonomy to an abrupt and tragic halt. These are the fundamental limit situations which bring a man to sudden awareness of his dependent, transient nature - man's condition as mortal, suffering and sinful being […]'; James Collins, *The Existentialists: A Critical Study* (Chicago: Henry Regenery, 1968), p. 111.

[104] Cooper, pp. 110-11.

suppresses the individual in favour of the whole. When the human person is viewed as an object he is apt to be lost as a tiny drop in the ocean of humanity. The awareness of this subordination of the individual to the life of the mass was a conspicuous feature of Hegelian philosophy.[105] It fitted in with certain social tendencies which had become accentuated with the advent of the Industrial Revolution and the scientific progress and mass production that came with it. Kierkegaard and Nietzsche may have been poles apart in their philosophies, but were united in their aim to point out that the greatest danger threatening European civilization was the emergence of such a mass mentality. Kierkegaard was aware that society was full of demonic, downward levelling forces and regarded the Press as the most potent of these forces. He saw that men were determined to lose themselves in the world of things and history, and that no one wanted to be an individual human being. His emphatic recognition of the individual as the bearer of all authentic human value, together with his distrust of mass mechanisms and mass attitudes transmitted itself to the whole existentialist movement. Likewise, Nietzsche railed against the oppressive, levelling power of the 'herd', the 'mob' with its determination to rein in the select individual, the higher man.[106] 'The main purpose of his diatribes against democracy, Christianity and traditional morality is that "the ideas of the herd should rule in the herd- but not, reach out beyond it:"'[107] There must be an end to its tyranny over those capable of becoming 'higher men'.[108] Nietzsche's criticism of accepted standards was not made in the spirit of anarchy and de-

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[105] 'This Being-with-one-another one's own *Dasein* completely into the kind of Being of "The Others" in such a way, indeed, that the others […] vanish more and more. In this inconspicuousness and unascertainability the real dictatorship of the "they" is unfolded, […] The "they" which is nothing definite, and which all are, […] prescribes the kind of Being of everydayness'; Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (New York: Harpercollins, 1962), p. 164.

[106] 'Nietzsche separates mankind into two sorts, "The herd" and those willing to strive towards the overman. The herd is characterized by its unthinking interdependence and its reliance on Christian values. Nietzsche is swingeing in his criticism of Christianity, and argues that the herd's Christian morality has grown out of a situation where the weak have grouped together and produced laws designed to keep "leaders", would-be-overmen, under control'; Earnshaw, p.48.

[107] *The Will to Power* (New York: Walter Kaufman and R.J. Hollingdale, 1968), p. 162.

[108] Cooper, pp. 110-11.

structiveness. His ultimate aim was to remove the obstacles placed on unusual individuals: 'At present it belongs to the conception of "greatness" to be noble, to wish to be apart, to be capable of being different, to stand alone, to have to live by personal indicative'.[109] Existentialists then, saw philosophy as the essential prerequisite for a real awakening of minds to the problems of mass standardization. Mass uniformity had to be resisted in every walk of life. Individuals had to be encouraged to think for themselves and to understand themselves not as things but as free persons.

It is difficult to ascertain what precisely was so threatening about 'das Man'.[110] Heidegger lays out his case against 'him': each *Dasein*[111] exists as an 'I am' and also as an 'I am-with-others' and, therefore, is subject to takeover by the others. In one's own everyday existence one's *Dasein* dissolves completely into the kind of being characteristic of 'the others'. Who causes this? The answer is: no one in particular. The 'who' is 'das Man', 'one', the 'they', the 'faceless public'. Thus, every kind of excellence in individuals gets silently suppressed as a result of the 'levelling down' of all the possibilities of being.

According to Jaspers, the basic question of our time is whether an independent human life is still possible because the mass order brings into being a universal life apparatus which proves destructive to the world of a truly human life. He argues that:

> When the average functional capacity has become the standard of achievement, the individual is regarded with indifference. No one is indispensable. He is not himself, having no more genuine individuality than one pin in a row, a mere object.[112]

The Spanish philosopher, José Ortega y Gasset (1883-1955), also saw this diminution and levelling down process as the greatest danger facing European man and was probably the

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[109] As quoted by Zimmerman in the Introduction to *Beyond Good and Evil*, p.vii. Carlos Fuentes's Artemio Cruz is clearly an example of the 'overman'; see especially Chapter 4 of this thesis.

[110] 'Indeed, escape from servitude to other persons may deliver one more completely into the hands of the ubiquitous dictator of everyday human affair, the impersonal one, *das Man*'; Blackham, p.91.

[111] '*Dasein* (the word, although ambiguously used by Heidegger) is generally accepted as an untranslatable technical term of his philosophy, meaning the mode of existence of the human being'; Blackham, p.88.

[112] Jaspers, *Man in the Modern Age*, pp. 51-52.

thinker who provided the most searching analysis of the deleterious effects of mass culture on the efforts of the individual to achieve authentic existence.[113] In his *La rebelión de la masas* (1930) he asserts that 'mass-man' has triumphed. Vulgarity runs rampant everywhere and mass-man crushes everything different or outstanding and strives to bring everyone else down to his own level of mediocrity. He does not recognize any superiors and is intolerant of the ideas of others. The masses have been the instruments of modern living but because of a lack of education mass-man lives, even amidst civilization, as a primitive. All this, according to Ortega, began in the eighteenth century with the affirmation of the rights of man, and was accentuated with the increasing material well-being of the nineteenth century and the scientific progress of the twentieth. As he sees it:

> As the masses, by definition, neither should nor can direct their own personal existence, and still less rule society in general, this fact [the revolt of the masses] means that actually Europe is suffering from the greatest crisis that can afflict peoples, nations and civilization […] It is called the rebellion of the masses.[114]

c. Freedom and Choice

For Jaspers, the term 'existence' (*Existenz*) designates the indefinable experience of freedom and possibility, an experience which constitutes the authentic being of individuals, who became aware of 'the encompassing' by confronting suffering, conflict, guilt, chance and death. 'The Encompassing' denotes the ultimate Being which is the foundation stone

[113] 'Así, un pueblo que, por una perversión de sus afectos, da en odiar a toda individualidad selecta y ejemplar por el mero hecho de serlo, y siendo vulgo y masa se juzga apto para prescindir de guías y regirse por sí mismo en sus ideas y en su política, en su moral y en sus gustos, causará irremediablemente su propia degeneración'; Ortega y Gasset, *España invertebrada* (Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 1964), p. 153.

[114] Ortega y Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses* (New York: Norton, 1957), p. 11.

for all our concepts but which can never be completely comprehended by them.[115] This concept of freedom lies at the core of Jean Paul Sartre's philosophy, so much so that he devotes a quarter of *Being and Nothingness* (1943) to a deep and penetrating analysis of the subject. This existential philosophy is based primarily on the belief in human free will and choice. His central argument was that, since there was no Creator, humans were condemned to be free. For Sartre, each individual is endowed with unlimited freedom:

> Human freedom precedes essence in man and makes it possible; the essence of the human being is suspended in his freedom […]. Man does not exist first in order to be free subsequently; there is no difference between the being of man and his being-free.[116]

Clearly, physical and social constraints cannot be overlooked when we make choices. Freedom is to be understood as characteristic of the nature of consciousness rather than lack of external constraint. Sartre's notion of freedom is that it amounts to making choices and indeed not being able to avoid making choices. It is up to each individual to exercise his freedom in such a way that he does not lose sight of his existence as facticity defined as all the concrete details against which human freedom exists and is limited: place of birth, language, environment and the individual's previous choices. Man has been cased up in the world. He knows not why or how. He is never just what he is. He is free and able to determine himself by the projects he chooses. This freedom to make himself separates man radically from all sub-human natural entities. Human beings have access to freedom through decision and decision lies at the very centre of man.

In contrast to Sartre, Albert Camus (1913-1960) argued that he was not interested in whether or not man is free, but only in his own freedom. This gives rise to an absurd paradox whereby either we are not free, and God, the all-powerful, is responsible for evil, or

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[115] Karl Jaspers, *Reason and Existenz: Five Lectures* (New York: Noonday Press, 1955), p. 10.

[116] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 60.

we are free and responsible but God is not all-powerful. The 'absurd'[117] man realizes that he is not really free and that death and the absurd are the principles underlying the only reasonable freedom:

> Knowing whether or not man is free doesn't interest me […] the problem of 'freedom as such' has no meaning. For it is linked in quite a different way with the problem of God. […] either we are not free and God the all-powerful is responsible for evil, or we are free and responsible but God is not all-powerful.[118]

In other words, the man who considers himself free in the sense that he can direct his life and that his life has a sense of purpose, once awakened to the absurd and to the fact that he could die at any moment, becomes aware that this 'freedom' is a 'lie'.

d. The Facticity of Existence

Human freedom, as is widely acknowledged, is never an absolute freedom but rather is limited in innumerable ways. It is not an observed state of affairs but the inward, existential awareness of one's being as a fact that has to be accepted. No one has chosen to be. One simply finds oneself in existence and that one is here is an inexplicable, crude fact. Although man has indeed developed beliefs and formulated theories about his origin and destiny, the only thing he knows beyond doubt is that he is. Where he has come from or where he is going, however, remains a mystery.

The individual has been born into a particular historical situation in a particular society and all kinds of forces operate within that situation and that society to shape his life

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[117] 'Camus sees the origin of the absurd in the confrontation between man's longing for happiness and reason and the "unreasonable silence of the world"'; Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), p.42; see also p. 64.

[118] Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus,* p.55.

and limit what he can become. The decisions of others shape the events in which he is presently caught up. And when he begins to make his own decisions in such limited areas as are open to him, then each decision determines, to some extent, the choices that will remain open to him in the future. Facticity in this regard, may be considered as the opposite of possibility. There is never an absolutely open future. As we have noted, Heidegger applies the term 'throwness' to man's factitious condition in that Man is thrown into existence.[119] This event is rather like the throw of a dice: on it will depend one's being ill-natured or good natured, affluent or destitute, black or white, intelligent or stupid. Human possibilities, therefore, are always set within a framework of facticity. It is always there, always holding out the threat of tragedy and the frustration of possibility. Existence never escapes from the tension between possibility and facticity. On the one hand, man is open and projects his possibilities and, on the other, he is closed in by the factual situation in which he finds himself. For Ortega y Gasset, life is what happens to man as he finds himself shipwrecked in the sea of circumstances. He emphasizes that

> Life is given to us […] it is thrown at us, or we are thrown into it, […] what life is – this is a problem that we must solve for ourselves. Life is not felt as predetermined […] at any moment we find ourselves forced to choose among various possibilities.[120]

It is interesting to think through some of these ideas in relation to another core concept of existentialism: alienation. According to this notion, the physical cosmos is alien to man in the sense that it is indifferent to his ideals and hopes. In the vastness of the universe, human existence and history appear transitory and casual. Furthermore, the individual has become a riddle to himself. He has been told that his conscious life is the expression of hidden, subconscious drives, impulses and urges and, thus, the self appears as

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[119] "The expression "throwness" is meant to suggest the facticity of its being delivered over'; Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 174.

[120] Ortega y Gasset, *El tema de nuestro tiempo* (Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 1923), p.221.

fragmented. God, if he exists, is hidden; the physical cosmos is indifferent; society is divided and stands on the brink of an abyss.[121] The raw facts of man's origin and early history are foreign to him because he has been thrown into existence and assigned a particular place in the world without being consulted. He stands alone in a world which is indifferent to his existence, in which he cannot feel at home. Indeed, much of our human life seems alien and strange. This feeling, based upon new insights into the uniqueness of human existence, runs through the whole of existentialist literature.[122] In the first place, what is called the world is only a tiny, little island lost in the vast and mysterious context which engulfs it. We do not know what the world is, where it came from or what it is for. We do not know our place in it. Science can provide only partial answers to our questions. Who are we to think that the whole universe that surrounds us is ordered to our ends or, for that matter, to any ends at all?

e. Time

Ordinarily, we think of time as a succession of present 'nows' imagining it as a flowing stream. The present alone is real at any given moment, the past and the future being non-existent. According to Heidegger, this notion carries within it an element of truth, and, for him, time lies at the root of the structure of being. It is an existential structure which pervades man's being-in-the-world. The human person is not a thing or a set of events in time.

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[121] 'Alienation: People suppress a sense of alienation from the world by becoming absorbed in or tranquillized by the comforting ready-made schemes of beliefs and values which prevail in their societies. But this "tranquillized" life is at odds with the exercise of essential freedom. It is the life of people estranged from what is most essentially their own, hence from themselves'; Cooper, p.33.

[122] David E. Cooper states: 'All existentialist writers express disquiet about the subject-object picture [of the world] the sense than an alien world can afford no "reliability", or "home". This sense, in turn, derives from a picture of ourselves separated from the world as subjects from objects'; pp. 81-82.

His being is stretched out into a future, past and present, which Heidegger calls the ecstasies of time.[123] Time, according to this formulation, is the basic structure of the individual's existence. Heidegger offers a coherent explanation of the normally accepted view of time in terms of inauthentic existence.[124] Such existence tries to escape from itself. Instead of making the active choices which the moment offers, one forgets himself and becomes absorbed in the manipulation of artefacts or in the contemplation of the things that are there before one. Time is thus dissolved into a succession of things or events.

In the latter part of *Being and Time*, where Heidegger turned his thoughts to the problem of time, he asserted that

> Aristotle's essay on time is the first detailed interpretation of this phenomenon which has come down to us. Every subsequent account of time including Bergson's has been essentially determined by it.[125]

Time, Heidegger tells us, provides the transcendental horizon for the question of Being. To be human:

> is to be 'thrown' into an already established cultural tradition, to 'fall' into a current situation and to 'project' into the eventual closing down of all one's possibilities, to be 'towards death'. In each case it is time that makes sense of being; that is, it makes it intelligible to us.[126]

The traditional way of looking at time involved dividing into three parts – the Past, the Present and the Future. Heidegger, however, set out to reformulate this notion:

> *Dasein* has been our theme only in the way in which it exists 'facing forward', as it were, leaving behind it 'all that has been'. Not only has Being-towards-the-beginning remained unnoticed, but so too, and above all, has the way in which *Dasein* stretches along between birth and death.[127]

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[123] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p.377.

[124] Heidegger, *Being and Time,* p.40.

[125] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p.49.

[126] See Introduction to Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p.xvi.

[127] Heidegger, *Being and Time,* p. 425.

In this way we can see that Heidegger shows time as a sequence of 'nows' which are constantly present-at-hand, simultaneously passing away and coming along. Time is understood as a succession, as a 'flowing stream' of 'nows', as the *course* of time. Science, concerned with measurement, treats time spatially, like the spaces marked out on the dial of a clock. It is treated in terms of before and after, or earlier or later. Thus, the conception of time as linear becomes the dominant one.[128]

On the other hand, for Ortega y Gasset, our life is, in its very essence, orientated towards the future. Every moment of the day we have to decide what we are going to do in the next moment. Ortega viewed the future as the most important aspect of temporality because it is the 'open area' towards which man directs himself.[129] The French philosopher, Henri Bergson (1859-1941), described time as a 'flow' – a *durée* – encompassing past, present, and future and an experience of existing within that flow. This 'flow' is resistant to calculations and objective measurements, mingling as it does very particular sensations and memories, so that the experience of time as 'flow' is unique to each individual. Sartre also dwells at length on the concept of time but essentially agrees with Heidegger and Bergson that it is composed of succession and flow.[130]

f. Death

The subject of death figures prominently in the writings of the existentialists. It is seen as being always present as a possibility, one that is certain. Of all the existentialist philoso-

[128] As we shall see later on (p. 136), Fuentes does not agree with this notion of time as linear.

[129] 'I believe that all life […] is made up of simple moments, each of them relatively undetermined in respect of the previous one'; Ortega y Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses*, trans. by Anthony Kerrigan (London, Unwin, 1969), p. 59.

[130] See Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* for a more detailed analysis of time (especially Chapter 3, p. 159).

phers, Heidegger is the one who most closely examined the meaning of death and most fully incorporated it into his philosophy of existence. He sees human existence as 'being-towards-death'. Death is already present as the most certain of all possibilities. It is one of the most inexorable 'givens' of the human condition. Heidegger claims that death, honestly accepted and anticipated, can become an integrating factor in an authentic existence. For him, death is not a disaster, the end of human existence, but rather the culmination of the individual's life project, like the full ripening of a fruit.[131] Moreover, Heidegger argues that dying is something that stands before us, something always impending but something from which the individual always shies away. In our absorption in the world of our concerns, death gets passed off and its character as a possibility becomes concealed:

> This evasive concealment in the face of death dominates everydayness […], the 'they' provides a constant tranquillisation about death.[132]

For other existentialists, death is seen as the final proof of the absurdity of both man and the universe. Camus and Sartre are just as insistent as Heidegger on the need to face death as a reality. For Camus, such confrontation produces not despair but rebellion. For Sartre, it is the final absurdity –neither more nor less absurd than life itself.[133]

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[131] 'When, for instance, a fruit is unripe, it "goes towards" ripeness. In this process of ripening, that which the fruit is not yet, is by no means pieced on as something not yet present at hand. The fruit brings itself to ripeness; such a bringing of itself is a characteristic of its Being as a fruit'; Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 287.

[132] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, pp. 297-98.

[133] As Camus affirms: 'Having accepted the limits of my life —the absurd and death— I can live it to the full'; Earnshaw, p.99. Sartre, likewise, comments that 'Today my life comes to an end. Tomorrow I shall have left the town […] My whole life is behind me […] There is very little to say about it: it's a lost game, that's all'; *Nausea*, trans. by Robert Baldick (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), p. 233.

In this chapter, we have seen how certain ideas around human freedom, choice as well as man's alienation emerged as major philosophical preoccupations throughout intellectual circles in Europe. This new set of ideas energized intellectual thought in creative and innovative ways and, through the work of transnational figures such as José Ortega y Gasset, these ideas received enthusiastic following in Latin America and were also transformed and modified as a result of their transcontinental voyaging. In Chapter 2, consideration will be given to the ways in which the principal tenets of European existentialist thought were developed and expanded in Latin America.

Chapter Two

Latin American Philosophy: The Search for Identity

This project is concerned with the careful elucidation of existential philosophical concepts as they are explored in the fiction of Carlos Fuentes. Chapter 1 has outlined in broad terms the parameters of existentialist philosophy as they evolved in Europe and it is now time to consider the context of philosophical debate in Latin America and Mexico, in particular. It shall be seen the extent to which existentialist ideas were recast and reimagined through the writing of key thinkers such as José Ortega y Gasset and Gaos, in particular. Furthermore, it is clear from any examination of Latin American 'existentialism' the extent to which – through the reception of Ortega y Gasset and perhaps, even more significantly, through the work of José Gaos - existentialism is historicized and applied to the excavation of national identity and nation formation. Through the critical lens of Gaos, in particular, existentialist ideas around death, freedom and alienation are transferred from the individual per se to the location of the individual within the larger national context. In this regard, it chimes with debates more widely – in political theory and anthropology – that were invested in elaborating a concept of *mexicanidad* that could embrace and engage all of its citizens. Fuentes, as will be seen, was deeply immersed in these debates and contributed significantly to them, both as a public intellectual but also as a writer of fiction who, through the novels examined here, offered an informed and sophisticated response to key philosophical debates in Mexico at the time.

The conquest of what is now called Latin America was a traumatic event for the indigenous populations because, virtually overnight, their way of life and traditions (including traditions of thought) were almost obliterated and replaced by a culture which was based on an entirely different view of the world. For many hundreds of years following this historic process, there was no significant development or innovation in the realm of philosophical thought. What passed for philosophy was, in fact, the same form of late Scholasticism that permeated the church and church-run institutions (including the universities) in Spain.[134] Indeed, it was not until the nineteenth century, when the continent had achieved its independence from Spain, that new philosophical ideas began to circulate in the context of the quest to define emergent national identities. The European philosophies of Liberalism and Positivism played a very influential role in this process.

In 1519, the first Spaniards arrived in Mexico and began to absorb the indigenous peoples into their vast colonial empire. In time, the indigenous population was decimated by war, imported diseases and enslavement. For three centuries, the Spanish crown ruled over this far-flung empire as a 'New Spain', but in 1821, after years of conflict against its rule, it ceded independence to the new state of Mexico. The predominant political concerns of the era included the organisation and consolidation of the new nations. The spirit of Spain survived in its architectural legacy of magnificent buildings, both ecclesiastical and public, its system of land tenure (*latifundia*), its social and ecclesiastic structures, and in the form of Scholastic philosophy itself. According to Leopoldo Zea,

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[134] 'European-derived philosophy began in Latin America in the sixteenth century, most visibly in the work of Bartolomé de Las Casas (1484–1566), and especially in connection with the rights of conquered Amerindians. Scholasticism, introduced by the Spanish and Portuguese clergy that arrived with the *conquistadores,* was the dominant philosophical perspective. Most of the work produced during the first two centuries in the colonies was cast in the framework used in the Iberian Peninsula. It was particularly indebted to the thought of both sixteenth-century Iberians, such as Francisco Suárez (1548–1617) and Francisco de Vitoria (1492–1546), as well as to medieval philosopher-theologians, such as Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) and John Duns Scotus (1265/6–1308)'; Jorge Gracia and Manuel Vargas, 'Latin American Philosophy', in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2013), ed. Edward N. Zata <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2013/entries/latin-american-philosophy/>

> A la emancipación política de las metropolis iberas ha de seguir la emancipación mental. Esto es deshacerse de todo pasado, de los hábitos y costumbres que alejaron a los latinoamericanos de la verdadera cultura.[135]

But the euphoria of independence soon evaporated when the countries in question took cognizance of the task ahead of them: that of creating genuinely independent states. The first step was to set up stable governments based on sound political and philosophical principles. There was no native paradigm for this task, so that in order to achieve this end they had to have recourse to the ideology of European Liberalism to fight both the conservative forces of the status quo in politics and an all-pervasive 'ecclesiasticism'. The basis for this approach was the idea of the desirability of the separation of Church and State and the laicization of the State itself, and the drawing up of a new constitution. In fact, the way in which the former colonies developed together, despite internecine wars and foreign aggression is remarkable. As Leslie Bethel points out:

> The obscurantist restraints of colonial society had given way to modern secular standards in education and in civil organisation […] Liberalism provided an almost universal heritage for the governing elites of the post 1870 years.[136]

Leopoldo Zea argued that the optimism preceding the independence movement turned into a deep pessimism because the men who carried out the revolution were unable to endow the people with new beliefs. Consequently, complete disorder followed the era of revolutionary struggle. According to Zea, there was something innate in the Hispanic American that made it impossible for him to be free. The generation following the revolutionary one would devote itself to the task of finding out why this was so and would aim to remould the mentality of Latin America:

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[135] 'Entre 1492 y 1640, la población indígena de México y de las Antillas, desciende de 25 millones y medio a un millón, y la de América del Sur de tres millones y medio a medio millón. El buen salvaje fue esclavizado en la mina, la encomienda y la latifundia, "valiente mundo nuevo"'; Leopoldo Zea, *La filosofía americana como filosofía sin más* (Mexico City: Colección Mínima, 1969), p. 20.

[136] Leslie Bethel, *Ideas and Ideologies in Twentieth-Century Latin America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 134-35.

> The spectacle which the new generation offered was something really grievous and discouraging; countries decimated by long and endless revolutions, anarchy and despotism experienced alternately in a vicious circle. There began to appear in the different countries of this America a series of historical works that revealed the negative reality of Hispanic America.[137]

In reaction to this state of affairs, there arose a group of writers who aimed to transform this mentality and reshape the habits of Hispano-Americans in order to achieve an authentic form of independence and real intellectual emancipation.

The Argentinian writer, and seventh president of his country, Domingo Faustino Sarmiento (1811-1888), attributed the conflict at the heart of his society to the fact that there were two rival and incompatible societies in his country: one European and civilized, the other barbarous and American.[138] In Chile, both José Victorino Lastarria (1817-1888) and Francisco Bilbao (1810-1884) criticized the spiritual and social legacy of Spain. Lastarria excoriated the persistence of the feudal mentality, and Bilbao went so far as to call for the 'de-hispanicizing' and the 'de-catholicizing' of Chile.[139] The Mexican, José Luis Mora, noted that two forces were in conflict: the colonial and the modern.[140] The Venezuelan writer Bautista Alberdi stated that

> Our South American man must be educated to overcome the great and overwhelming enemy of our progress: great empty spaces, material backwardness, and the brutish and primitive nature of our continent.[141]

Liberalism reached its zenith in the middle of the nineteenth century and was quickly superceded by the new philosophy of Positivism which swept in from France. It was especially influential in Mexico but was adopted in all Latin American countries. It arrived at

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[137] Leopoldo Zea, *The Latin American Mind*, trans. by J Abbott and L. Dunham (Norman, OK: Oklahoma University Press, 1963), pp. 17-18.

[138] See Domingo F. Sarmiento, *Facundo* (Madrid: Cátedra, 1997)

[139] Hale, p. 135.

[140] 'Mora argued that two forces were in conflict - the colonial and the modern'; Leopoldo Zea, *The Latin American Mind*, p. 51.

[141] Zea, *The Latin American Mind*, p. 123.

an opportune time and spoke eloquently to the needs of that age's elites. Positivism was successful in a way that no other philosophical movement has been in Latin America since Scholasticism.[142]

This section is devoted, then, to examining the immediate philosophical context in which Fuentes's work was produced. The early part of the twentieth century was a golden age for philosophical thought in Latin America, and Mexico was in the forefront of this trend, as evidenced by the emergence of a host of distinguished philosophers, including José Vasconcelos, Antonio Caso, Samuel Ramos, and Leopoldo Zea. These set out to study and analyse the nature of Mexican identity and society from an existentialist perspective and to formulate solutions to the problems peculiar to their country. Carlos Fuentes was well aware of their endeavours, as is particularly clearly reflected in two of his better known novels, *La región más transparente* and *La muerte de Artemio Cruz,* the subject of detailed study in Chapters Three and Four. In these two works he incorporates the philosophical ideas of his contemporaries and, like Sartre, reflects upon them through the medium of literature rather than through formal philosophical discourse.

2.1 Positivism

In France, Auguste Comte (1798-1857) had attempted to develop a rigorous, systematic understanding of man both as an individual and as a social being. In pursuit of this objec-

[142] 'Indeed, positivism became so influential and widely accepted by intellectuals that it became the official state philosophy of several nations. It was even used to justify dictatorial regimes, as in the case of Mexico. Positivism of the Latin American variety was derived from a peculiar mix of European ideas primarily originating in the thought of Auguste Comte (1798-1857), Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), and Ernst Haeckel (1834-1919). The period of positivist hegemony, during which it was the dominant philosophical perspective in Latin America, extended roughly from the middle of the nineteenth century to the first decade of the twentieth. Among the most famous positivists were Gabino Barreda (1818-1881) and Justo Sierra (1848-1912) in Mexico'; Gracia and Vargas, 'Latin American Philosophy' <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2013/entries/latin-american-philosophy/>

tive he sought to apply to the study of human affairs the methods and truth criteria that had yielded such revelatory results in the field of the natural sciences. As Jorge J.E. Gracia has stated:

> The new science would lead to the solution of concrete problems. This practical aspect was what was most captivating for Latin Americans, who desired to overcome anarchy, eradicate misery and place their countries on the path of progress.[143]

The approach he pioneered and which came to be known as 'Positivism' claimed to bring to the study of man and society the objective methodology associated with the sciences. It was believed that the application, through educational and political reforms, of scientifically based principles could lead to the most efficient possible management of society. It was thought that, by means of a positive education, a new type of man could eventually be created, one free from all the defects he had inherited from his colonial past – a man with a great practical mind. Unfortunately, Positivist principles were also invoked to justify dictatorial regimes operating oppressively under such slogans as 'Order and Progress'. For example, Positivism was the prevailing ideology of the thirty-five year presidency (1876-1911) of Porfirio Díaz in Mexico, a period of tyranny during which liberty and freedom were sacrificed on the altar of progress.[144]

José Vasconcelos (1882-1959) was the first Mexican intellectual to make a fundamental attack on Positivism and, by the turn of the nineteenth century, it had fallen into decline.[145] One of the issues which aroused the most profound dissatisfaction was its conceptualization of liberty. Positivism denied freedom to man. As the Argentinian philosopher Alejandoro Korn put it:

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[143] Jorge J. E. Gracia, *Latin American Philosophy in the 20th Century* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1986), p. 123.

[144] See Enrique Krauze, *Biografía del poder: I Porfirio Díaz. Místico de la autoridad* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1987; 9th reprint, 2012).

[145] 'The generation of philosophers born around 1910 were trained as positivists, but ultimately rebelled against it. That anti-positivist rebellion constitutes the first phase of contemporary Latin American thought. The principal members of this generation – called "the generation of founders" by Francisco Romero, and dubbed "the generation of patriarchs" by Francisco Miró Quesada – […], José Vasconcelos (1882–1959) and Antonio Caso (1883–1946) in Mexico, […]'; Gracia and Vargas, 'Latin American Philosophy'.

> We cannot accept a philosophy which obliterates human personality, reduces its unity to a biological phenomenon, denies it the right to forge its own values and ideas and prohibits thought from transcending the limits of empirical existence.[146]

Leopoldo Zea agreed with Korn's criticism:

> Comtian positivism paid homage to the most reactionary of political systems, a system in which, in the name of hypothetical progress, liberty was restrained and a new order as despotic as the theological one was established.[147]

The Latin America bourgeoisie was merely a tool at the service of its great European and North American counterparts. The colonial spirit reappeared and coups d'état, revolutions and military uprisings dominated the political landscape:[148]

> It was believed that a new era had begun in which scientific study would make it possible to find the causes of social evils and to eliminate them.[149]

The evils of anarchy, misery and disease which they had hoped to eliminate by means of a 'positive' education reappeared. The problem seemed to be insoluble. Hispanic America again appeared divided into two great camps: one looking back to a colonial past and the other looking towards a formless future.

2.2 Is A Latin American Philosophy Possible?

One of the dominant preoccupations of Latin American thinkers of the past hundred years has been the search for a distinctly Latin American approach to philosophy. Is there, or can there be, a Latin American philosophy? The question of whether or not a Latin American

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[146] Gracia, *Latin American Philosophy,* p. 17.

[147] Zea, *The Latin American Mind*, p. 139

[148] Zea, *The Latin American Mind,* p. 34.

[149] Gracia, *Latin American Philosophy*, p. 17.

philosophy, culturally specific to the continent, exists, has been considered by thinkers such as Leopoldo Zea, Risieri Frondizi and Salazar Bondy. All of them have expressed the view that the region's philosophical discourse is imported and imposed and, hence, not worthy to be considered as authentically regional.[150] The inference from all of this is that, until now, there has not been, and in the future there cannot be, genuine Latin American philosophies as long as the current social and economic conditions prevail. The Peruvian philosopher, Salazar Bondy, argued that, as long as Latin America suffered from a state of dependence and underdevelopment, it would be condemned to follow foreign ideas. According to him, the type of philosophy practised in Latin America had been the product of intellectual élites who, having no original ideas of their own, imitated the various philosophical currents fashionable in Europe:

> There is no way to consider our philosophies as national thought because it is impossible for the community to recognize itself in these philosophies, precisely because we are dealing with transplanted thought.[151]

Questions about the existence of a Latin American philosophy were first explored in the writings of Leopoldo Zea and Risieri Frondizi in the 1940s.[152] Even before this, the Argentine, Juan Alberdi, had raised the question of the character and future of Latin American philosophy. Alberdi regarded philosophy as an instrument that could help to introduce a new awareness about the social, political and economic needs of Latin American nations.[153] It was not until the fifth decade of the twentieth century that the problem of the

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[150] See Chapter 4 of Abelardo Villegas, *El pensamiento mexicano en el siglo XX* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1993).

[151] As cited in Gracia, *Latin American Philosophy,* p. 235.

[152] Zea, *The Latin American Mind*, and Risiseri Frondizi, 'Panorama de la filosofía latinoamericana contemporánea', *Cuaderno Minerva*, 3 (1944), 95-122.

[153] 'An early proposal to develop a peculiar Latin American philosophy is perhaps that of the Argentine Juan Bautista Alberdi (1810–1884) in his "Ideas" […] This short newspaper article, published in Montevideo in 1840, offers advice about how to develop a high school course in philosophy to be taught at the Colegio de Humanidades (School of Humanities)'; Susana Nuccetelli, 'Latin American Philosophy: Metaphilosophical Foundations', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2014), ed. Edward N. Zalta <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2014/entries/latin-american-metaphilosophy/>.

philosophical identity of Latin America was explicitly formulated and fully explored. A generation of Mexican intellectuals inspired by Orteguean perspectivism, introduced into Latin America by José Gaos, suggested that the cultural circumstances of the continent provided the basis for an original Latin American Philosophy.

Leopoldo Zea, the leader of this group of intellectuals, argued that any type of philosophical thought could be classified as a 'Latin American philosophy' by virtue of the inescapably intimate relationship between philosophy and culture. The nationalist sentiment that characterized the politics of most Latin American nations at the time, but particularly Mexico, was propitious to the propagation of Zea's views concerning the existence of a Latin American philosophy. Frondizi, however, argued that philosophy must be distinguished from cultural nationalism and transcend geographical boundaries. He argued that it would be better to speak of philosophy *in* America rather than of a philosophy *of* America.[154] José Vasconcelos went so far as to explicitly deny the existence of a Latin American philosophy on the grounds that philosophy was universal in character. Nationalism had no place in his thought. In the words of Zea:

> El latinoamericano, decían los próceres de nuestra emancipación mental, se ha empeñado en repetir, en copiar los frutos de la cultura europea en lugar de imitar el espíritu que los ha originado.[155]

In 1938, having fled Franco's Spain, Ortega y Gasset's favourite pupil, José Gaos, arrived in Mexico and set about re-animating Latin American philosophy. He found that philosophy in Mexico was in a parlous state and, in his view, was creating nothing original, but merely regurgitating familiar, received ideas. In time, one of Gaos's disciples, Leopoldo Zea, would become an outstanding philosopher and author of fifty books, such as *Filosofía de la historia en México* (1976) and *El pensamiento latinoamericano* (1965).

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[154] Risieri Frondizi, '¿Hay una filosofía iberoamericana?', *Realidad,* 3 (1948), 158-70.

[155] Zea, *La filosofía americana,* p. 36.

Gaos's emphasis on the importance of thinking about one's own world inspired the Latin Americanist philosophical current exemplified by Zea. According to Gaos, man is defined by his reason and his history. This philosophical concept of history – historicism – had a profound influence in Latin America. It was an instrument which helped, by means of knowledge of the past, to forge an authentic Latin American philosophy. It provided Latin Americans with an instrument to help them to understand and reevaluate their cultural and intellectual inheritance and understand them as resulting from a particular historical evolution. Historicism implied an understanding of man and human life as shaped by history, with its ideologies, institutions and structures:

> Una filosofía del mexicano no podía menos de mirar a la circunstancia mexicana, ni de ceder en ella sus propios antecedentes. A la filosofía de la circunstancia le es esencial el historicismo. Tal es la esencial conexión entre la actividad enderezada a elaborar una filosofía de las ideas en México y la enderezada a elaborar una filosofía del mexicano.[156]

For Leopoldo Zea, philosophy was not just an intellectual game but an instrument for the liberation of people and the creation of justice and freedom. He argued that the relationship of Latin Americans with European culture constituted a huge problem for the realization of Latin American identity.[157] Zea contended that in order for Latin Americans to overcome feelings of inadequacy and alienation, they must become 'collaborators' in Western culture. They must continue to work on the central, abstract problems of Western philosophy (being, knowledge, God). Zea argues that questions which are considered 'universal' are also ones that must be considered from within a Latin American context. Latin American philosophy, he thought, must begin by pondering its own circumstances, but it must also expand its reach to tackle broader, abstract questions in order to be relevant. Commenting on Zea's *Two Stages of Thought in Hispanic America* (1949), José Gaos says that in it he ex-

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[156] José Gaos, *En torno a la filosofía mexicana* (Mexico City: Porrúa y Obregón, 1953), p. 61.

[157] Zea, *The Latin American Mind*, p. 52.

pounds a philosophy that can be properly called Latin American, an original philosophy derived from the history of the ideas of the region – a philosophy of history.[158]

The Argentinian philosopher, Risieri Frondizi, on the other hand, takes issue with the concept of a Latin American philosophy.[159] In his view, the attempt to create a Latin American philosophy is plagued by two errors: the first lies in trying to see the big picture through the small one, and the second in the proposal to create an authentic philosophy which is subject to political and literary interests. He argued strongly that the impatient desire to create one's own philosophy is itself the greatest obstacle to the emergence of such a philosophy. Furthermore, he affirmed that the philosophy of any country or epoch must be the result of the idiosyncrasies of its authors and not the result of a deliberate programme to create an original body of thought. In other words, Frondizi advocated that any national philosophy had to be, above all else, a philosophy in its own right, or a pure form of philosophy. Other intellectuals and philosophers such as Sarmiento, Alberdi, Bilbao, Lastarria and Mora, similarly, wrote about the possibility of a Latin American philosophy but, for them, the precondition for achieving this was mental emancipation, a break with the colonial culture.[160] The models to be followed were those of Europe and North America. However, as Zea pointed out:

> Los pueblos latinoamericanos siguen gravitando en formas de vida que en poco o nada se diferencian de las coloniales [...] Latinoamérica está formada por pueblos cuya mentalidad sigue siendo la que le impusieron cuatro siglos de coloniaje íbero.[161]

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[158] Gaos, p. 36.

[159] Frondizi, *Panorama de la filosofía latinoamericana contemporánea*.

[160] See, for example, Domingo F. Sarmiento, *Facundo* (Madrid: Cátedra, 1997); 'For Alberdi, 'Latin American philosophy should be used an intellectual tool for developing an understanding of the most vital social, political, religious, and economic problems facing the people of Latin America', Alexander V. Stehn, University of Texas <http://www.iep.utm.edu/latin-am/>. For references to Francisco Bilbao, José Victorino Lastarria and José María Luis Mora see *A Companion to Latin American Philosophy*, ed. by Susana Nuccetelli, Ofelia Schutte and Otávio Bueno (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013).

[161] Zea, *La filosofía americana,* p. 25.

In 1900, the Uruguayan writer, José Enrique Rodó, published a short essay, entitled *Ariel*, which had an immense influence on Latin American intellectuals for two decades. Indeed, Rodó's essay became a clarion call for a revival of idealism.[162] By evoking a Latin American 'spirit' and identifying it with a revised sense of race, the essay inspired a reaffirmation of the humanistic values of Latin American culture. In Mexico, the main forum for the fomentation of this new idealism was the Ateneo de la Juventud, a philosophical group established by Antonio Caso and José Vasconcelos. The Ateneístas and the Arielistas[163] were heavily influenced by the philosophies of Henri Bergson and Émile Boutroux.[164] Both movements represented a reaction against the materialism and utilitarianism of Positivism which gave no place to religion, the spiritual, or to art. As Samuel Ramos pointed out:

> Contra el utilitarismo y materialismo positivista, emprendió el 'Ateneo de la Juventud', cuyos miembros eran lo más selecto de la élite mexicana. Trataban de renovar el ambiente intelectual introduciendo una nueva filosofía espiritualista que rehabilitará los altos valores de la vida, muy rebajados en México por influencia del positivismo. La obra cultural del Ateneo estaba alentada por el mismo espíritu que el *Ariel* de Rodó.[165]

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[162] 'Though Rodó was heralded as a prophet of a new idealism, much of *Ariel* was in fact cast in a positivist mould. The same was true of the writings of those intellectuals he directly inspired, often known as Arielistas. Rodó's "transitional" quality reflected one version of the continuing interaction between empiricism (positivism) and idealism (spiritualism) […]'; Charles A. Hale, 'Political and Social Ideas in Latin America, 1870–1930' in *The Cambridge History of Latin America*, ed. by Leslie Bethell, 10.4 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 367-442 (p. 415).

[163] 'Ateneístas' being the members of the Ateneo de la Juventud and 'Arielistas' those influenced by José E. Rodó.

[164] Émile Boutroux (1845-1921) was a French spiritual philosopher who argued that religion and science were compatible. The philosophy of Henry-Louis Bergson (1859-1941) touches upon such topics as time and identity, free will, perception, memory, and consciousness. His work *Creative Evolution* (1907) offered a profound consideration of evolution; see Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, trans. by Arthur Mitchell (New York: University Press of America, 1911).

[165] Ramos*, El perfil del hombre y la cultura en México,* p. 82.

2.3 Philosophers of Mexico

a. Antonio Caso (1883-1948)

Antonio Caso, frequently referred to as 'el padre de la filosofía mexicana', was the first to call for the creation of a genuine Mexican philosophy – that is a philosophy that would respond to the reality of the country rather than to preoccupations and ideas that were foreign.[166] For Caso, Mexico was a reality and not an abstraction, like 'race' or 'humanity'. In addition, he wanted to emphasize that the Revolution had destroyed not only the social order but the order of ideas and that Mexicans had to rethink their new reality in a profound way and not by following the worn-out ideas of colonial scholasticism or Porfirista Positivism.

As we can see from Caso's dates, 1883-1948, he bridged two centuries and thus was eminently well positioned to look back on Mexico's turbulent history and forward to the future. Like his colleague and fellow philosopher, José Vasconcelos, he set out to formulate a new interpretation of what he saw as the intrinsically human. In his conception, with the death of Greek civilization, man ceased to be the absolute centre of the universe and became subordinate to other realities, so that philosophy had to re-emphasize the importance of the ontology of the self and return to the question, 'what is man'? Existentialism, then, he thought, presents us with a new picture of man, very different from that presented by Positivist rationalism. It is a less idealistic one which conceives of him as subject to realities such as time and death that provoke feelings of guilt, isolation and anguish. Existentialism identifies the essence of man with his activity and the creation of values. The antiscientific reaction which characterized not only the beginning of the twentieth century in Latin America but throughout the world, as such, was inspired especially by the perspec-

[166] Antonio Caso, *Discurso a la nación mexicana* (Mexico City: Porrúa, 1922), p. 68.

tivism of Ortega y Gasset and, later on, by Existentialism. Along with Vasconcelos, Caso founded the 'Ateneo de la Juventud', a group opposed to the philosophy of Positivism:

> El espíritu del siglo XIX, durante esas décadas finales, era propicio al movimiento de las tendencias positivistas en México. La industria, el comercio, el bien material, la riqueza económica, eran los desiderata humanos.[167]

It is important to underscore that, like some figures in the European tradition discussed earlier, this group's belief in the ideal of a moral, willing and spiritual human being was inspired by the Christian tradition.[168]

In this regard, Caso believed that the greatest danger within contemporary civilization was the lack of respect for the human person, its excessive attention to groups, to the anonymous, the collective. If man submitted himself to the standards of contemporary civilization, his destiny, his sense of humanity would soon be lost forever. In the words of J.E Gracia:

> The possibility of being, of developing as a man, of putting essence in harmony with existence can be destroyed by a corrupt, unjust, useless social environment. One must recover the being of the human person in the face of the conditions of contemporary life. Our concern is for being; which we explore along the pathways of contemporary philosophy.[169]

For Caso, charity was the highest form of existence as it forced man to escape from his isolation and endowed him with the liberty to give himself to others. Thus, because of his emphasis on the human being and man's freedom, Caso anticipated some of the major ideas associated with the Existentialist movement.

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[167] Caso, *Discurso a la nación mexicana*, p. 68.

[168] Caso, *La existencia como economía, como interés y como caridad* (Mexico City: UNAM, 1989).

[169] Gracia, *Latin American Philosophy in the 20th Century,* p. 47.

b. José Vasconcelos (1882-1959)

José Vasconcelos, like Antonio Caso, was a founder member of the 'Ateneo' movement. He is one of the most interesting and controversial figures in the history of Latin American philosophy. In his work he reveals a profound sense of the nature of the Mexican destiny. In 1925, he published *La raza cósmica* as an attack on the negative aspects of Positivism and an affirmation of the historic role of Latin America. It was a controversial book, amalgamating as it does philosophy, eugenics and utopianism. Essentially, Vasconcelos identifies the cyclical nature of all the great civilizations, noting that all of them have disappeared after accomplishing their mission. Our present civilization, predominately white and Anglo Saxon, is but a bridge to and a preparation for the cosmic race that is yet to come and which will be led by Latin America.[170] Its mission is to mechanize the world and lay the foundations for the new era, the era of the mixture and fusion of all the peoples. According to Vasconcelos, the white colonial masters in North America set out to eliminate the indigenous population whereas in Latin America the rulers assimilated the native population and so qualified them for their unprecedented historic mission:

> La ventaja de nuestra tradición es poseer mayor facilidad de simpatía con los extraños. Esto implica que nuestra civilización, con todos sus defectos, puede ser la elegida para asimilar y convertir a un nuevo tipo a todos los hombres.[171]

To accomplish this mission, Latin Americans, in Vasconcelos's view, must prepare for it philosophically and embrace it as a new form of mysticism.

Both Caso and Vasconcelos came to the conclusion that it was necessary to promote the formation of a new type of man. For them, neither reason nor science was capable of achieving human values. They argued for the primacy of emotion in identity formation,

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[170] José Vasconcelos, *La raza cósmica* (Mexico City: Porrúa, 2012), pp. 6-7.

[171] Vasconcelos, p. 14.

isolating what they saw as the inherently emotional nature of Mexicans which meant that they acted only through emotion, enthusiasm and inspiration.[172] Vasconcelos's concept of the 'new man' of the cosmic race appears close to being racist and it must be remembered that the book (published in 1924) was written in a period when eugenics still had some currency. Vasconcelos rejected the crude determinism of Darwin and the Positivists in favour of the Mendelevian position: [173]

> Si reconocemos que la Humanidad gradualmente se acerca al tercer período de su destino, comprenderemos que la obra de la fusión de las razas se va a verificar en el continente iberoamericano […] Las leyes de la emoción, la belleza y la alegría regirán la elección de parejas, con un resultado infinitamente superior al de esa eugénica fundada en la razón científica.[174]

He believed that a mixing of races, facilitated in accordance with the rules of social freedom, sympathy and beauty, would lead to the formation of a new type of human being, infinitely superior to any that had existed heretofore. Mendel's law, he thought, would lead to the gradual perfecting of the species:

> Uniones fundadas en la capacidad y la belleza de los tipos tendrían que producir un gran número de individuales dotados con las cualidades dominantes […] los tipos de selección se irán multiplicando, a medio que los recesivos tenderán a desaparecer […] los tipos bajos de la especie serán absorbidos por el tipo superior […] Se operaría en esta forma una selección por el gusto, mucho más eficaz que la brutal selección darwiniana.[175]

Vasconcelos argued that no one could stop the fusion of the races and the advent of the fifth era of world history, the era of universality and cosmic enlightenment, and that Latin America was the only continent with the spiritual capacity, racial mix and territory necessary for accomplishing the great enterprise of initiating the universal era of Humanity:

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[172] Vasconcelos, p. 25.

[173] George Mendel (1822-1884) was the founder of the modern science of genetics. It was not until the twentieth-century that the importance of his ideas was realized. Darwin was unaware of his scientific paper. Mendel's theory of heredity sees it as an inherently biological process; see Edward Edelson, *Gregor Mendel and the Roots of Genetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

[174] Vasconcelos, p. 25.

[175] Vasconcelos, p. 27.

> El cristianismo predicó el amor como base de las relaciones humanas, y ahora comienza a verse que sólo el amor es capaz de producir una Humanidad excelsa. La política de los Estados y la ciencia de los positivistas […] dijeron que no era el amor la ley, sino el antagonismo, la lucha y el triunfo del apto.[176]

c. Samuel Ramos (1897-1959)

Samuel Ramos belonged to the younger generation of Mexican philosophers. He was a pupil of Antonio Caso and continued the pioneering work of both Caso and Vasconcelos. The perspectivism of Ortega y Gasset helped to provide a foundation for his preoccupation with a national philosophy and his desire to define the 'Mexican character'. He sought to remain faithful to the particularity of Mexican reality and yet aspired to knowledge and values that were universal:

> Entendemos por cultura mexicana la cultura universal hecha nuestra, que viva con nosotros, que sea capaz de expresar nuestra alma.[177]

Spengler's *La decadencia de occidente* (1918-1922) had provided the first intimations of a philosophical revolt against European culture. This revolt took the form of a clear embrace of nationalism and, in Mexico, the lack of a clear idea about the nature of Mexican identity gave rise to two points of view, two sides who disagreed passionately about the attitudes that should be adopted on Mexican culture: the 'nationalists' and the 'Europeans':

> No podemos proseguir practicando un europeísmo falso; poro es preciso huir también de otra ilusión peligrosa, que es la de un mexicano igualmente falso. Tal mexicanismo es el que, animado de un resentimiento contra todo lo extranjero, pretendiendo rehacer toda nuestra vida sobre bases distintas a las que ha tenido hasta ahora.[178]

According to Ramos, these different ideas had led to a state of confusion:

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[176] Vasconcelos, p. 31.

[177] Ramos, *El perfil del hombre,* p. 95.

[178] Ramos, *El perfil del hombre,* p. 90.

> La formación de nuestro carácter a través de los siglos ha sido un proceso discontinuo, impulsado por móviles inconscientes. El resultado de estas anomalías es que se ha falseado nuestro destino, y hoy marchamos desorientados, tratando de encontrar el verdadero rumbo de nuestra existencia.[179]

In other words, he thought that philosophy must deal with the fundamental questions about national identity: Mexican identity and the nature of its culture. Ramos was the first historian of philosophy in Latin America, and although a pupil of Caso's, he later broke away from him. In turn, his *Perfil del hombre y la cultura en México* (1934) was influenced by the Historicism of Ortega y Gasset, who considered that all philosophy arises from within the context of a given culture. In this work, Ramos is dismissive of the aboriginal culture, which he calls 'Egiptismo', and seeks to analyse the violence of the Spanish Conquest and colonization that caused a trauma which has lasted in the collective psyche.

Applying the psychoanalytical theories of Alder, he believed that he had discovered the fundamental characteristic of the Mexican people – an inferiority complex stemming from their overreaching ambition to be superior to all others, and a bitter disillusionment at the stark reality of failure. Consequently, he falls back on favouring what is in effect an imitation of European and North American culture:

> Para el filósofo mexicano Samuel Ramos, el problema central de la cultura mexicana radica en que, antes de buscar nuestro modo de ser, de mirarnos a nosotros mismos como nación, debemos comparar nuestras escasas obras con las de los países más antiguos de las culturas desarrolladas […] lo cual origina el 'sentimiento' de inferioridad. Esto, dice Ramos, lleva al mexicano al complejo de inferioridad, que se expresa, en el afán por disfrazarse de 'extranjero' y no aceptarse como es. Ramos sostiene que en nuestro país no ha habido un desarrollo histórico, sino más bien, una sucesión de hechos que se repiten, hasta llegar a coincidir con la circularidad viquiana […] La auto-denigración del mexicano es consecuencia de la sumisión cultural en la cual nace México como nación.[180]

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[179] Ramos, *El perfil del hombre,* p. 99.

[180] Anaya M. Magallón, 'Samuel Ramos y su idea de cultura en México', *Temas de Ciencias y Tecnología*, 11. 33 (2007), 13-22 (p.20). Vico's theory of history as 'corsi and 'recorsi' was fundamental to Fuentes's understanding of it, as we shall see later on in examining his novel *Cambio de piel.*

The failure of Mexican history in the nineteenth century was, then, due not to a deficiency of the race but rather to the excessive ambition of leaders who overlooked the real problems of the Mexican peoples: an indigenous population that was miserable and uneducated, passive and indifferent, and an educated, exaggeratedly individualistic elite which was resistant to all order and discipline. Whilst Caso and Vasconcelos were optimistic about the future of the Mexican people, Ramos was less so. He is severely critical of the typical Mexican – 'el pelado' – and excoriates what he sees as his primitive and brutish nature, his interest in immediate results, and his lack of long-term ambition:

> El mexicano tiene habitualmente un estado de ánimo que revela un malestar interior […] es susceptible y nervioso; casi siempre de mal humor y es a menudo iracundo y violento.[181]

He urges the Mexican man to throw off the mask behind which he is hiding and allow his authentic nature to reveal itself.

Expressing views similar to those of Ramos and Octavio Paz, Jorge Portilla, another member of the 'Hiperión' group, analyses 'el relajo' a character similar to 'el pelado' and equally relevant to the understanding of the Mexican character:

> La actitud relajienta del mexicano […] niega la posibilidad de futuro, es decir, de transcender su condición presente […] así, el relajiento es un hombre sin porvenir. No toma nada en serio, no se compromete con nada […] El relajiento es simplemente un 'testigo bien-humorado' de la banalidad de la vida […] Ser frágil, ser traído por la nada, he ahí la piedra fundamental a partir de la cual deberá intentarse una descripción antológica del mexicano.' Autonegación y negación del pasado inmediato y de todo porvenir.[182]

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[181] Ramos*, El perfil del hombre,* p. 90.

[182] Jorge Portilla, *Fenomenología del relajo* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1984), p. 212.

d. Emilio Uranga (1921-1988)

As already stated, Emilio Uranga, was a member of the Hyperion group. The members of this movement believed that Mexican philosophy need not be a copy of European philosophy in order to be universal, but rather that it should approach the constants of the human condition from a Mexican perspective.[183] However, according to Hurtado, this approach was bound to fail. Its chief error was to assume that there was a problem with Mexican philosophy when there was not, and to propose solutions to this non-existent problem which presupposed the existence of something called 'Mexicanidad' – i.e. a conglomeration of characteristics possessed by all Mexicans without which they would not be Mexican. The 'Hyperions', influenced by Heidegger and Sartre, sought to explore the essence of the Mexicans by means of the description and phenomenological examination of their life style, characteristics and history.[184]

In his *Análisis del ser mexicano* (1950), Uranga advanced the thesis that Mexicans suffered from an ontological insufficiency which gave rise to the negative aspects of their character, and led them to adopt an inferiority complex as a fundamental mode of being. According to this thesis, the so-called typical Mexican leaves everything until tomorrow and allows others to make decisions for him. He is always indignant and realizes that things are bad but makes no attempt to change them. He just complains and laments and becomes melancholic. Lacking a solid foundation, he is fragile, uneasy and full of anxiety. His nature is 'accidental'. This notion of the 'accidental', a central theme of Uranga's ontological existentialism, is not an easy concept to define but it denotes a form of existence

[183] Guillermo Hurtado, 'Dos mitos de la mexicanidad', *Dianoia: Anuario de Filosofía*, 40 (1994), pp. 263-94.

[184] 'Hiperión was formed in the fall of 1948, when a group young intellectuals, under the influence of *transterrado* José Gaos, set to work on a Mexican philosophy of the present'; Carlos A. Sánchez, *The Suspension of Seriousness: On the Phenomenology of Jorge Portilla* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2012), p.24.

and being-in-the-world that accords with the Heideggerian notion of 'throwness'. However, according to Hurtado, Uranga's thesis presupposes that there is a specifically Mexican mode of being, but, as he sees it, any attempt to describe this purely mythical essence is misplaced. In the words of Leopoldo Zea,

> El mexicano Emilio Uranga ha descrito la relación de la filosofía existencialista con la preocupación por el ser del hombre de esta América. Al abordar el estudio del existencialismo […] nos ha movido […] a dar una descripción del hombre mexicano. […] lo que decide el valor del existencialismo es su capacidad de dar base a una descripción sistemática de la existencia humana, pero no de una existencia situada en situación. Esto es, encuadrada […] en un cuadro social y cultural.[185]

Uranga aimed to uncover this being which he believed had been covered over by colonial representations, following the idea that Mexicans are defined by their history, a history that is itself defined by the accidental discovery of the New World.

e. Leopoldo Zea (1912-2004)

Leopoldo Zea was the most renowned philosopher, not only of Mexico, but also of Latin America as a whole. Tutored by José Gaos, he went on to become a prolific writer on the history and philosophy of Mexico. His works were numerous and of unprecedented range and depth. Like no other philosopher of the twentieth century, Zea propelled the study of Latin American philosophy not only within the continent but also in Europe and the world. According to him, philosophers emerge from specific historical situations and, thus, he maintained, it is necessary to reflect on those circumstances in order to understand them.

[185] Zea, *La filosofía americana como filosofía sin más,* p. 97.

This attitude, inspired by Ortega y Gasset, leads Zea to the study of Mexican philosophy and of the specific historical circumstances from which it emerged.

Zea argues that while Asians continue to view the world as their ancestors did, Latin Americans do not view the world in the same way as their indigenous ancestors, the Aztecs and Mayans. He affirms that what belongs to them, what is properly Latin American is not to be found in pre-Columbian culture and he makes a case for the importance of European culture in the generation of meaning for Latin Americans, a meaning that cannot solely be sourced from pre-Columbian culture. Their view of the world is European but they perceive the achievements of that culture as alien. The malaise stems from the fact that they want to make the Latin American circumstance fit a conception of the world inherited from Europe, rather than adjusting that conception of the world to the Latin American circumstance: hence, the divorce between ideas and reality. From Europe, Latin Americans have received their cultural framework – language, religion, customs. In this way, Zea maintains, every attempt to create a Latin American philosophy, guided by the sole aim of making it Latin American, is destined to fail. Latin Americans have to start with themselves and their own circumstances, their limitations, and the fact of their being Latin American.

As Zea sees it, Mexicans formulated the ideals to which they aspired in accordance with the values of the great Anglo-Saxon countries – England and the USA – and with those of France. The political institutions, philosophy, literature and cultures of these countries were the models to which the Hispanic Americans looked as they sought to shape a new history:

> Quienes adaptaron el positivismo clásico […] pretendían hacer de nuestros países lo que se suponía había hecho esa filosofía por Inglaterra, Francia y los Estados Unidos: se pensó que su adquisición, por los latinoamericanos como instrumento

> educativo y técnico, nos incorporaría al progreso. La historia de estos esfuerzos nos demuestra el fracaso de lo mismo.[186]

For Zea, human freedom means that of the concrete man in his constant and unending struggle in the midst of different circumstances. Like Sartre, he argues that

> El hombre es responsable de sus propios actos. Y por el hecho de estar en el mundo, el hombre está condenado a actuar en él, y las circunstancias lo comprometen entre las múltiples opciones que puede elegir. En cada elección hay una des-elección y aun cuando se niegue la individualidad, creyendo en ella eludir la responsabilidad, se es también responsable de dicha acción.[187]

In an article published in 1987, José Luís Gómez-Martínez states that

> Con la publicación en 1923 de la *Revista de Occidente* el desarrollo del pensamiento mexicano entra en una nueva etapa y la influencia de los libros de Ortega y Gasset crearon en México un ambiente propicio para el desarrollo del pensamiento. Se había formado una nueva conciencia sobre el propio valer […] Por medio de la *Revista* – nos dice Samuel Ramos – los estudiosos de México se pusieron en contacto con el pensamiento alemán contemporáneo y se despertó el interés por leer las obras de sus grandes filósofos.[188]

In the mid 1930s, many young, aspiring Latin American philosophers went to Germany, then the nerve centre of philosophy, to study the newly emerging philosophies of Phenomenology and Existentialism. However, when they returned home they were disappointed because they found that these clothes did not 'fit' them. While European philosophy continued maintaining its focus on abstruse subjects such as the nature of Being, Latin American philosophers were searching for a philosophy that would address the problems of a continent emerging from decades of conflict, corruption and dictatorships. The greatest problem was the question of how to amalgamate a disparate population made up of indigenous peoples: Spanish, Creoles and Mestizos. These young thinkers saw the answer to their problems in the ideas of the Spanish philosopher, Ortega y Gasset. Although Ortega visited

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[186] Zea, *La filosofía americana,* p. 78.

[187] José Martín Hurtado Galves, 'Una revisión sobre el concepto de identidad del mexicano' *Amerika*, 4 (2011) <http://amerika.revues.org/2067 ; DOI : 10.4000/amerika.2067>

[188] José Luís Gómez-Martínez, 'La presencia de Ortega y Gasset en el pensamiento mexicano', *Nueva Revista de Filología Hispánica*, 35. 1 (1987), 197-222.

only one Latin American country – Argentina – his writings had a profound resonance throughout the continent. In Mexico, Ortega's ideas were disseminated by José Gaos and Leopoldo Zea and found a wide readership among the intelligentsia. His theories about Historicism and Perspectivism seemed to provide the answer to the problem of re-evaluating the indigenous and colonial legacies as a prelude to formulating an autochthonous philosophy, comparable with those of European countries, and, consequently, giving encouragement and an impetus to the emerging Latin American philosophers.

f. Octavio Paz (1914-1998)

Though not a philosopher in the accepted sense, in his extended essay, *El laberinto de la soledad* (1950), Octavio Paz explored philosophical themes from an existentialist perspective in the course of his search to arrive at an understanding of the Mexican psyche. This work, though controversial, continues to be recognized as a ground-breaking study of Mexican identity and thought.[189] For many scholars, the principal influence on Paz's book was Hegel's phenomenology of the spirit, although Ladislav Franek argues that it represents the product of cross-fertilization by Hegelian idealism and Kantian formative power.[190] During his travels in the USA, Paz had noticed that Mexican migrant workers were ashamed of their origin and reluctant to integrate with the native population:

> Lo que me parece distinguirlos del resto de la población es su aire furtivo e inquieto, de seres que se disfrazan, de seres que temen la mirada ajena, capaz de desnudarlos y dejarlos en cueros.[191]

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[189] See, for example, Rolando Romero and Naomi Harris (eds), *Feminism, Nation and Myth: La Malinche* (Houston: Arte Público Press, 2005); also, Margo Glantz, *Las hijas de la Malinche* (Alicante: Biblioteca Virtual de Miguel de Cervantes, 2006).

[190] He writes: 'In this sense Paz's cohesion with the neo-Kantian conception of George Simmel as presented particularly in the work *Sociology* (1908), could appear still more distinctively although too generally and diffusely'; 'An Essay on the Modernism of Octavio Paz', *Human Affairs*, 2 (1998), 121-36 (p. 132).

[191] Octavio Paz, *El laberinto de la soledad* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1996), p.15.

This observation led Paz to undertake a deeper analysis of the Mexican psyche and especially its more negative aspects. He argued that the inferiority complex of the Mexican male in particular can be explained to some extent by his inner solitariness, his inability to open himself up to others, and his tendency to repress his intimate feelings:

> Este profundo sentimiento de soledad – que se afirma y se niega […] en el silencio y el alarido, en el crimen gratuito y el fervor religioso. En todos lados el hombre está solo.[192]

All of this accords with a fundamental aspect of Sartrean existentialism: the notion of man as cast adrift in an alien world that exists only for itself and is indifferent to the anxieties of the individual. Paz relates this notion to the history of Mexico and his fellow countrymen's search for their origins and for a relationship with the Spanish, French and indigenous roots of their history.[193] Paz sees the Mexicans' sense of solitude as arising also from their religious experience. They have a sense of being orphaned, of being torn away from the absolute and seeking to re-establish the links that would unite them with the world around them:

> Estamos solos. La soledad, fondo de donde brota la angustia, empezó el día en que nos desprendimos del ámbito materno y caímos en un mundo extraño y hóstil. Hemos caído; y esta caída, este sabernos caídos, nos vuelve culpable, ¿De qué? De un delito sin nombre: el haber nacido.[194]

To Paz, the Mexican appears as a being enclosed within himself, one who uses a mask to preserve his solitude. This mask is made of silence, courtesy and resignation. He is always distant from the world and others, and even from himself. Above all, he does not want the outer world to intrude into his intimacy. This 'hermetismo', or enclosedness, adopted as a protection against outside influences, is at the source of his suspicion and diffidence. The

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[192] Paz, *El laberinto*, p. 22.

[193] 'The French intervention marked Mexico's second experiment with an emperor, this time the Austrian Archduke Maximilian. The experiment lasted less than five years'; J. Burton Kirkwood, *The History of Mexico*, 2nd ed. (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood Publishing, 2010), p.106.

[194] Paz, *El laberinto*, p. 88.

Mexican 'macho' is extremely skilled at minding himself and shutting himself away within his own being. No wonder, as Paz observes, that stoicism is one of the greatest of the Mexicans' military and political virtues:

> México está tan solo como cada uno de sus hijos. El mexicano y la mexicanidad se definen como ruptura y negación […] como viva consciencia de la soledad, histórica y personal.[195]

Paz goes on to argue that the Mexican character is a product of the social circumstances of the country and of its history, especially that of the colonial period. In this way, he affirms that history is at the root of the Mexicans' hermetic and unstable nature. The post-independence history of the country also contributed to a perpetuation of a slave mentality, especially since the endemic problems of rural poverty and social inequality had not been solved, and this in spite of a century and a half of fighting and constitutional reform. The recourse to violence and the abuses perpetuated by the powerful had only served to compound these problems. Indeed, Paz expresses astonishment at the number and violent nature of festivals in Mexico:

> Durante esos días el silencio mexicano silba, grita, canta, arroja petardos, descarga su pistola al aire. Descarga su alma […] el mexicano […] quiere […] saltar el muro de soledad que el resto del año le incomunica. Todos están poseídos por la violencia y el frenesí.[196]

Since Mexicans cannot confront their own inner selves, they have recourse to the festivals to liberate themselves from the norms that they have imposed on themselves and to overcome their sense of alienation and angst.

Paz engages in a profound analysis of the existential theme of death in a way that is reminiscent of Heidegger: our death illuminates our life; if our death lacks meaning, so too does our life; death is non-transferable, as is our life, and if we do not die as we have lived,

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[195] Paz, *El laberinto*, p. 97.

[196] Paz, *El laberinto*, p.53. Carlos Fuentes alludes to this gratuitous violence in his novel, *La región más transparente,* p. 425. For further discussion of this subject, see Chapter 3, Section 3.5.

it is because the life we lived was not in reality ours. For the ancient Mexicans, the contrast between life and death was not as absolute as for us. Death, for them, was not the natural ending of life but only a phase in an infinite cycle. Life, death and resurrection were merely stages in a cosmic process that repeated itself endlessly. They did not believe that their deaths belonged to them just as they did not believe that their lives were really theirs, at least in the Christian sense.

In sophisticated, modern societies, Death is largely voided of transcendental significance. It is seen merely as the inevitable end of a natural process. In the modern world, everything functions as if death did not exist. In fact, everything – political life, commercial advertising, public opinion, customs – all conspire to suppress it. Nobody thinks of death, his own death, because no one lives a personal life:

> Los niños y los hombres primitivos no creen en la muerte […] no saben que la muerte no existe […] Su descubrimiento nunca es tardío para el hombre civilizado pues todo nos avisa y previene que hemos de morir.[197]

For the present day Mexicans, also, death lacks meaning. It has ceased to be seen as a transition, the mode of access to another life. For Paz, Mexicans' indifference towards death arises from their indifference to life. Thus, Mexican death offers a mirror image of Mexican life:

> […] la muerte nos venga de la vida, la desnuda de todas sus vanidades y pretensiones […] En un mundo cerrado y sin salida, en donde todo es muerte, lo único valioso es la muerte […] nuestras representaciones populares (de la muerte) son siempre burla de la vida, afirmación de la nadería e insignificación de la humana existencia.[198]

All the existentialist philosophers are united in pointing out the dangers posed to authentic individual existence by the influence of a mass psychology that suppresses the individual in favour of the whole. Paz was also aware of the tendency towards the depersonalization

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[197] Paz, *El laberinto*, p. 212.

[198] Paz, *El laberinto*, p. 64.

of human beings associated with the mass industrialization of the modern world. Capitalism despoils the individual of his human nature because it reduces his status to that of a cog in a vast industrial machine. As Marcel pointed out, 'life had come to be dominated by a vast, web-like apparatus within which millions of human individuals had to perform highly regulated, machine-like functions'.[199] The Córdoba-born philosopher Carlos Astrada (1984-1970) also agrees with Marcel's assessment of the dangers brought about by the proliferation of modern technology:

> Igualmente falsa es la actitud […] frente a la técnica, su exaltación por el positivismo utilitario y cientifista, que hace de ella una religión de la técnica. A esta postura se llega como resultado de la primacía absoluta que la concepción positivista otorga al conocimiento fundado en las ciencias […] Tal sobrestimación de la técnica introduce al hombre dentro del engranaje de un determinismo coactivo […] al transformarse la técnica toda en un fin que él tiene que servir, el hombre está condenado a moverse como un autómata inánime […].[200]

The idea of time is another important theme of existentialist philosophy, and in Paz's opinion the Aztecs looked on time not as something abstract but as something concrete: a force, substance or fluid which is used and consumed and, hence, the need for rituals and sacrifices to reinvigorate the year and the century they lived in. But time, besides being something living, which is born, grows and decays and is reborn, is also a succession which incorporates regression. One age ends and another returns. Central to this logic is Paz's interpretation of why Montezuma interpreted the arrival of the Spaniards not so much as an external danger but rather as the interior ending of one cosmic era and the beginning of another. Furthermore, space and time, for the Aztecs, were intimately linked and formed an unbreakable continuum.

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[199] Gabriel Marcel, *The Mystery of Being* (London: The Harvill Press, 1950), p. 78.

[200] Carlos Astrada, *La revolución existencialista* (La Plata: Nuevo Destino, 1952), p. 153.

2.3 Conclusion

When Fuentes was writing his novel *La región más transparente* in 1958, the polemic about the possibility of a Latin American philosophy was at its height. After gaining independence from Spain, the continent was bereft of any autochthonous ideology and relied on imported philosophies to fill the gap. The most enduring and widespread of these was Positivism, which held sway for many years, especially in Mexico. In time, native philosophers such as Caso, Vasconcelos, Ramos, and Zea set about remedying this situation and argued for the possibility of Mexico having its own, specific philosophy, one that would not be dependent on ideas imported from European philosophers. Unfortunately, no attempt was made to integrate the pre-Columbian world-vision into this project. The arrival of hundreds of asylum-seeking intellectuals from Franco's Spain, gave a great impetus to Mexican philosophy which, according to José Gaos, was then in a state of precarious instability.

Despite the objections to relying on philosophical ideas imported from Europe, Mexican intellectuals enthusiastically embraced the new philosophy of existentialism, in many cases regarding it as a magic key. Fuentes's attitude to this debate and his views on superiority versus inferiority, Europe versus America are well aired and indeed expressed in the words of his mouthpiece, Manuel Zamacona, in *La región más transparente*:

> ¿Qué cosa es el sentimiento de inferioridad sino el de superioridad disimulado? En la superioridad plena, sencillamente, no existe el afán de justificación. La inferioridad nuestra no es sino el sentimiento disimulado de una excelencia que los demás no alcanzan a distinguir, de un conjunto de altas normas, que, por desgracia, no acaban de funcionar […] Mientras esa realidad superior de lo mexicano no cuaje, piensan en el fondo los mexicanos, habrá que disimular y aparentar que hacemos nuestros otros valores, los consagrados universalmente; desde la ropa hasta la política económica, pasando por la arquitectura […] Por desgracia, la nueva burguesía mexicana no ve más de eso; su único deseo, por el momento, es apropiarse, cuanto antes, los moldes de la burguesía capitalista (*La región*, pp. 78-79).

In the following chapter, we shall begin to examine how existentialist ideas, interlinked with debates around Mexican national identity and the possibility of a Mexican philosophy are explored through the complex multi-faceted portrayal of the great urban metropolis of the nation, Mexico City.

Chapter 3- *La Región más transparente:* Nation and Revolution

> Antes de Fuentes a nadie había inquietado recorrer todos los velos de la capital de México (como el meollo del país y la nacionalidad) y tampoco la renovación de la novela, estancada por así decirlo.[201]

In 1958 Carlos Fuentes published his first novel dealing with Mexico and the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution. It was an ambitious undertaking for a young writer and the novel was an immediate success.[202] *La región más transparente* sets out to sketch a panoramic view of Mexico City and its society as it emerged from the ravages of the Revolution and entered the modern age. In this way it stages the transition between competing traditions and ways of life so as to illuminate the contradictions and tensions of the post-Revolutionary period. As Fuentes commented to a French reporter:

> In my first novel I tried among other things, to write a personal biography about that species of whale anchored in our high valley of Mexico City. Its silhouettes, its secrets, a city which I love and hate at the same time because in it are presented with the greatest brutality the miseries and holes of all my country. I tried to produce a synthesis of present day Mexico: conflicts, aspirations, rancors.[203]

When Fuentes was writing *La región más transparente*, existentialism was at its highest intellectual point. Moving radically away from the traditional philosophical focus on the notion of man as an abstract entity, the new philosophy of existentialism was more concerned with what Miguel de Unamuno termed 'el hombre de carne y hueso', and the importance for the individual of taking control of his own life.[204] Existentialism foregrounded the importance of man, the individual, and explored the many and varied facets of exis-

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[201] Introduction to Carlos Fuentes*, La región más transparente*, ed by Georgina García Gutiérrez (Madrid: Cátedra, 1994), p. 15.

[202] 'It was the book that established Fuentes'; Harss and Dohmann, p.286.

[203] Brody and Rossman, p. 55.

[204] Miguel de Unamuno, *Del sentimiento trágico de la vida* (Madrid: Akal, 1983), p. 82.

tence and nature that, by and large, had been ignored by traditional philosophy, such as his moods and feelings as well as the question of his psycho-biological nature.[205] In addition, Kierkegaard had urged his fellow Christians to overcome their torpor and become knights of faith, while Nietzsche decried the stultifying effects of the prevailing morality and urged individuals to rise above the 'herd' and become supermen.[206]

As outlined in Chapter Two, both Jaspers and Ortega y Gasset emphasized the need for the individual to escape from the tyranny of anonymity and the idea of the *anonymous mass man*.[207] As previously discussed, the existentialist philosophers concentrated on the nature of man, his relationships with his fellow individuals and the universal validity of his being. In like manner, Fuentes pursued the same ends and remained interested in that central existentialist concern, namely the relationship between individual and society, very much following Sartre in this regard. As Van Delden asserted, 'Sartre sought to demonstrate that existentialism provides a philosophical basis for an attitude of engagement with the world and commitment to one's fellow individuals'.[208] Indeed, going further, Van Delden maintains that the social dimension of human life was critical to existentialism, at least in the later stages exemplified by Sartre. He is also keen to emphasise the historical dimension that underpins Fuentes's approach:

> He offers instead a conception of history as open, dynamic, and unfinished. It is the novel – 'an arena of languages where nobody ever has the last words' – that constitutes the ideal vehicle for articulating such a conception of history.[209]

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[205] See, for example, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge & Keegan Paul, 1962).

[206] For Kierkegaard's 'knight of faith' see 'Concluding Unscientific Postcript', in *The Essential Kierkegaard,* p.230; see also Nietzsche, *The Higher Man* (especially Chapter 73, p. 276), in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (London: Wordsworth Classics, 1997).

[207] 'Man as a member of a mass is no longer his isolated self. The individual is merged in the mass, to become something other than he is when he stands alone'; Jaspers, *Man in the Modern Age*, p.39.

[208] Maarten Van Delden, 'Myth, Contingency, and Revolution in Carlos Fuentes's *La región más transparente*', *Comparative Literature*, 43. 4 (1991), pp. 326-45 (p.333).

[209] Van Delden, *Carlos Fuentes, Mexico and Modernity,* p.115.

We can see from this, then, how Fuentes adopts a historicist approach derived from the philosophy of the Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset, who in turn was influenced by the insights of Hegel and Dilthey, both of whom insisted on the centrality of history in understanding the human condition.[210] Hegel maintained that society and all human activities were defined by their history and that, indeed the essence of man could only be found through a grasp of history.[211] Dilthey argued persuasively for an understudying of history in order to reach an understanding of individual subjectivities. In their view, history provides the lens through which the essence of man – both as an individual and a human being – becomes manifest. Ortega y Gasset considered human life as an essentially historical process in which individuals were continually reformulating their experience. Thus, the idea of the individual having a fixed, determined character was unacceptable to him. Ortega viewed Dilthey as being one of the first to discover historicity as a constitutive feature of the human being. Historicism, as defined here, emphasizes the historical quality of human existence. It embraces not only individuals but also different peoples, customs and cultures. Ortega considered this aspect of existentialism most valuable for the creation of philosophy in Latin America and his ideas were a source of inspiration for Mexican philosophers such as Leopoldo Zea, Emilio Uranga and José Gaos, as well as for writers like Carlos Fuentes and Octavio Paz. As examined in the introductory section to the thesis, Fuentes, was shaped by the philosophical debates of his time and his first novel, *La región más transparente*, may be considered a detailed examination of some of the principal ideas

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[210] See Ortega y Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses*, pp. 31, 36; the ideas expressed here are sufficient to integrate him into the mainstream of existentialist thought. Dilthey emphasized that life was a lived experience. We can see this notion amply developed by Fuentes in *La muerte de Artemio Cruz*. Although there is no direct connection between Ortega and Fuentes one can assume that Fuentes would have been aware of Ortega's ideas since he was expressing them in the 1920s, long before existentialism became popular. Furthermore, Ortega's writings were very well disseminated in Latin America and he was a primary conduit for the philosophical ideas emanating from Europe, especially Germany.

[211] See Bertrand Russell, *The History of Western Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1991), Chapter 22.

of existentialism, filtered through an historicist approach that is concerned with the exploration of the national character, also under such intense scrutiny since the 1930s.

La región más transparente was published to some ecstatic reviews and generally to very positive critical acclaim.[212] Yet, despite this acclaim it did not escape completely criticism. Critics such as Elena Garro, Elena Poniatowska and Martínez Cáceres drew attention to its complexity, superfluity of characters and material, and general overreaching ambition.[213] This complexity arose from the fact that Fuentes was moving away from the novel of the Revolution and the traditional novel of the land towards a concern with urban space, the notion of the city, a trend that was widespread in Latin America. As Fuentes himself stated in an interview with Alfred MacAdam and Charles E. Ruas:

> Nobody has written a novel about the post-revolutionary period as it was reflected in the city, in the social structure, in the survival of so many ancient strands of our imaginary and historical life.[214]

In plot terms, it is frequently described as kaleidoscopic in the way in which it builds layers of stories around a series of characters in Mexico City in the 1950s. Focusing on the story of Federico Robles – who has abandoned his revolutionary ideals to become a powerful financier – it offers a snapshot of a city through a seemingly unending list of 83 characters classified by Fuentes in the early pages of the novel, largely according to social status and including the de Ovanda family, the Zamaconas, the Polas, a bourgeois group, intellectuals, foreigners, socialites a lower class group and representatives of the indigenous communities, Ixca Cienfuegos and his mother Teódoula Moctezuma. These stories thread around and through each other to form a network of human connections and relations through which Fuentes explores the nature of modern urban life.

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[212] '[…] of approximately two dozen reviews, five were openly hostile and a dozen extremely laudatory'; Brody and Rossman, p. 52.

[213] Richard M. Reeve, 'The making of *La región más transparente'*, in *Carlos Fuentes: A Critical View*, ed. by Brody and Rossman, p. 32.

[214] Alfred MacAdam and Charles E. Ruas, 'Carlos Fuentes, the Art of Fiction'.

Joseph Sommers affirms the existentialist dimension of *La región más transparente* novel in clear terms:

> The novel establishes a clear link with post World War II existentialist thought. The sense of responsibility of individual and nation, rooted in the anguished consciousness of past failures merges with that of Western man […] One source of contemporary anguish is the relative absence of freedom of choice for the individual.[215]

Taking Sommers's view here as my starting point, this chapter will explore Fuentes's thoughts on the existentialist nature of Mexico itself: its historical circumstances, philosophy, sense of identity and destiny. The analysis will then proceed to probe the novelistic treatment of the various aspects of the Mexican character and psyche: its endemic propensity to violence, the individual's sense of alienation from the world about him, his inability to communicate with his fellow beings and the authenticity or lack of it in his life. Furthermore, there are various features, such as historicity, authenticity and the role of freedom and choice which are central to existentialist philosophy and which receive ample exploration in the novel. The novel then proceeds to analyse the notion of Mexico itself, its history, philosophy and sense of destiny. Sommers states that Fuentes insisted upon his own examination of the status of Mexico and the Mexicans: 'In the light of universal ideas such as existentialism and in the mood of the post-war thought all the world over, with its shadings of doubt, individualism and disillusionment'.[216] In this way, Fuentes deftly integrates the universal concerns expressed through existentialist thought with a painstaking focus on the national/local expression of them. Many of Fuentes's attitudes and beliefs about existentialist beliefs are related to the Revolution itself and to the social consequences that flowed from that upheaval. As has been well studied elsewhere, the revolutionary period was characterized by the lack of a coherent philosophical basis or of lofty proclamations and was rather an agrarian revolt aimed at breaking the excessive power of

[215] Williams, pp. 150-51.

[216] Joseph Sommers, *After the Storm* (Austin TX: University of Texas Press, 1968), p. 98.

the landed classes.[217] Highlighting those areas identified by Sommers, then, this chapter undertakes an analysis of existentialist thought as it is filtered through characterization, plot and theme in *La región más transparente.*

The main action of the novel transpires in the years 1951-1953 during the presidency of Miguel Alemán. Mexico was then passing through a period of unprecedented change and expansion. The capital itself was estimated to have a population of five and a half million. Skyscrapers began to dot the skyline and North American tourists were visiting the country in ever increasing numbers. As seen, there is no well-defined plot in the traditional sense, but rather a series of cameos portraying the various social strata of Mexico City: from the pseudo oligarchy to the lower classes, the Maceulli. The city itself appears as a kind of protagonist as it transforms itself into a modern metropolis. It mirrors the disappearance of the old way of life, like that of the Ovando family, and the rise of a new bourgeoisie. The main characters in the novel, Ixca Cienfuegos, representative of the vanquished Aztec world, and Federico Robles and his wife Norma, are the primary plot axes who represent the new Mexico of the post-revolutionary era. The fortunes of these protagonists form a leitmotif running throughout the novel and forge a link with the rest of the peripheral characters. Fuentes strives to probe this particular dimension, a long standing interest of his, as Malva E. Filer attests:

> […] la expresión temprana de uno de sus temas recurrentes: la interacción entre un pasado indígena que se rehusa a morir y un México moderno que tiende a desconocer sus propias raíces.[218]

The setting for the novel was the mid-1950s at a time when the *Hyperión* group of philosophers which included Samuel Ramos, Antonio Caso, José Vasconcelos and Leopoldo Zea were actively trying to arrive at a definition of the nature of the Mexican man in

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[217] Stuart Easterling, *The Mexican Revolution: A Short History 1910-1920* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2013), p. 16.

[218] Malva E. Filer, 'Los mitos indígenas en la obra de Carlos Fuentes', *Revista Iberoamericana,* 127 (1984), pp. 475-89 (p.477).

order to create an autochthonous philosophy for Mexico. As was outlined in Chapter Two, they were debating the nature of Mexican culture and especially the question as to whether there could be such a thing as a Mexican Philosophy. Could they fathom the intractable nature of the Mexican psyche? They wondered if the country could overcome its legacy of fractiousness and dictatorships and create a modern society in line with that of European countries. Fuentes was well aware of this polemic which he represents here in this novel through its mouthpieces, the characters Federico Robles and Manuel Zamacano. Zamacano believes that the fault lies in Mexico's eccentricity:

> Sólo México es el mundo radicalmente ajeno a Europa que debe aceptar la fatalidad de la penetración total de Europa y decir las palabras y las formas de la vida, de la fe, europeas, aunque la sustancia de su vida y su fe sean de signo diverso […] Todo desde entonces, es la búsqueda, cerrada, ciega, marginal, del punto de encuentro entre lo que realmente somos ya las formas que han de expresar una sustancia, en sí, muda.[219]

Fuentes provides a rare, explicit reference to existentialism at the beginning of the novel when he introduces the reader to 'Estévez el filósofo existencialista' (*La región*, p, 31), who is giving a lecture to some women of the so-called 'pop-off' society on the subject. It is curious to trace this reference to the real-life figure of the Argentinian philosopher, Estévez, deemed responsible for introducing Heidegger's philosophy to Mexico and a member of a large group of characters, known as 'Los Inteligentes', in the novel. While reproduced in the Introduction, the exchange is so revealing that it merits repetition here:

> En un rincón, las señoritas de gafas asentía urgentemente al nervioso hablar de Estévez: -El mexicano es este ente, anónimo y desarticulado, que se asoma a su circunstancia con, a lo sumo, miedo o curiosidad. El Dasein, en cambio, ha tomado conciencia de la finitud del hombre; éste es un conjunto de posibilidades, la última de las cuales es la muerte, siempre vista en terceros, nunca experimentada en pellejo propio. ¿Cómo se proyecta el Dasein a la muerte? […] es un ser para la muerte; una relación entre el ser puro y la nada anonada. Dardo Moratto […] Siga, siga Estévez. Para eso estoy aquí, para enterarme de lo que se piensa en México. Muy interesante […] ver las cosas cuando recién empiezan. (*La región*, pp. 52-53)

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[219] Easterling, p.16.

Here, the narrator comments on Heidegger's concept of *El Dasein* and in particular its relationship to death, an omnipresent theme in the novel. In this interesting passage, Estévez is projected as the quintessential outsider, placed to learn about Mexican thought. In this sense, the novel is explicitly set up as an exploration of existentialist thought filtered through its panoply of characters.

3.1 Identity and the National character

As Leslie Williams points out in his work on Fuentes's *La región más transparente,* 'Identity […] is frequently conceptualised in this novel in opposition to progress. The modern Mexican is portrayed as an uprooted individual who has lost any sense of the past and identity'.[220] First, it is critical to consider the influence of existentialism in the novel's depiction of 'Mexicanidad'. Here we should remember that existentialism did not express itself in a uniform manner in the various countries, and that, as has been discussed, in Spain, both Unamuno and Ortega y Gasset adopted markedly personal approaches to the philosophy. While Unamuno was agonizing, Ortega adopted Dilthey's philosophy of historicism and perspectivism. In Mexico, Leopoldo Zea and the *Hiperión* group were inspired by Ortega y Gasset's philosophy of 'I and my circumstance' as an answer to their country's search for its identity at a time when its writers and philosophers were debating the relative merits of 'Mexicanism' and 'Internationalism' in a post-revolutionary resurgence of national consciousness.

Like Samuel Ramos before him, Fuentes set out to accomplish a wide historical review with the aim of both outlining the traumas of the country and seeking solutions. To

[220] Williams, p. 121.

this end, he marshalled three main spokesmen to debate the issues: Federico Robles, Ixca Cienfuegos and Manuel Zamacona. In a sense, then, these characters function as conduits through which Fuentes can explore different approaches to the 'problem' of national identity and, perhaps more crucially, suggest different solutions. In this way, he follows in Samuel Ramos's footsteps:

> Ramos […] consideraba que para llegar a conocer el mexicano era preciso un análisis completo y detenido de las distintas etapas y estratos que habían conformado su subconsciente […] Ramos encontraba en la *violencia original* de la conquista el *trauma* no superado que pesaba sobre la personalidad profunda y colectiva del mexicano, y cifraba en el período independentista el nacimiento de ese complejo de inferioridad.[221]

Cienfuegos's solution to the problems of Mexico is unambiguous. Mexico has to go back to its pre-Columbian indigenous origins if it wants to achieve authenticity as a modern nation. He argues that if the Revolution has failed and Mexicans are still suffering from the imperialist and economic influence of North America, a link with the indigenous past could provide an alternative way forward. However, his only solution is a further demand for continuous blood sacrifices which are powerfully symbolized in the novel by the deaths of Norma, Gabriel and Zamacona. According to George Irish:

> His vision of Mexican history from the conquest up to the present is expressed in the pessimistic image of the continuous night of suffering, defeat, treachery and false promises […] He is totally disillusioned over the way the revolution turned out. The initial idealism […] degenerated into a base desire for power and wealth.[222]

Cienfuegos goes on to elaborate on his own philosophy:

> Tarde o temprano una fuerza secreta y anónima lo inunda y transforma todo. Es una fuerza más vieja que todas las memorias […] es el origen. Todo lo demás son disfraces, allá en el origen está todavía México, lo que es nunca lo que puede ser. México es algo fijado para siempre, incapaz de evolución. Una roca madre incon-

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[221] Vázquez, p. 528.

[222] Irish, p. 39.

> movible que todo lo tolera […] la roca en sí no cambia, es la misma para siempre. (*La región*, pp. 149-50)

Here he feels that life in modern Mexico is a substitution and a flight from reality and the real origins of the nation. In the same way, people like Federico Robles, Hortensia Chacón, Norma Lagorriti and Libriado Ibarra live only dubious and inauthentic lives.

A counterpoint to this view is represented by Manuel Zamacona who vehemently rejects Cienfuegos's romanticized concept of the pre-Columbian past civilizations. He considers it in the following passage:

> México debe alcanzar su originalidad viendo hacia adelante; no la encontrará atrás. […] La cima de la barbarie […] ser para los ciclos, alimentar al astro, vivir bajo el signo de la naturaleza increada. No, no tienen razón […] y no es posible resucitarlo […]. (*La región*, pp.74-75)

He has no faith in what he calls the despotic, bloody and satanic theology of ancient Mexico. Like Cienfuegos, he is disappointed with the course of the Revolution since it merely replaced one set of local exploiters with another, establishing the economic hegemony of the USA and paralyzing the political life of the country through the setting up of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional. Representing one of the most authentic individuals in the novel and exemplifying the existentialist dictum of the importance of authentic living for the individual, he echoes Fuentes's criticism of the excesses of the Revolution. In the novel he functions as the conscience of the nation and through him Fuentes ponders on these excesses and poses the question of who should take responsibility for the one million dead:

> ¿Pero a quién se hará responsable de ese dolor y esa traición? Insisto, Cienfuegos: no basta atestiguar la miseria y los derrotas de México ¿A quién son imputables? Te lo digo en serio: por cada mexicano que murió en vano, sacrificado, hay un mexicano responsable. […] Pero, ¿quién acarrea los pecados de México, Ixca, quién? (*La región*, p. 411)

In an argument with Federico Robles, Zamacona affirms that Mexico is 'eccentric' because it is an accident in the order of things. It is a backwater that lost its identity through aping foreign cultures. He goes on to argue that the Mexicans must create a new social and philo-

sophical structure. After all, he asks plaintively – was this not what the Revolution was all about?

> Siempre hemos querido correr hacia modales que no nos pertenecen, vestirnos con trajes que no nos quedan, disfrazarnos para ocultar la verdad: somos otros […] ¿No ve usted a México descalabrado por ponerse a la par de Europa y los Estados Unidos? (*La región*, p. 302)

Here the perennial question of what is truly "authentically" Mexican is posed and the familiar castigation of Mexico for turning to 'foreign' ways is laid bare. For Rosario Castellanos, Zamacona is a spokesman for Fuentes himself:

> […] traza la ruta del país arrojando por la borda el peso muerto de la arqueología, de las inoperantes e inasimilables civilizaciones prehispánicas para incorporar a México al vasto movimiento mundial de desarrollo.[223]

In the same way as Jaspers and Sartre were concerned to reveal to man what he is and what the possibilities of human choice are, with a view to promoting authentic choice, so Mexico must examine itself as a society and a country: 'Estamos en el cruce ¿Cuál vamos a escoger entre todos los caminos? Sobre todo México, tan cargado de experiencias confusas, de vida contradictoria' (*La región*, p. 80). Mexico is placed at a crossroads of indecision and, in the end, frustrated and despairing of his country, Zamacona turns his back on logical explanation:

> Pequeños y ridículos debían sentirse cuantos trataran de explicar algo de este país ¿Explicarlo? No- se dijo- nada más. México no se explica; en México se cree con furia, con pasión, con desaliento. (*La región*, p. 80)

Fuentes attributed this feeling of inferiority and instability to the Mexican's solitude and inability to open himself up to others and to the repression of his intimate feelings, thus recalling Paz's pronouncements on the subject: 'Este profundo sentimiento de soledad – que se afirma y se niega, en el silencio y el alarido, en el crimen gratuito y el fervor reli-

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[223] Rosario Castellanos, as cited in Eugenio Nuñez Ang, 'La visión del hombre en la obra de Carlos Fuentes', *Universidad del Estado de Mexico* (2006) < http://www.ensayistas.org/critica/generales/C-H/mexico/fuentes.htm>

gioso. En todos lados el hombre está solo'.[224] Samuel Ramos was equally critical of the typical Mexican man – 'el pelado' – as being primitive and brutish: "El pelado' mexicano […] constituye la expresión más elemental […] del carácter nacional. Es un ser de naturaleza explosiva cuyo trato es peligroso […] es un animal […] "El pelado" busca la riña como un excitante'.[225] This idea of a brutish force at the heart of the *pelado*, in turn representing the 'heart' of Mexico, recurs in Fuentes's novel, as does the idea of an explosive animalistic nature, and these divergent strands within the national psyche are held in tension throughout the novel.

3.2 Inauthenticity and 'Desilusión': Federico Robles

Fuentes opens his novel with a brilliant cameo of the members of the new aristocracy celebrating a raucous cocktail party. It is attended by a heterogeneous group of more than thirty-six, including business people, lawyers, poets, pseudo-philosophers, socialites, among others: 'Miles de aristócratas y pintores y jotos […] la crema de la crema' (*La región*, p. 3). These *nouveau riche* characters spend their lives carousing and living the high life, exchanging *bons mots* about the misery of the poor, the backwardness of Mexico, and the new-fangled philosophy of Existentialism represented by 'Estévez el filósofo existencialista' (*La región*, p. 31). Fuentes classifies them as 'la gente pop-off' and it is the women who consider themselves as trend-setters in this new society: 'Todas las mexicanitas rubias, elegantes, vestidas de negro, convencidas de que dan el tono internacional en el triste país pulguiento y roído' (*La región*, p. 44). Meanwhile, their men folk are intent on push-

[224] Paz, *El laberinto*, p.22.

[225] Ramos, *El perfil del hombre,* pp. 53-54.

ing their ambitions to the limits: 'Sus maridos, los abogados de éxito, los incipientes industriales, creen estar penetrando […] la zona de la recompensa, definitiva, de los grandes placeres del loco éxito' (*La región*, p. 44). In this opening section, Fuentes contrasts the attitude of the new 'aristocracy' with that of the old under the regime of Porfirio Díaz, but sees no moral superiority.[226] The latter is represented in *La región más transparente* by the Ovanda family, who consider themselves destined to rule, set standards and enjoy the wealth commensurate with their status as bulwarks of the established order, as witnessed in the following passage: 'El magnífico edificio de la paz y el progreso no puede ser destruido tan fácilmente […] el país no podrá prosperar sin su élite directiva' (*La región*, p. 100). However, the Revolution puts an end to their privileged lifestyle and now they have to accommodate themselves to poverty and the new society: 'El pedestal que durante cerca de cuatro décadas Lorenza habrá creído vacío, esperándolos, ya estaba ocupado, con vulgaridad' (*La región*, p. 107). Pimpinela Ovando is the mouthpiece for this class and is constantly making the contrast between the old way of life and the modern society of Mexico and bemoaning the catastrophe of the Revolution, lamenting the fact that Mexico is 'un país destruido por la revolución y la vulgaridad […] esta orgía de barbarie' (*La región*, p. 319). Life for the new social élite is a constant round of parties and holidays in Acapulco, flashy cars, yachts and mansions, a lifestyle that is seen as completely inauthentic and hedonistic. The moral bankruptcy of this political and social class, then, is connected centrally here in Fuentes's analysis to the ideas of alienation, inauthenticity and modernity.

This probing of the national character is deftly handled throughout the novel and follows a process that commenced in the immediate post-revolutionary period, as discussed by George Irish: 'They reveal the desire of a probing spirit to discover an image of con-

[226] 'Díaz came to power in 1876. During his long rule (1876-1910) known as the Porfiriato, Díaz and his allies sought to create a powerful central government and to place Mexico in the hall of modern capitalist economic development', Easterling, pp. 4-6.

temporary Mexico representing the true national character and the real essence of life in Mexico since the Revolution of 1910'.[227] In his classic treatise on the nature of the Mexican identity arising from the Revolution, Samuel Ramos delineates the archetypal 'modern' man:

> Un nuevo tipo de hombre se yergue orgulloso y dominador, despreciando la antigua moralidad. El disfrute del dinero como instrumento de poder, y como medio para obtener el bienestar material y la vida confortable, los placeres sexuales, el deporte, los viajes, la locomoción, y una multitud de diversiones excitantes constituyen la variada perspectiva en que se proyecta la existencia del hombre moderno.[228]

Federico Robles fits this picture perfectly and, in this way, epitomizes the 'new', post-revolutionary Mexican man. An ardent advocate of the Revolution; as a young man full of idealism, Federico took part in the fighting and distinguished himself at the battle of Celaya. In discussions with Ixca Cienfuegos and Manuel Zamacona (whom we discover to be his son), he argued that before the Revolution the country was impoverished and prey to banditry and corruption. With like-minded idealists, Robles believed that the Revolution had achieved tremendous success in the fields of education, land distribution and job opportunities for young people, all of which had been denied them under Porfirio regime. Yet, as time went by, it was clear that Robles began to lose his idealism and slip into an inauthentic life style and becoming implicated in the assassination of the leader, Feliciano Sánchez (*La región,* p. 417). He then turns his energies towards creating a vast financial empire but in the process loses his moral compass. Having amassed great wealth as a banker, Robles decided to marry a local beauty, Norma Larragoti, in order to enhance his social standing. A kindred spirit to Robles, she comes from humble origins: 'mi padre era un comerciante pobretón […] y mi mamá una vieja bastante vulgar' (*La región,* p. 389), but she was ambitious and determined to do well in life and move up the social ladder:

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[227] Irish, p. 31.

[228] Samuel Ramos, *Hacia un nuevo humanismo* (Mexico City: Nueva Biblioteca Mexicana, 1999), p. 4.

> Cuando cumplió veintiocho años, hablaban mucho de ella; salía retratada en todos los cabarets cada vez con un hombre distinto, y en una recepción oficial conoció a un banquero prieto […] Tiene su pinta el banquero, todos le rinden. Eso es lo único que necesito. […] "- Si logro dormirme a este viejo, recuperamos la fortuna. Es el Rotschild local" (*La región,* p. 141)

This self-serving tendency is the hallmark of Norma's character, and the utter shamelessness of her approach is shared by many of the other characters from her social milieu. Joseph Sommers also singles out this vicious depiction of the upper classes:

> The tone of sarcastic irony with which Fuentes views the patterns and mores of upper-class Mexican society serves as an astringent counterbalance to the deeper note of underlying tragedy in the lives of the main characters.[229]

As examined in detail earlier, existentialist thought was heavily preoccupied with the contrast between authentic and inauthentic modes of existence, and it was Kierkegaard who was probably the first to offer an in-depth analysis of the subject. He referred to the inauthentic way of life as 'aesthetic' since it involves making no decisive choices and is only committed to the pleasures of the moment. For Heidegger, on the other hand, as seen in Chapter One, authentic existence can only come into being when individuals arrive at the realization of who they are. For him, the authentic individual is one who takes responsibility for his own existence and the inauthentic individual is one who lives in the way that others think he should. To be truly authentic is to have realized one's individuality: the person who avoids choice and who becomes a mere face in the crowd has failed to become authentic. In this way, individuals must attain a certain degree of self-awareness and consciousness. For Sartre, such a person is in 'bad faith' by not accepting his responsibility and in seeking to blame someone else or some external factor for what he himself has done freely. He is resigned to a pattern of life laid out in advance and over which he has no control and, hence, sees himself as free of existential responsibility.

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[229] Sommers, p. 23

Thus, it is clear, from the way in which he explores and condemns the lifestyles of the principal characters, that authenticity is one of Fuentes's main concerns in the novel, and he is especially trenchant in his depiction of the conduct of the 'pop-off' society with their endless parties and empty prattle. Federico Robles and his wife Norma are prime symbols of the inauthentic life style of the 'new' post-revolutionary Mexican society, many of whose members are of humble origin: 'subimos muy de prisa para pensar que somos los mismos que hace apenas medio siglo bajo las órdenes de hacendados' (*La región,* p. 110). Speaking to Ixca Cienfuegos, Robles confesses to being a self-made man:

> Le he contado mi vida. Yo vengo desde la milpa aquella y he llegado por mi trabajo y mi ambición, sin ayuda de nadie ¿Qué yo ha sido eficaz y los otros torpes? Pues ahí tiene usted la historia de este país en dos palabras […] (*La región,* p. 400)

He fought in the Revolution and distinguished himself in the battle of Celaya but the War made him cynical when he saw how others took advantage of it to advance their own selfish ambitions. So he decided to follow them by becoming a lawyer, as the first step to becoming a ruthless property speculator and wealthy banker. Considerable investments from the USA gave him his opportunity:

> Luego fue Federico a proponer la venta de los terrenos, que ni siquiera eran suyos, a tres veces su valor real a unos banqueros gringos […] Para 1936 ya no había quién lo parara. Dinero llama dinero y esos gringos le tuvieron confianza, lo pusieron de abogado consultor de sus compañías (*La región,* pp. 201-02)

Robles is cynical in his attitude and behaviour toward Norma. Theirs is portrayed as a cold and empty relationship: he does not expect great passion from her, only insisting that she carry out her functions as the public expression of his wealth and social standing. He is domineering and manipulative:

> ¿No sentía él mismo que era preciso que Norma fuera a esta y a todas las bodas, a complementarle a ayudarlo a cubrir todos los terrenos a fin de que, tácita o expresamente, la presencia de Federico Robles, se dejara sentir en todos los ámbitos del mundo escogido como el del éxito? (*La región,* pp. 173-74)

From these passages it can be seen that, from an existentialist perspective, both of them lead profoundly unauthentic lives and in time they began to drift apart and become alienated from one another. Robles has an affair with Hortensia Chacón and Norma with Cienfuegos:

> Federico quiso tocar con las manos la cara de su mujer: la furia contenida de Norma volvió a apartarlas […] ¿Cuál sería el punto de unión del rostro diamantino que reproducía todas las páginas de modas martilleadas hasta convertir esa subespecie de la elegancia singular en la muestra común de una vulgaridad clandestina y rostro grueso y oscuro de carnes espesas y ojos de cuchara y sienes rapadas que asomaba a su lado? (*La región,* pp. 176-77)

He realises that there could never be any great love between them. The choices they had made and the insincerity and 'bad faith' of their relationship led to a gradual alienation and ultimately disastrous consequences:

> Pero […] así la había pensado y buscado: contrapartida de su vida pública, continuación o avanzada de sus resortes de éxito, nueva soldadera de la verdadera Revolución […] Norma era respetada porque era la mujer de Federico Robles […] y Federico Robles era un hombre que había sabido triunfar y dominar y era el dinero y la posibilidad de ayuda para escalar […] así la había buscado, para esto. Para nada más. No tenía derecho a exigirle otra cosa. Norma había cumplido el pacto tácito. (*La región,* pp.177-78)

Equally, Norma admits to Cienfuegos that she married Robles for selfish reasons: 'Me casé con él porque estaba arruinada. Mi familia perdió todo en la Revolución' (*La región,* p. 333). She is, then, acutely aware that, were it not for marrying him, she would now be working as a local shop assistant. This brief analysis of the relationship between Norma and Cienfuegos serves as an illuminating example of Fuentes's literary representation of existential inauthenticity. Indeed, his portrait of them serves as a cautionary moral tale, a warning against the dangers and risks of inauthenticity on a grand scale. Furthermore, towards the end of the novel, and after tragedy strikes, Fuentes shows us a more authentic Robles, stripped of his material goods and living a simple life in the countryside. In this way, Fuentes charts the disastrous consequences of inauthenticity through the lives of his

characters, utilizing his fictional explorations as a vehicle for the probing of important philosophical questions.

3.3 Existentialist Revolution

Authenticity is also central to Fuentes's philosophical exploration of the Mexican Revolution in the novel, where it is a central theme. Overall, the novel is ambivalent about the Revolution, seeing it as a success in the sense that it abolished the old privileged aristocracy and dragged Mexico into the modern age. But, on the other hand, the emergence of a 'new' form of aristocracy and a philosophy of progress that is modelled on positivistic Porfirian ideas is less warmly regarded. In his book on the Mexican Revolution, Stuart Easterling points out that

> There is a rich history here, one of popular insurrection, political radicalism, friends turned enemies, and ideals fought for and lost. Understanding the narrative area of the Mexican Revolution – its cause, process and outcome – can teach us about far more than just the history of Mexico in the 1910s. Like any revolution, it is a window into understanding human beings and their conflicts.[230]

He goes on to argue that there are divergent views on the outcome of the Revolution. On the one hand, there are those who believe that the Revolution's legacy of social reform and grassroots revolt provided a basis for renewing their nation's politics. On the other hand, there are those who hold that the Revolution's legacy is something best left aside and that its principal legacy was a corrupt and authoritarian regime in the form of the one-party rule of the PRI. This ambivalence about the precise meaning(s) of the Revolution is clearly

[230] Easterling, p. 2.

reflected in the novel and Fuentes devotes much attention to analysing its historical setting and problematic consequences:

> Si, la Revolución. Ustedes saben cómo empezó, y yo la viví. Sin programa, sin ideas, casi sin metas […] Con jefes improvisados y pintorescos. Sin táctica ni pensamiento revolucionarios auténticos ¡De acuerdo! Mucho se perdió o, fue traicionado. Pero algo se salvó, y lo salvamos nosotros […] Los que nos ensuciamos las manos […] (*La región*, p. 405)

On the one hand, Robles justifies the role he played in the Revolution when he recalls the oppressive social conditions that existed in the past:

> Todavía en tiempos de Serafín, mi abuelo, esta tierra daba de comer a todos. Después vinieron las leyes esas, y es cuando el señas Don Ignacio (de Ovando) empezó a comprar todas las parcelas. Después los soldados extranjeros acabaron con muchos de nosotros [….] después de la guerra nos mandó el gobierno esas nuevas leyes, y entonces sí nos tragó Don Ignacio (*La región*, pp.110-11) [231]

Continuing this line of analysis, Froilá Reyero, Robles's cousin, and his friend, Gervasio Pola, are depicted as active in organising strikes against the terrible working conditions of the workers in Puebla and Río Blanco, strikes that were suppressed with great brutality by the army:

> Entonces fue cuando entraron las tropas de Rosalío Martínez, echándose sus descargas una tras otra, sin parar, mientras todos caían muertos en las calles, sin poder ni siquiera gritar […] después nomás se vió como salían las plataformas de ferrocarril repletas de cadáveres y a veces nomás de piernas y cabezas. Los fueron a echar al mar a Veracruz y a los del Círculo de Obreros que quedaban en Río Banco luego los ahorcaron allí mismo. (*La región*, p. 114)

Considering Mexico's bloody past, Robles argues that the Revolution was necessary, asserting that the country was destroyed after ten years of anarchy with gangs of 'bandoleros' roaming the countryside creating havoc.[232] According to this view, the economic life of the country was paralysed and there was a lack of confidence in industry at home and abroad, as well as a lack of esteem for the country. By 1920, the state was being ad-

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[231] 'In 1883 a law was passed permitting easy acquisition of so-called *terrenos baldíos*, that is, unoccupied or unused lands'; Easterling, p. 17.

[232] 'In Río Blanco and its environs between fifty and seventy workers were killed in attacks on crowds, armed skirmishes, and subsequent summary executions'; Easterling, p. 37.

ministered by a new military caste whose goal was to advance Mexico's economy through capitalist economic development. Many of the military officers originated or moved within the sphere of the nouveaux riches or aspired to be part of it. The model for the age was the general-turned-businessman, like Federico Robles:

> Pueden criticarnos mucho, Cienfuegos, y creer que el puñado de millonarios mexicanos […] nos hemos hecho ricos con el sudor del pueblo. Pero cuando recuerda uno a México en aquellas épocas, se ven las cosas de manera distinta. Gavillas de bandoleros que no podían renunciar a la bola. Paralización de la vida económica del país. Generales con ejércitos privados. Desprestigio de México en el extranjero. (*La región*, p. 114) [233]

Into this explosive socio-political context, the Revolution brought dramatic changes. Millions of children could now go to school and millions of peasants were now qualified workers, and formed a stable middle class: 'Esas gentes son la única obra concreta de la Revolución, y ésa fue nuestra obra […] Sentamos las bases del capitalismo mexicano' (*La región*, p. 129). Robles admits that there may have been corruption and injustices in the process, 'manchándonos las conciencias' (*La región*, p. 128) but 'teníamos derecho a todo' (*La región*, p. 129). 'Las revoluciones las hacen los hombres de carne y hueso, no santos, y todas terminan por crear una nueva casta privilegiada' (*La región*, p. 129). Here, the view advanced is that the Revolution was part of a natural process whereby hierarchies reproduce themselves.

3.4 Freedom and Choice

As has been discussed in Chapter One, one of the most fundamental traits of existentialism was the emphasis it placed on the role of choice and freedom in the individual's life. Tradi-

[233] 'A layer of Villa's troops and officers had become increasingly professionalized, even mercenary […]. This led to a form of arbitrary, lawless rule when Villa's troops were billeted in Mexico City. Villa's 'rowdies' went on repeated rampages in the capital […] Homes were ransacked and looted [...] and a significant number of summary executions took place'; Easterling, p. 111.

tional philosophies had ignored the uniqueness of the individual and assigned him a specific place in the order of the universe. Modern industrialized society now sought to view man as a mere cog in a very complicated machine. For Sartre, the philosopher cannot determine a universally valid set of objective values, nor can he tell the individual what his choices should be. A person's existence is an 'issue' for himself and in confronting this dilemma he must develop beliefs, values and interpretations of his situation which will direct the shape he gives to his life. He must determine the place that work, pleasure or religion will occupy in his life. In like manner, Camus does not dictate to the individual how he should behave in an absurd world; all he can do is to draw attention to the possibilities of choice and behaviour in such a world. Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Ortega y Gasset and Marcel are all of the same opinion with regard to the importance of choice in the life of the individual. In reference to these existentialist themes of freedom and choice, Joseph Sommers remarks:

> One source of contemporary anguish is the relative absence of freedom of choice for the individual. […] Caught between a cross-fire of impulses which operate on his make up – the mythical currents of his culture, the relentless cycles of national history, origins which determine later destiny, the heavy inheritance of guilt to be assumed – the individual finds limited scope for personal development, for maturation of individual personality.[234]

This limited framework for maturation is seen vividly in the Robles/Norma relationship. When Robles's financial empire collapses, he wants to take back all the jewellery he had given her but she turns and heaps insults on him: 'La sensación de que pertenecías, de que no eras un barbaján, un indio mugroso, que podías llegar a ser gente decente […] un pelado con aires' (*La región,* p. 431). The row between them reaches a tragic conclusion when Norma is burned in a mysterious fire which engulfs their mansion. After the fire and the collapse of Robles's financial empire, he drives around the city in a state of shock and be-

[234] Sommers, p. 151.

wilderment: 'Se sintió al final de un largo viaje, los muros despintados le cerraban las vías los postes de luz y teléfonos, […] formaban una selva de alambre impenetrable […] Robles caminó sin rumbo' (*La región,* p. 444). During his stupor, he stumbles on the funeral wake for Gabriel, one of the *pelados* who had been brutally murdered during the frenzy of 'la fiesta del Grito' and he is overcome with emotion as he remembers all the unnecessary deaths of the people he knows: his cousin Froilán in prison, Feliciano Sánchez, the labour leader, in whose assassination he was implicated and, above all, that of his son:

> Federico volvió a mirar el cadáver de Gabriel. ¿Quién dará razón de su muerte?—¿quién es el asesino de este hombre, de todos nuestros hombres? Con un sollozo seco que nadie escuchó, Federico cayó de rodillas. […] De rodillas, Robles levantó el brazo y pasó la mano por la frente helada de Gabriel. (*La región,* pp. 468-69)

It is the moment of his redemption and reincorporation into the world of common humanity:

> Robles sintió surgir […] más allá de sus huesos y de su sangre, en las vidas de otras que en ese minuto de humillación y carne rendida eran su propia vida, en las vidas mudas que lo habían alimentado […] y esas vidas mudas […] se multiplicaban […] hasta abarcar toda la tierra de México, todas las derrotas y asesinatos y batallas. (*La región*, p. 469)

Here, he sees in the death of Gabriel a reflection of his own inauthentic life with its disastrous consequences and decides to leave it all behind him and return to the simple but more authentic life of his youth: 'Vive en el norte: creo que tiene unas tierras y cultiva algodón' (*La región*, p. 490). An almost didactic tone enters the text at the point where Robles is described crying over the death of one of the lowest placed members of society; meanwhile, Norma distributes surplus clothing to the poor.

The encroachment of the lower classes into the lives of Robles and his circle is a striking feature of the novel and is characterized by ambivalence. On the one hand, sympathy is shown for their hard life of poverty, fatalism and the necessity for emigration to the USA in search of seasonal work. On the other hand, and recalling the strictures of Octavio

Paz, the novel is trenchant in its exposure of their drunkenness, immoral behaviour and general 'coarseness'. Another example of this can be seen in an interesting vignette that illustrates the influence and working out of the existentialist theme of choice in an individual's life. Robles and Librado Ibarra were school friends and after qualifying, were ready to face life at the age of twenty five:

> Pues sí, los dos igualitos, con los mismos caminos por delante. Era cuestión de escoger […] todo estaba por hacerse […] Íbamos a empezar en cero a construir a México. ¿Qué camino no ofrecía posibilidades? […] Para eso se había hecho la Revolución. Iban a tener las mismas oportunidades el obrero y el campesino y el abogado y el banquero […] En fin, eso creíamos entonces. (*La región*, p. 199)

Both get employment in the new administration: 'Yo Dizque Ibarra iba a especializarme en derecho agrario […] Federico ya iba por otro rumbo. En cuanto se recibió, el general le dejó muy buenos negocios' (*La región*, p. 199). Ibarra leaves his office job in the city and goes into the countryside to see how land distribution is working in the wake of the Revolution. What he sees shocks him: government officials being killed by *pistoleros*, the governor's family stealing land from the Indians, his own life threatened. He gives up his job and returns to the city and gets a humble job in the Department of Education. In the meantime, his wife has left him: 'Me retaché a México, y después de aquella experiencia sólo quería vivir en la ciudad y ni oler algo que tuviera que ver con el campo' (*La región*, p. 200). His friend, Robles, also goes from success to success: 'Para 1936 ya no había quién lo parara. Dinero llama dinero, Robles, siempre a la segura. En política, contactos con los gringos […] viajes a los Estados Unidos, y una esposa pop-off, y todas esas cosas que dan prestigio' (*La región*, pp. 201-02). Here, Ibarra is shown to be philosophical about the choice he has made, recognizing its authenticity: 'Lo importante es que cada quien vivió su vida ¿no?, y que allá quedó él y acá abajo yo' (*La región*, p. 204)

Existentialist philosophers, as has already been extensively outlined, are noted for their emphasis on freedom of action and the necessity for the individual to choose what he

will be. As Ortega y Gasset points out in his book, *The Revolt of the Masses,* 'To live is to feel ourselves fatally obliged to exercise our liberty to decide what we are going to be in the world. Not for a single moment is our activity of decision allowed to rest'.[235] Such ideas about freedom and choice permeate the novel and can be seen to subtend the construction of the various characters who play out these ideas of freedom in their daily lives. The ways in which their lives play out are clearly presented as the direct result of decisions and choices they make as they exercise their freedom.

Freedom and choice are, of course, constant themes in existentialist thought, and the concept of freedom and choice for the individual lies at the core of Sartre's philosophy in particular. His view of individual freedom was based on the notion that, since there was no Creator, human beings were condemned to be free. Such freedom was exercized above all in making choices and, indeed, in not being able to avoid making choices. According to Sartre, man is never just what he is, but rather is free and able to determine what he is by the projects he chooses. [236] Thus, decision-making is at the very centre of being human. In the words of Jaspers: 'Indeed, it has become a general problem whether man can be free'.[237] On the other hand, Camus regards all notions of freedom as illusory. [238] The man who considers himself free in the sense of being able to direct his life and purpose becomes aware that his 'freedom' is a lie. Joseph Sommers also speaks of this concept of lack of freedom and choice in the context of Mexico:

> One source of contemporary anguish is the relative absence of freedom of choice for the individual […] caught between a crossfire of impulses- the mythical currents of

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[235] Ortega, *The Revolt of the Masses*, p. 36.

[236] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness,* p. 101.

[237] Jaspers, *Man in the Modern Age*, p. 241.

[238] Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 99.

> his culture, the relentless cycles of national history, origins which determine later destiny […] the individual finds limited scope for personal development.[239]

This is exactly what Fuentes lays bare in the novel: the limitations imposed by historical circumstances, and the relentless cycles of national history that, even, in their new 'revolutionary' phase, can offer little relief or change to the characters living in the nation's capital city.

3.5 Violence

Towards the end of the novel, one of the characters, Manuel Zamacona, approaches a garage owner to buy some petrol for his car. The owner takes out his gun and shoots him dead just because he did not like the way he looked at him. It is through such casual instances of gratuitous violence, that the novel undertakes a profound analysis of the character of the Mexican and, in so doing, of Mexico itself. Existentialism provides an appropriate and effective conceptual framework for this evaluation. It may have been a new philosophical phenomenon in Europe, but as Fuentes remarked to Emir Monegal, and as noted in the Introduction, in his view, it was always inherent in the Mexican psyche:

> También hay un existencialismo *avant la lettre* y muy obvio. México es un país del instante. El mañana es totalmente improbable, ¡peligroso! te pueden matar en una cantina, a la vuelta de una esquina, porque miraste feo, porque comiste un taco. Vives el hoy porque el mañana es improbable.[240]

This insistence on the Mexican propensity to violence has, of course, been central to many examinations of the national character and psyche, and was articulated most famously, perhaps, by Paz, who, as noted in Chapter Two, declared himself astonished at the number and violent nature of Mexican festivals. In *La región más transparente*, Fuentes highlights

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[239] Sommers, p. 151.

[240] Monegal, *El arte de narrar*, p. 118.

several of these violent expressions of the Mexican psyche which manifest themselves most frequently but not exclusively among the lower classes, and he analyses this predisposition to violence from an existentialist perspective. In this way, he again touches upon one of existentialism's central questions, and analyses it within the specific cultural and sociopolitical context of post-revolutionary Mexico.

Closely related to the idea expressed above is the notion of the Mexican man as someone who feels that he is living a life of frustration and alienation. Fifo and Beto, two of Fuentes's characters, allude to this sensation when they refer to 'esta pinche vida que arrastramos' (*La región,* p. 85). The physical cosmos is alien in the sense that it is indifferent to ideals and hopes. It is a vast expanse in which human existence and history appear as transitory and casual events. Man is alone in a world that is indifferent to his existence. He experiences a sense of angst and dread which enclose him within a feeling of restlessness and solitude. Human existence is an absurdity since it is always at the mercy of chance events and of coincidence; no one is ever secure. Even so-called freedom is problematic since all kinds of forces shape life and limit what we can do and become. A similar sense of the arbitrariness of existence permeates the novel and is expressed through descriptions of acts of random violence that reverberate in the lives of the characters and add to the sense of senselessness and meaninglessness of the world that the novel epitomizes and evokes. Examples of this include the case of Gervasio Pola, and of his three companions, who are executed in Belén prison because they happen to be on the 'wrong' side in the Civil War.[241] In another instance, one of the *pelados*, Gabriel, gets beaten up in a canteen in a row with two others: 'El compañero […] pasó a dar de macanazos a Gabriel mientras el hombre flaco le metía la rodilla en el vientre y, tomando la botella vacía, le golpeaba los

[241] Gervasio Pola was very active in politics collecting money for the Zapatista faction and organizing strikes for the workers in Puebla and Río Blanco. With three companions, Gervasio escaped from Belén prison in a rubbish truck only to be recaptured later on and brought back to prison. Gervasio reveals the hiding place of his three companions, Froilán, Sindulfo and Pedro Ríos, in an attempt to save his own life, but all four were summarily executed; see *La región*, p. 97.

hombros y el rostro'(*La región*, p. 239) Later, they meet him again, when the matter becomes more serious, and they stab him to death: 'Te dije que a mí no me agarrabas igual dos veces, manito –dijo el hombre flaco, con la navaja ensangrentada en la mano' (*La región*, p. 439). Gabriel's companions are stunned at this turn of events but at the same time their attitude is fatalistic: '—¡Ya se nos fue Gabriel, señor! Él no se la buscó, palabra; le cayó nomás; así es la suerte […] morirse nomás, sin razón, de repente […] Es como morirse en balde' (*La región,* pp. 467-68).

The same words could be applied to the death of the idealistic Zamacona, who meets a senseless and meaningless death when looking for petrol for his car, and is murdered simply because of the way he looked at his assassin: 'disparó su pistola dos, tres, cinco veces sobre el cuerpo de Zamacona – A mi nadie me mira así' (*La región,* p. 425). Hortensia Chacón is blinded and confined to a wheelchair after being assaulted by her husband, Donaciano, when she discovered that the job he was working in was not the one about which he boasted to his friends; his 'machismo' was offended 'y él quiso vengarse' (*La región,* p. 382). Other examples abound, as when Federico Robles organizes the assassination of Feliciano Sánchez, the labour leader and agitator, in order to secure a piece of land for development:

> Feliciano cayó de boca sobre los matorrales […] No, amigo, no. No exijo tanto por mis servicios. Agradézcale al general su oferta […] Dígale al General que me conformo con unos cuantos metros de esos terrenos que tiene por allá arriba. (*La región,* p. 477)

Librado Ibarra tells Cienfuegos of a violent incident that he had witnessed in the countryside:

> A una profesora de Villa de Refugio la agarró y una gavilla de bandoleros pagados que la arrastraron de cabeza sobre un pedregal hasta dejarla hecha trizas. A otra le cortaron las orejas, a otros maestros los ahorcaron y les quemaron los pies. (*La región,* p. 202)

What these instances of random cruelty and violence serve to illustrate is the extent to which, in the novel, the universe is conceived of as being organized according to a set of principles that have neither sense nor logic, making an attitude of alienated detachment a prerequisite for survival within it. In this way, the novel functions as an exercise in existentialist probing, whereby characters mediate central existentialist questions relating to violence, inauthenticity and freedom.

3.6 Ambivalence and Alienation: The Role of Ixca Cienfuegos

Before proceeding to the second part of this analysis of *La región más transparent*e as an example of an existential appraisal of the country itself, it is necessary to examine the role of Ixca Cienfuegos and his philosophical ideas. Cienfuegos is a character of essential importance within the novel, one who has received extensive critical attention, although it is interesting to note that William Foster considers him to be both marginal and, at the same time central, to the narrative action.[242] John Brushwood, on the other hand, considers him to be a major narrative error, arguing that he functions simply as an inorganic device for representing or manifesting the influence in Mexican culture.[243] On the other hand, for Joseph Sommers, 'He incarnates the values and myths of Indian Mexico, in particular the timeless sense of betrayal and the compulsion to reestablish ties with the past by means of sacrifice'.[244]

Unlike the character of Federico Robles, we know nothing of his background and he springs upon us suddenly in the novel. Urbane and sophisticated, he moves easily among

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[242] '*La región más transparente* and the Limits of Prophetic Art', *Hispania,* 56 (1973), pp. 35-42 (p. 35).

[243] John S. Brushwood, *Mexico in its Novel* (Austin TX: University of Texas Press, 1966), p.38. See also Walter M. Langford, *The Mexican Novel Comes of Age* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1971), pp. 132-33.

[244] Sommers, p. 103.

the various social classes, from the bourgeoisie to the 'macenalli' (the lower classes), and is the link that holds the various sections of the novel together. He remains a mystery man for the 'pop-off' society:

> Es un sangrón […] Como Dios en todas partes, nadie lo puede ver. Entrada libre a los salones sociales, a los de high-life, a los de los magnates también. Que si es el cerebro mágico de algún banquero, que si es un gigoló o un simple marihuana, que se viene, que si va, en fin, una fachita más de este mundo inarmónico en que vivimos. (*La región,* p. 46)

In this passage, he is portrayed as a Mephistophelian figure, a strange amalgam of kindness and cynicism. He befriends Rodrigo Pola, a young writer and poet, and gives him encouragement and advice. Inexplicably, he tries to abduct a youngster as a sacrificial victim for his mother. He befriends Rosenda Pola and organizes her funeral when she dies. Although an intimate financial adviser to Federico Robles, he cynically seduces his wife, Norma, and spreads rumours about the imminent collapse of his financial empire. He also condemns his mother's necromancy and the way in which she reveres the bones of her dead husband and children as having special powers, in accordance with the Aztec religion. For Luis Harss and Barbara Dohman, Cienfuegos is the personification of the lingering presence of Mexico's past: 'He is the devil whispering backstage, a god of ancestral sacrifice prompting the characters of the drama to their downfall'.[245] From an existentialist perspective, Cienfuegos's philosophy may be aligned to that of Nietzsche. He considers Aztec mythology as more meaningful than Christianity which, according to him, only encourages mediocrity, weakness and cowardice rather than the moral strength and courage to face life. Speaking to Pola he says he can help him if he is prepared for the sacrifice:

> En él te podrás redimir. Ven conmigo; yo te enseñaré […] olvida todo lo demás, lo que has sido Rodrigo, los signos que ni siquiera has sabido vivir de una fe que sólo ha aumentado la compasión hacia ti mismo. ¡Escupe sobre lo sagrado si lo sagrado es esa misericordia ramplona que sólo acentuará tu mediocridad! […] tiembla y siente

[245] Harss and Dohmann, p. 287.

> el terror en el sacrificio […] y llegarás a los nuestros […] y el sol te apretará la garganta y te comerá la sangre para que seas uno con él. (*La región*, pp. 288-89)

The novel proceeds to explore Cienfuegos's philosophy of life, which is a strange confection of Aztec mythical sun worship, nature worship, and the invocation of the influence of the spirits of the dead in the lives of the living. Furthermore, it evinces existential themes such as the uniqueness of the individual, the brevity of his life and the finality of death:

> Cada hombre alimenta la creación de un Dios […] cada hombre, cada sucesión de hombres refleja el rostro de los colores sin forma de un Dios que lo marca y lo determina y lo persigue hasta que se reintegra a la dualidad original […] Veo los elementos visibles e inmediatos, copulados sin intermedio a la vida de cada hombre. Veo los pruebas fechacientes - sol, lluvia- de un poder superior, y sobre la tierra mi delgada pared de hueso y carne. (*La región*, pp. 286-87)

Speaking to Pola, Cienfuegos articulates an existentialist sense of the absurdity of life and the Nietszchean concept of eternal return:

> O se alcanza la situación de una ardilla en una jaula […] Corres sobre el carril de la estrecha prisión, te haces la ilusión de que avanzas […] y un día, se apagó todo, […] Entonces debes abrir los ojos a tu despreciable vida, sin contactos, y convencerte de que solo cabe tu destrucción. (*La región*, p. 288)

George Irish characterizes Cienfuegos's philosophy as a coherent philosophy based on the fatalistic Indian view of life: he 'believes that the true Mexican character can only be discovered by falling back upon and reviving the distant indigenous past'.[246] From a literary-critical point of view, however, the portrayal of the character of Cienfuegos is disconcerting. At the beginning of the novel, he is presented to us as a highly articulate person, at ease in all levels of society. But then, just as in the case of Rodrigo Pola, we learn that he is completely dominated by the necromantic practices of his mother, Teódula Moctezuma. His exit from the novel is perplexing and lacks logic within its linear narrative framework. After all, Robles had a reason for retiring into obscurity after the collapse of his financial empire. But, here, Fuentes gives us no reason for why Cienfuegos suddenly

[246] Irish, p. 32.

quits the social scene of the pop-off society, although it is hinted that this may be related to the tragic death of Norma. In any event, the ambivalence of his characterization seems to signal Fuentes's own ambivalence towards the task of integrating or adequately representing the complexities of Mexico's indigenous past within a society dominated by classism, racism and the pursuit of self-interest.

Towards the end of the novel, Cienfuegos and Pola meet one another after a lapse of three years and discuss their respective fortunes in the intervening years. The latter is satisfied with his life as a script writer for film makers, although it has meant abandoning his ambitions as a writer. He is aware that his life is a very inauthentic one: 'Pensaba que todas las explicaciones son posibles, y que él no tenía por qué regresar a las que le dolían, a las que no dolían, a las que no debían tener lugar en su nueva vida' (*La región*, p. 488). Pola, too, follows an existentialist pathway in his pursuit and later abandonment of ambition. Indeed, Van Delden identifies Pola as

> […] an emblematic modern personality - a type toward the definition of which the existentialists made a key contribution. His actions are guided by a search for authentic self-definition […] he has to struggle against the oppressive demands of his mother Rosenda […] In this he appears to be heeding the existentialist exhortation to free oneself from all forms of external conditioning […] Rodrigo's pursuit of a total freedom from all external constraints leads first to feelings of alienation and inauthenticity, and eventually to a complete turnaround and unconditional surrender to society's norms of success.[247]

Bearing this paradigm in mind, and in relation to Cienfuegos, it is clear that he is equally dissatisfied with the external constraints that bind him, and he admits to having been dominated by his mother's 'Aztec' beliefs:

- Ya se cumplió el sacrificio- silbó la viuda al oído de Ixca-[…] ya podemos volver a ser los que somos, hijo. Ya no hay por qué disimular. Volverás a los tuyos, aquí, conmigo […] Aquí vas a vivir. Ya se acabó.(*La región*, pp. 443-44)

- ¡Ella me obligó a vivir con esta criada y con sus hijos! (*La región*, p. 491)

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[247] Van Delden, *Carlos Fuentes, Mexico and Modernity,* pp. 20-21.

He has come to regret pandering to her wishes and magical rites: 'Todo fue un juego espantoso, nada más, un juego de ritos olvidados y signos y palabras muertas' (*La región*, p. 491).

3.7 Bad Faith

As well as freedom and choice, existentialist thinkers placed a characteristically strong emphasis on the importance of individual responsibility. For Sartre, as we have seen, 'bad faith' consists in not accepting one's responsibilities and in seeking to blame someone or something for what one has done freely oneself, in choosing to assert one's freedom only where it is expedient and on other occasions to seek refuge in determinism. Anger and despair lead to a tendency to embrace 'bad faith', a self-deception in which the person views himself as an object, a person without responsibility. This type of 'bad faith' involves resignation to a pattern of life laid out in advance, over which one supposedly has no control, and for which one is therefore free of responsibility. It counsels only a dull resignation to one's fate. According to Sartre, the individual was not only responsible for his own life but also those of his fellow human beings.[248] In answer to Zamacona's query about responsibility, it can be argued that Robles was faithful to Sartre's dictum: not only was he a fervent defender of the Revolution and its positive elements, but he also actively participated in it: 'Pero a quién se hará responsable de ese dolor y esa traición? […] por cada mexicano que murió en vano, sacrificado, hay un mexicano responsable […] alguien debe asumir la culpa' (*La región,* p. 411). It was only at the end of the Revolution that Robles cast aside

[248] Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, p. 31.

his high ideals and allowed himself to be seduced by the grab for power and wealth that he saw going on around him.

In the course of an argument with Robles and Cienfuegos, Zamacona points out that Mexico has had such a sad and turbulent history that any attempt to account for it seems impossible, as does any attempt to ignore it:

> ¿Qué justifica la destrucción del mundo indígena, nuestra derrota frente a los Estados Unidos, las muertes de Hidalgo o Madero? ¿Qué justifica el hambre, los campos secos, las plagas, los asesinatos, las violaciones? […] Toda, toda nuestra historia pesa sobre nuestros espíritus, en su integridad sangrienta […] no podemos vivirnos y morirnos tratando de olvidarlo todo […]. (*La región*, p. 301)

Robles agrees with him and points out that he does not want to forget the past completely, but to analyse it: 'Rescatar lo vivo y saber, por fin, qué es México y que se puede hacer en él. Con México sólo se puede hacer lo que nosotros, La Revolución hemos hecho, hacerlo progresar' (*La región*, p. 303). Here, he argues that Mexico is a backward and impoverished country striving to be progressive and wealthy. While nineteenth century thought identified the precedents set by England and the USA that could mark the pathways to modernity, the Mexican revolutionaries believed that that goal could only be achieved by creating industries and a middle class that would propel and benefit from this progress:

> La Revolución nos obligó a darnos cuenta de que todo el mexicano era presente y que, si recordarlo era doloroso, con olvidarlo no lograríamos suprimir su vigencia […] La Revolución, al recoger todos los hilos de la experiencia histórica de México, nos propuso metas muy claras; reforma agraria, organización del trabajo, educación popular […] superando el fracaso humano del liberalismo económico. (*La región*, p. 306)

Speaking to the American, Natasha, Pola confirms Robles's assessment of the Mexican condition but, at the same time, Robles can decipher a certain authenticity at the core of his being:

> ¿Por qué vivimos en una ciudad tan horrible? […] Porque al lado de esta costra de pus hay gentes […] increíblemente desorientadas […] son pisoteadas […] y explotadas, porque debajo de esta lepra americanizada y barata hay una carne viva […]

> la carne más viva del mundo, la más auténtica en su amor y su odio y sus dolores y alegrías […]. (*La región*, p. 193)

The principal thrust of this passage bears on one of the main themes of the novel, and of existentialist philosophy: authenticity. The new aristocracy which emerged from the Revolution, concentrated on enjoying the fruits of that revolution and considered itself entitled to everything that it offered. We have already noted the extent to which Fuentes pillories their ostentatious wealth and hedonistic lifestyles. The notion of authenticity is also central to Fuentes's philosophical exploration of the Mexican Revolution in the novel. As has been observed, one of those who benefited from the Revolution was Federico Robles, a man who epitomizes the opportunism of the many who took advantage of the opportunities to acquire great wealth at the conclusion of the war, and generally by corrupt means. Such people argued that they had helped to stabilize the country after so much disruption and mayhem and, therefore, were entitled to a claim to the fruits of that Revolution, although admitting that their hands were not always left clean in doing so. Fuentes is extremely critical of the manner in which they compromised the ideals of the Revolution and of their belief that they were entitled to do so in recompense for their efforts. In the words of Joseph Sommers. 'It is this logic which rationalizes self-enrichment in a morass of clandestine financial transactions and real-state dealings'.[249]

[249] Sommers, p. 99.

3.8 Conclusion

To conclude this analysis of the existentialist philosophical underpinning of the novel, it seems appropriate to quote the words of H. Ernest Lewald, which summarize Fuentes's pessimistic outlook on 'el mexicano' and 'la mexicanidad' with exemplary clarity:

> En *La región más transparente* se lanza a la búsqueda de su México […] Al no encontrar otra cosa que una parodia de lo que […] debiera ser lo nuestro, vuelca en sus páginas una cronía ácida y mordaz, el resultado de la distancia […] lo que es y lo que debiera ser […] Fuentes condena a sus personajes por la falta de ideales y sentimientos inspirados por el espíritu de la 'mexicanidad'. Comprendemos también a oposición […] de Fuentes a la constante transculturación que continúa […] imponiendo modas de vida foráneos en el ambiente social mexicano.[250]

The novel, as it is hoped that this analysis has shown, is built around the story of Federico Robles, a man who has abandoned his revolutionary ideals to become a powerful financier. Its multi-faceted portrayal of life at all social levels in Mexico City means that it stands as much as a biography of the city, and, implicitly, of the nation, as of an individual character. The novel was celebrated not only for the quality of its writing, and its extensive use of interior monologues and explorations of the subconscious, but also for its portrayal of moral corruption in modern Mexico.

La región más transparente is centrally informed by the existential concept of authenticity, not only with reference to the various characters in the novel, but also to Mexico itself, and especially to its Revolution of 1910. The Revolution was a defining moment in Mexican history and functioned as the bridge between the traditional age-old Mexico and its propulsion into the modern age. Fuentes was greatly interested in this transition, and subjected it to a rigorous analysis in existentialist terms, placing particular emphasis on the areas of life choices, freedom, alienation, lack of communication, care for others, among others. All the existentialist philosophers accept as fundamental the distinction between

[250] Lewald, p. 219.

authentic and inauthentic modes of existence, as one that divides men at the root of their very being and which is manifested at every level of their concrete existence. For Kierkegaard, the inauthentic existence is characterized by its frivolous nature, as vividly exemplified in *La región más transparente* by the 'pop-off' society. Those given over to this mode of existence make no decisive choices and are committed only to the pleasures of the moment. Passing judgement on the authenticity of the Revolution itself, Fuentes suggests that it has not altered the character of the Mexican man, since violence and truculence are still engrained in his psyche. The political leaders are shown to be engaged in internecine wars and, in the end, to establish a political regime – the PRI – that resembles the old and which is equally corrupt. Bearing all of this in mind, it is no wonder that Fuentes is diffident about the future of Mexico. In the following chapter we shall see how this diffidence is translated and channelled through the exploration of another set of existentialist questions about Mexico's tumultuous path towards modernity.

Chapter Four

Identity and the Self in *La muerte de Artemio Cruz*

After the acclaim that greeted the publication of *La región más transparente* in 1958, Fuentes's reputation was copperfastened internationally with the publication of *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* in 1962. This novel came to be recognized as one of the author's most enduring works and it propelled Fuentes to the forefront of the Latin American literary stage. Hailed as an early masterpiece of the 'Boom' period in Latin America literature, it became one of the best-selling books ever published by the Fondo de Cultura Económica.[251] In this novel, Fuentes paints a disturbing portrait of the 'modern', post-Revolutionary Mexican male subject, but he also delves into the mysteries of time and memory, and how these are played out in Mexican society. In this novel, he chronicles the life and times of its eponymous protagonist, Artemio Cruz, a soldier during the Mexican Revolution, then a rapacious land-grabber, and later on an unscrupulous businessman and corrupt Congressman. In an article on the novel, Lanin A. Gyurko offers a succinct summary of its essential features:

> *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* provides a contrast between self-delusion and reality, will and fate. It portrays the individual's quest for salvation through the construction of an earthly paradise and the frustration of that search. The irremediable finiteness of human existence thwarts the self-exalting efforts of the protagonist to conquer other men, time, and even death itself.[252]

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[251] Williams. p. 31.

[252] Lanin A. Gyurko, 'Self-Renewal and Death in Fuentes' *La muerte de Artemio Cruz*', *Revista de Letras*, 15 (1973), pp. 59-80 (p. 59).

Gyurko goes on to argue that even when Cruz's economic power and political position are consolidated, he attempts to live by a self-deluding belief in terrestrial immortality while being constantly tormented by the ever-present threat of violent death.

It is difficult, on one level, to ascertain the reasons that lie behind the novel's popularity. It may be that it resonated with a prevalent unease among the middle classes about the failure of the Revolution to achieve its aims and over the flagrant corruption of those who had used it as an excuse to enrich themselves at the expense of the poor and indigenous populations. Moreover, it was eminently readable and accessible to the so-called 'man in the street', unlike many of Fuentes's other novels, which are frequently considered too erudite and cerebral, belonging to a class of 'high' literature that is difficult for the general reading public to access, and appreciated only within the confines of academia. Indeed, it seems that there can be little doubt but that Fuentes was at his best when dealing with the Revolution and Mexico itself.[253]

Critics have disagreed about which of the two early novels is better, but Fuentes would have considered this dispute fruitless. As John S. Brushwood comments, 'In my opinion, it [*La muerte de Artemio Cruz*] is Fuentes's best novel to date, although it has not been praised as highly as *La región más transparente*'.[254] In his critical study of *La muerte de Artemio Cruz,* Joseph Sommers states:

> For Carlos Fuentes, *La región más transparente* served as the proving ground, a laboratory of the novel in which the author could test his talent in assembling literary influences and experimental techniques, in interpreting social realities and intellectuals' polemics.[255]

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[253] None of his others works achieved such popularity as *La región más transparente* and *La muerte de Artemio Cruz*, failing to resonate with the reading public in the same way as these two early texts. This might be attributed perhaps to the fact that the Revolution was still fresh in people's mind and its outcome was debatable and controversial while Mexico itself was undergoing enormous social changes and structural realignments to bring it into line with the twentieth-century.

[254] Brushwood, p. 40.

[255] Sommers, p. 153.

In the view of this writer, the success of the novel owes a lot to Fuentes's use, either consciously or unconsciously, of the classical unities of action, place and time. According to this classical theory, unity of action, as a precept, means that a narrative should have one main action and very few or no subplots. Unity of place requires that the action transpire in a single physical space, while unity of time requires that it should do so in no more than twenty-four hours. All these requirements are fulfilled in *La muerte de Artemio Cruz*, giving it a tightly-knit and concentrated focus. Again, in the words of Joseph Sommers:

> By comparison with the uneven first novel, *La región más transparente, La muerte de Artemio Cruz* is the work of a more accomplished literary craftsman. It is a tightly knit, finished product, depending more fully on form, and technique to reveal and interpret its world [….] It fuses existential themes of choice, individual responsibility and guilt.[256]

Critics have drawn attention to the similarities between the tale of Artemio Cruz and those depicted in the iconic film, *Citizen Kane* (1947), directed by Orson Welles. Indeed, Gyurko devotes considerable space to developing a comparison between of both texts.[257] It is clear from his insightful study that Fuentes was, in fact, greatly influenced by Orson Welles's film especially since he was himself an avid cinema-goer and supporter of the film industry in general.[258] There are, indeed, a number of striking resemblances between the protagonists of Fuentes's novel and of the film. Charles Foster Kane and Artemio Cruz lead carefree lives as children. As adolescents, they have to leave their infant paradises behind and face into the wider world: Kane into the world of the press and social concerns, and Cruz into the world of revolution and revolutionary idealism. With the passing of time, both betray their earlier idealism and end up equally frustrated in their search for true love and

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[256] Sommers, pp.162-63.

[257] Lanin A. Gyurko, '*La muerte de Artemio Cruz* and *Citizen Kane:* A Comparative Analysis', in *Carlos Fuentes: A Critical View*, ed. by Robert Brody and Charles Rossman (Austin TX: University of Texas Press, 1982), pp. 64-94.

[258] Williams, p.30.

stable relationships. To compensate for this loss, they direct their energies into amassing great wealth and power which, in turn, leads to further disillusionment and frustration. In the end, they build great mansions – Kane in Xanadu and Cruz in Coyoacán – in which to isolate themselves from their fellow beings and as bulwarks against fate. But death eventually finds them and brings to nought their vain attempts at staving off their fate. The tragic story of Kane, like that of Artemio Cruz, shows how a millionaire newspaper man who idealistically made his reputation as a champion of the underprivileged, ends up becoming corrupted by a lust for wealth, power and immortality. And as is the case with Artemio Cruz, his tragedy lies in his inability to experience any real emotion in his human relationships. Like the novel, the film eschews traditional, linear, chronological narrative and tells Kane's story entirely through flashbacks and from different points of view. It depicts Kane as an enigma, a complicated man, who, in the end, like Artemio, leaves viewers with more questions than answers.

The plot of the *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* is simple and tightly constructed with the exception of the section on the Spanish Civil War, which might be seen as an unnecessary digression except for the way in which it illustrates the idealism of Artemio's son, Gonzalo, serving to contrast it with the materialism of Artemio himself. The plot keeps the focus on the two main characters, Artemio and Catalina. In the opinion of Joseph Sommers,

> The construction of the novel lends itself to an existentially oriented view of man. One component of this view is the concept of life as a series of choices by which man determines his destiny, a theme repeated throughout the novel.[259]

We are introduced to Artemio early on in the novel when he falls sick and is brought home from his office to face his fatal illness and imminent death. He calls in his secretary, Padilla, to review how he made such great wealth as owner of a newspaper and mining stocks, his role in the creation of joint Mexican-U.S. corporations, his acquisition of vast proper-

[259] Sommers, p. 158.

ties, among other things. He will spend his remaining days reminiscing about his past life, how it was and how it could have been:

> Te habrás dado gusto. Ya habrás recordado eso. Pero recordarás otras cosas, otros días, tendrás que recordarlos. Son días que lejos, cerca, empujados hacia el olvido, rotulados por el recuerdo - encuentro, rechazo, amor fugaz, libertad, rencor, fracaso, voluntad […]. (*La muerte*, p. 19).

Artemio's childhood was an eventful one, full of violence. When he was born, his father, Atanasio, wanted to kill him: 'Sí el amo Atanasio murió muy a tiempo; él hubiera mandado matar al niño; Lunero lo salvó' (*La muerte*, p. 308). However, Master Atanasio was ambushed and killed by his political rivals who took over his state at Cocuya, and all that was left was a half burnt-out *hacienda*, Artemio's half-crazed grandmother, Ludivinia, slave workers, Barroca and Lunero, and Artemio's brother, Master Pedrito. They lived in isolation and poverty until, one day, the agent of the new owners comes to take Lunero away. The young Artemio, then aged thirteen years, shoots and kills Pedrito whom he mistakes for the agent. Bereft of parents, Artemio is brought up by Lunero and his is the only love and affection the young boy experiences: 'y lo amaba… lo amaba desde que corrieron a palos su hermana Isabel Cruz y le entregaron al niño y Lunero le dio de comer en la choza' (*La muerte*, p. 309). In return, the young Artemio loves Lunero and does not want to live without him. Artemio turns out to be a mirror image of his father and, indeed, has inherited many of his characteristics:

> Cavalgando sobre la tierra feroz con el fuerte en el puño, pronto a imponer su voluntad decisiva, a saciar su grueso apetito con las campesinas jóvenes, a defender con la banda de negros importados la integridad de las tierras contra las incursiones cada vez más frecuentes de los juaristas (*La muerte*, p. 316)

After Pedro's death, Artemio has to leave Cocuya, the paradise of his youth, and set out on the adventure of a new life, burdened with his legacy of violence and death. Ahead of him will be 'las promesas de amor y soledad, de odio y de esfuerzo, de violencia y ternura, de amistad y desencanto' (*La muerte*, p. 339).

When Artemio falls ill, he thinks that it is only a temporary, and that he will soon recover his customary good health. He conducts his business as usual with the aid of his administrator, Padilla. But as he begins to weaken, he has premonitions of his forthcoming death and starts to reminisce about his life. These reminiscences, then, form the bulk of the novel's narrative. As a final word on the plot, it is helpful to cite John S. Brushwood's summary:

> He (Artemio) spent his early years in a situation that frustrated every act that would have given meaning to life. The opportunism of his later life was originally self-preservation, and he has cast aside every possibility that might have his death significant in terms of what has gone before. Now, at the point of death, isolated from those who should be related to him, he is in no way prepared to accept death which has no more meaning than life.[260]

Critics have studied various dimensions of this fascinating novel, including Luis Harss and Barbara Dohmann, who point out that the novel is essentially about the Mexican Revolution:

> He (Artemio) grew up in it, flourished and declined with it. Like Federico Robles in *La región más transparente*, he has known love, loyalty and courage, but he compromised, treacherously trading them in for the cynicism and disillusionment of empty material success.[261]

Other critics have examined the novels' treatment of ideas of modernity and revolution, and all the major literary critics are unanimous in their praise of *La muerte de Artemio Cruz.* They have expressed themselves astonished at the emergence of such a novel in a literary and publishing context characterized by the popularity of novels on Indian themes, Nature, and by generalized works on the Revolution.[262] Here was a work that not only dealt with the Revolution itself but also the social context of the revolutionary period through the life of one man who typified both post-Revolutionary Mexico and the existen-

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[260] Brushwood, p. 40.

[261] Harss and Dohmann, p. 299.

[262] For example, Azuela's *Los de abajo* (1915), and the novels of Luis Guzmán and Agustín Yáñez.

tially insecure man of the modern age. Wendy B. Faris considered it Fuentes's most successful novel, and Leslie Williams saw it as an early masterpiece of the Boom period in Latin American Literature. For Joseph Sommers, it was the work of an accomplished literary craftsman and Fuentes's best novel to date. In like fashion, Van Delden, Luis Harss and Barbara Dohmann all concurred in lavishing unstinting praise on the work.[263]

With regard to the novel as a genre, Fuentes distinguishes two broad categories: the classic and the modern.[264] The classic novel is the bourgeois realist novel with its linear temporal organization and its preference for description, but Fuentes prefers what he calls the novel of radical modernity whose supreme representation he sees in the work of William Faulkner.[265] Maarten Van Delden has proposed that for Fuentes, the traditional novel was no longer an adequate instrument for analysing modern, social and economic realities and that this role had largely been taken over by the visual media. In its place, Fuentes advocated embracing ambiguity and complexity as the proper response to the new socio-economic situation:

> *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* is both a paradigmatic modernist text with its non-linear narrative and interior focus, and a culminating insistence of the novel of the Mexican revolution […] Artemio's destabilised subjectivity is the result of the personal choices he has made in the course of his life, but things could have been different.[266]

La muerte de Artemio Cruz bears the imprint of many of the features and preoccupations of existentialist thought, including the sense of the absurdity of life, of the elusiveness of true happiness, the futility of Christian faith, the finality of death, the prevalence of alienation and of the lack of authentic communication, alongside a rejection of all absolute values in

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[263] See Harss and Dohmann, *Into the Mainstream,* and Van Delden, *Carlos Fuentes, Mexico and Modernity*.

[264] Van Delden, *Carlos Fuentes, Mexico and Modernity*, p. 55.

[265] Faulkner made frequent use of 'stream of consciousness' in his novels, which are subtle and complex. See, for example William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* (New York: Random House, 1936).

[266] *Carlos Fuentes*, *Mexico and Modernity*, p. 52.

favour of those created by the individual himself. These are some of the basic existentialist dilemmas experienced by Artemio Cruz. His attitude of resignation before death indicates an acceptance of destiny that is inspired both by Aztec tradition and existentialist philosophy. Joy, success, failure, suffering and death are accepted equally. For that reason, in this chapter, it is proposed to focus attention on those existentialist preoccupations. Their presence may be readily discerned throughout the course of the novel; they surface in the ways in which the role of choice in Artemio's life, his ambition and ruthlessness, his incapacity to achieve a loving relationship and consequent isolation as well as his alienation and inevitable death are dealt with. As the novel's title suggests, death as the possibility of nothingness and as the ultimate experience of solitude is also of paramount concern in the novel.

4.1 The Ubiquitousness of Death

The theme of death features prominently in the writings of the existentialists where it is always presented as a certain possibility. Fuentes takes this concern with death and places it centre stage, evoking it as the most overwhelming dimension of life that the novel's main protagonist, Artemio Cruz, must face. As noted already, he faces death directly on numerous occasions during his life including the time when his Father wanted him killed as a child, and again at the age of thirteen, when he kills master Pedrito, mistaking him for the agent who has come to take Lunero away. When he hears of the death of Regina, he rushes headlong into the ranks of the enemy and narrowly escapes death. Later, he escapes from Perales Prison and what looked like certain death. Thus, Death permeates the novel and constitutes the central lens through which Fuentes explores the realities of post-Revolutionary Mexico.

Of all the existentialist philosophers, Heidegger is the one who carried out the most detailed and searching study of the existential meaning of death, incorporating it into the heart of his philosophy of existence. He sees life as a 'being-towards-death'.[267] Death is always already present as the most inexorable 'given' of the human condition, and Heidegger's central contribution to debates about death involved his claim that death, honestly accepted and anticipated, could become an integrating factor in an authentic existence. For him, death was not a disaster, the end of human existence, but rather the culmination of the individual's life project, just like the full ripening of a fruit.[268] Previous conceptualizations of death ranged from that of the pagan philosophers of classical antiquity who viewed it as the end-point, or moment of finality, to that of the Christians who saw it as a stepping stone to a higher form of endless existence and that of the Aztecs, who, along with other indigenous ancient civilizations of the Americas, who saw it as a part of a cyclical process of regeneration. Heidegger states that dying is something that stands before us, alerting his readers to the fact that, in general, they tend to want to shy away from it.[269] Heidegger notes the evasiveness of most human beings' thinking about death, their tendency to negate its character as a moment of possibility: 'This evasive concealment in the face of death dominates everydayness […] the "they" provides a constant tranquillization about death'.[270] For other existentialists, death is seen as the final proof of the absurdity of both human beings and the universe, but both Camus and Sartre are just as insistent as Heidegger about the need to face the reality of death.[271] For Camus, it produces not despair, but

[267] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 296.

[268] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 287.

[269] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 297.

[270] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 297.

[271] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 294.

rebellion. For Sartre, it is the final absurdity – neither more nor less absurd than life itself.[272]

It is now possible to attempt to locate Artemio Cruz's attitude towards death within the framework of the existentialist conception of death as certain possibility. Believing that his sickness is only a temporary setback, and that soon he will be himself again, his family bring along a priest to give him the last rites of the Church. While he is fiercely anti-clerical and anti-religious in general, he plays along with their wishes while considering the whole thing as a farce. The entire novel stages his preparation for inevitable death and his reconciliation of sorts with the inventory of his life. In this regard, the choices he makes are seen to be of paramount importance and are re-visited in his final moments. The representation, therefore, of the individual facing up to those choices at the moment of death constitutes an enactment of a classical existentialist dilemma, and when death finally comes to him he accepts it stoically and without recrimination.

This space between life and death is explored with skill in the novel. Indeed, Artemio's physical presence in the novel gives off the air of someone already dead, already past. In one of his last New Year's parties, events he has hosted for many years as an opportunity to showcase his wealth and opulence, he is seen seated on his chair surveying the crowd of unruly revellers vaunting their newly acquired statues as inheritors of the Revolution. His own status within this milieu, his display of unassailable power and domination is made clear in this regard when he asks: '¿Sabe usted por qué estoy por encima de toda esta gentecita […] y la domino?' (*La muerte*, p. 289). He despises their crass materialism while they in turn dismiss him as old and decrepit labelling him 'la momia de Coyoacán' (*La muerte*, p. 283). The pathway towards death taken by Artemio throughout the narrative involves a process of intense questioning of his own ethics, his own choices, and, in turn, it

[272] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 233.

interconnects with the novel's exploration of questions of subjectivity and authenticity. We shall now turn to examine the ways in which authenticity and the subject are treated in the novel in relation to Artemio, in order to trace the ways in which the handling of these themes also betrays the direct influence of existentialist thought.

4.2 Authenticity

A concern with the ethics of individual choice is central feature of existentialism and one of the key questions it addresses is whether, in fact, philosophy can point out an ethical pathway for the individual to follow. According to Sartre, the philosopher cannot determine a universally valid set of objective values nor can he tell the individual what choices he should make. All he can do is point out the difference between authentic and inauthentic choices.[273] A person's existence is considered a private, personal issue that must be confronted as such if the individual is to develop beliefs, values and interpretations of his situation which can help him to decide what shape he wants to give to his life. For Nietzsche, 'all that heightens in man the feeling of power, the desire for power, power itself is good' because power signifies strength; conversely, 'all that comes from weakness is bad'.[274] Indeed, according to George Irish, by Nietzschean standards, Cruz is a good man precisely because he loves power.[275] As seen in Chapter One, while Kierkegaard was urging people to take their Christianity more seriously and leave behind the tokenism that was then prevalent, Nietzsche was advocating the complete eschewal of Christianity as a weakness and the adoption of more robust ethical norms. Camus, on the other hand, proposed a dull

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[273] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 116.

[274] Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, p. 95.

[275] Irish, p. 46.

and stoical acceptance of life as the absurdity that it was.[276] However, all these thinkers concur that the individual has a moral imperative to confront the choices that he must and can make.

During the Revolutionary wars, according to his own testimony in the novel, Artemio is depicted as both weak and cowardly: he forsakes a fellow soldier who dies from his wounds in order to save himself and when he is later captured and imprisoned with Gonzalo, Bernal and Tobias, the Indian, he abandons them to their fate in order to survive. When faced with making a choice his reaction is always to save himself:

> Sabrían la verdad de su deserción durante la batalla […] pero no sabrían la verdad entera: no sabrían que quiso salvarse para regresar al amor de Regina […] Tampoco sabrían que abandonó a ese soldado herido, que pudo salvar esa vida. (*La muerte,* p. 86).

The war teaches him cynicism and duplicity and forces him to begin to question why he should not take advantage of the Revolution just like others round about him? While in Perales prison, he gleans from Gonzalo Bernal that his father Don Gamaliel is on the verge of bankruptcy, and decides that he will inveigle himself into the family and take over his estate. Don Gamaliel persuades his daughter, Catalina, to marry Artemio in order to save his estate and allow him to live out the rest of his life in comfort: 'Quedaba esa carta para salvar las cosas' (*La muerte*, p. 55). It is noteworthy that way in which his highly strategic choice to acquire wealth and status is framed as though it were a chance happening or opportunity, as a throw of the dice or a game of cards. Instead, as can be seen in this passage, it is a calculated and deliberate decision, executed with ruthless precision. This ruthless and amoral streak is isolated as a representative feature of Mexico's post-Revolutionary identity more generally in the novel. Don Gamaliel voices criticism of the new 'breed' of

[276] Earnshaw, p. 98.

Mexican man who has emerged from the Revolution and who has betrayed its ideals by exploiting it for self-aggrandisement and to accumulate power:

> Artemio Cruz. Así se llamaba, entonces, el nuevo mundo surgido de la Guerra Civil, así se llamaban quienes llegaban a sustituirlo […] Desventurado país […] que a cada generación tiene que destruir a los antiguos poseedores y sustituirlos por nuevos amos, tan rapaces y ambiciosos como los anteriores. (*La muerte*, p. 55)

Irish gives a succinct account of Cruz's *modus operandi* with regard to the acquisition of wealth and, consequently, political power. Having inveigled himself into the property of Don Gamiel, he begins an agrarian revolution in Puebla which wins him the favour of the President as well as that of the local populace. But it is all revealed as a cunning ploy:

> He gives them loans and cunningly exacts exorbitant interests. He acquires, by devious means, the lands of neighbouring landlords like Labastida and Pizarro […] and takes over the communal lands. In a short while his popularity wins him the local nomination for a federal seat as a deputy […] The president helps him to acquire lands in the city and to get shares in the mining companies. In this way Cruz establishes himself as the archetype of the successful revolutionary who becomes businessman, politician and hard-fisted capitalist in modern Mexico.[277]

This conception, then, of Cruz as an archetype, rather than a traditional character in the realist mode is one that serves Fuentes's purpose well; it allows him to function as a vehicle for an existentialist inspired exploration of the dilemmas facing post-Revolutionary society – and, in particular, as a way of unpacking the role played by the post-Revolutionary male subject.

In this highly philosophical text, then, Fuentes deplores what he considers to be the inauthentic life-style of those who had betrayed the idealism of the Revolution, believed in their own entitlement, and sought to morally justify their actions through their misguided belief in their own commitment to idealism and their unshakeable conviction that their own supreme sacrifices merited special recompense. One such character is the idealist, Gonzalo Bernal, Don Gamaliel's son. In one of many arguments with Cruz, he points out that

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[277] Irish, p.37.

> Una revolución empieza a hacerse desde los campos de batalla, pero una vez que se corrompe aunque siga ganando batallas militares, ya está perdida. Todos hemos sido responsables. Nos hemos dejado dividir y dirigir por los concupiscentes, los ambiciosos, los mediocres… y los letrados solo quieren una revolución a medias, compatible con lo único que les interesa: medrar, vivir bien, sustituir a la elite de Don Porfirio. Ahí está el drama de México […] Artemio, Artemio, los hombres no han estado a la altura de su pueblo y de su Revolución. (*La muerte*, pp. 211-12)

In stark contrast to this moral emptiness, the indigenous Yaqui community is depicted as the 'real' transmitters of authentic idealism because they were fighting for their rights and their very existence. Tobías instructs Cruz to reveal this:

> Cuenta cosas. De cómo el gobierno les quitó las tierras de siempre para dárselas a unos gringos. De cómo ellos pelearon para defenderlas y entonces llegó la tropa federal y empezó a cortarles las manos a los hombres y a perseguirlos por el monte. De cómo subieron a los jefes Yaquis a un cañonero y desde allí los tiraron al mar cargados de pesas. (*La muerte,* p. 211)

The novel is trenchant in its criticism of men like Artemio Cruz but also of Roberto Regules and Federico Robles who build up great wealth by means of manipulation, corruption and the misuse of political power. In this way, Cruz's legacy is seen to merit contempt and Fuentes has him remember it all on his death-bed as a sad tale of betrayal and corruption:

> Les legarás sus líderes ladrones, sus sindicatos sometidos, sus nuevos latifundios, sus inversiones americanas, sus obreros encarcelados, sus acaparadores y su gran prensa, sus braceros, sus ganadores y agentes secretos, sus depósitos en el extranjero, sus agiotistas engominados, sus depurados serviles, sus ministros lambiscones […]. (*La muerte*, p. 300)

The roots of this contaminated and toxic legacy are clearly shown to lie in the set of individual choices made by Cruz. Thus, Fuentes conceives of the corruption of post-Revolutionary Mexican society, in traditional terms as a function of the universal moral corruption of man, the subject. In this regard, his views are aligned with those of such prominent thinkers and writers as Octavio Paz and Samuel Ramos, who were severely and famously critical of the so-called typical Mexican man. In particular, the isolated the brutish and violent nature of this man, interested only in immediate results and having no long terms ambitions. Like Fuentes, both Ramos and Paz interpret Mexico's ills in terms of a negative

construction of masculine subjectivity. All three concur that it is this problematic and destructive masculine subjectivity that will continue to pose problems for the development of a Mexican modernity. Fuentes paints an unflattering picture of the likely future:

> Oh misterio, oh engaño, oh espejismo: crees que con ella caminarás hacia delante, te afirmarás: ¿a cuál futuro? No tú: nadie quiere caminar cargado de la maldición, de la sospecha, de la frustración, del resentimiento, del abuso, de la intimidación, del falso orgullo, del machismo, de la corrupción de tú chingada chingada. (*La muerte*, p.158)

Gyurko reads Cruz, in this way, as symbolic of failure on a national level:

> Cruz' self-betrayal is symbolic of Mexico's failure to actualise the ideals of the revolution of 1910. His desperate struggle for re-birth and for self-transcendence symbolises the nation that time and again throughout its sanguinary history has struggled to recreate itself.[278]

While the notion of Cruz as a symbol of national failure is undoubtedly well founded, the novel suggests a perhaps even stronger connection in that rather than presenting Cruz as an allegory of the nation, it insinuates a more direct causal link between a particular, destructive model of masculinity and the inevitable demise of society. In this regard, existentialist concerns with the individual's freedom to choose an ethical pathway are of critical importance as the novel depicts Cruz's choices as tainted and lacking in moral substance. In this way, the existential stakes are high and Fuentes does not flinch from presenting the catastrophic consequences. There is a strong link in existentialist thought between ideas about choice and individual freedom and its concern with emotional life and the interpersonal. This is frequently expressed in terms of debates about alienation and, indeed, this concept is probably one of the most enduring legacies of existentialism. It was given supreme expression in the writings of Camus and Sartre. In order to round out this exploration of the impact of existentialist thought on *La muerte de Artemio Cruz*, it is necessary now to focus attention on its configuration of this concept.

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[278] Gyurko, '*La muerte de Artemio Cruz* and *Citizen Kane*', p. 66.

4.3 Alienation and Interpersonal Paralysis

As is widely acknowledged, interpersonal relationships were a fundamental preoccupation of existentialism, and both Heidegger and Sartre devoted detailed attention to them.[279] As Ludmila Kapschutschenko asserts,

> En *L'Être et le Néant* Sartre se refiere a la importancia del 'otro' – ese proyectarse y verse fuera de sí mismo que el hombre necesita para encontrarse y existir dentro de sí […] el senso de transformarse en el 'otro' en el Artemio Cruz de la otra época, el que fue, el que hubiera podido ser.[280]

This confrontation between Artemio Cruz and the 'other' versions of his own self as well as his relationship with Catalina lie at the heart of the novel's engagement with existentialism. As will be recalled, Catalina reluctantly agrees to marry Artemio in order to save the fortunes of her father. Their relationship is complicated from the beginning. Initially, she admits to being in love with him: 'Este hombre que me gusta irremediablemente, este hombre que quizá me ama de verdad' (*La muerte*, p. 113). Yet, at the same time, she hates him because she holds him responsible for the deaths of her brother and father: 'Sólo podía vengarse esa muerte […] abrazando a este hombre […]. Matándolo en vida, destilando la amargura hasta envenenarlo' (*La muerte*, p. 58). The novel, therefore, establishes an emotional spectrum along which, throughout much of the novel, Catalina moves fluidly between the extremes of love and hatred. Her hatred is frequently expressed in extreme ways, as when she refuses to speak to him and calls him a monster: '¿Quién era este monstruo?; ¿quién era este hombre que todo lo sabía, que todo lo tomaba y que todo lo quebraba?' (*La*

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[279] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness,* Chapter 3; Heidegger, *Being and Time*, pp. 154-55.

[280] Kapschutschenko, p. 91.

muerte, p. 60) Catalina, thus, remains caught in a dilemma for the duration of the novel, and agonizes over whether she should leave or stay. Her vacillations between these options are played out in her frequent conversations with God:

> Debo decidirme; no tengo otra posibilidad en la vida que ser, hasta mi muerte, la mujer de este hombre […] Dios. Dios dime si yo misma estoy destruyendo mi felicidad, dime si debo preferirlo a mis deberes de hermana y de hija […]. (*La muerte*, p. 117)

Such acute feelings of angst, accompanied by indecision, are seen as being of utmost importance in existentialist thought, where they are conceived of as uncanny, and disturbing, summoning a person to reflect on his/her individual existence. Catalina's predicament is also one of personal freedom, a concern which, of course, is at the core of Sartre's philosophy. His notion of man being condemned to freedom is especially important and it is inextricably linked to his recognition of the supreme importance of choice:

> The decisions of people whom I never knew and who never knew me – decisions taken perhaps, long ago – are shaping events in which I am today being caught up. And when I begin to take decisions myself in such limited areas open to me, then each decision, determines to some extent, what choices will remain open in the future.[281]

As Sartre points out, man is never just what he is. He is free and able to determine himself by the projects he chooses. Catalina's choices are played out as part of a series of conversations with an interlocutor – God – but they are nevertheless expressions of individual turmoil, and the idea of choices begetting further choices, as articulated here by Sartre, is fully echoed in the novel's descriptions of her vacillations.

As the retrospective narrative progresses, Cruz tries to break down the wall of separation that keeps him from Catalina. However, he wants love only on his own terms and his concept of love is bound up with notions of domination and control, notions that Catalina would have to accept: 'Vas a vivir a mi lado; debes olvidar muchas cosas […] El tal Ra-

[281] Wild, pp. 190-91.

moncito [her boyfriend] se va de Puebla. No lo volverás a ver nunca más […].' (*La muerte*, pp. 60-61). He makes one final attempt to break down her resistance and win her affection, trying to make her understand that his love was real even if circumstances suggested the opposite:

> Sólo un acto podría, quizá, deshacer este nudo de la separación y el rencor. Sólo unas palabras, dichas ahora o nunca más. Si ella las aceptaba, podrían olvidar y empezar de nuevo. (*La muerte*, p. 224).

He admits his own failings and shortcomings and appeals to her understanding and forgiveness: 'Acéptame así con estas culpas, y mírame como a hombre que necesita […] no me odies. Tenme misericordia, Catalina, amada' (*La muerte*, p. 224).

However, it is only on his death-bed that Cruz realizes that life could have been different for himself and Catalina:

> ¿Crees que has encontrado al fin las palabras que nunca te atreviste a pronunciar? Ah, ¿Tú me quisiste?, ¿Por qué no lo dijimos? […] Nos salvó el orgullo. Nos mató el orgullo. Ella me lo ofreció todo. No lo tomé. No supe tomarlo. (*La muerte*, pp. 221-24)

This insistence on his own inability to accept her love is proof of his own alienated existence. In this moment of recognition, when he asks for forgiveness, his emotional inability is laid bare and admitted even if it cannot be overcome. In this way, Cruz embodies the crux of the existentialist dilemma around alienation: paralysed by his choices, he is simply unable to progress to that relationship with the other that could help bring authenticity. This paralysis manifests itself also with his other failed relationships; the first of these is with the prostitute, Regina, but this is abruptly cut short when Regina is hanged by the retreating Federal troops. The rest of his life becomes a fruitless quest for Catalina's love and, later, a similarly fruitless yearning for love from Laura Rivière, the sophisticated woman he meets in Paris, and, finally, from Lilia, a commoner with whom he forges a brief relationship.

La muerte de Artemio Cruz, then, shows us two people who are desperately seeking to reach out towards one another but who cannot find any basis for communication, such is the severe estrangement and alienation that Cruz experiences from those around him but also from himself – from a self he had the potential to become. He refuses to sever his relationship with Catalina in order to marry Laura because he would be exposing himself to yet another disappointment. His reaction to this impasse is to create a substitute material paradise that would proclaim his invisibility. To this end, he transforms the old monastery at Coyoacán into a sumptuous palace:

> Que tu existencia será fabricada con todos los hilos del telar, como la vida de todos los hombres. Que no te faltará, ni sobrará, una sola oportunidad para hacer de tu vida lo que quieras que sea. Y si serás una cosa, y no la otra, será porque, a pesar de todo, tendrás que elegir. (*La muerte*, pp. 37-38)

Catalina ultimately rejects all of Artemio's overtures towards reconciliation:

> ¿Crees que después de hacer todo lo que has hecho, tienes todavía derecho al amor? […] No puedes encontrar en mí lo que sacrificaste, lo que perdiste para siempre y por tu propia obra. No sé qué has hecho. Sólo sé que en tu vida perdiste lo que después me hiciste perder a mí: el sueño, la inocencia. Ya nunca seremos los mismos. (*La muerte*, p. 123)

To counter Catalina's rebuff, Artemio brings a peasant woman into his big house to be his concubine and thus their alienation from each other becomes final and complete. Catalina's emphasis on Cruz's loss in this passage is both poignant and apposite. His inability to recognize or know what he has done is further evidence of his advanced alienation from himself and those around him. In this sense, the portrait of Cruz as the archetypically alienated, paralysed individual, crippled by his individual choices, is complete.

In her work on Latin American literature, Kapschutschenko also identifies Catalina as a site of paralysis, overcome by pride and indecision, and she is further accused as re-

[282] Kapschutschenko, pp.103-04.

sponsible for the downfall of both.[282] Ultimately, however, it is the lack of communication that ensures their inevitable alienation:

> El hombre puede elegir el curso de su vida y hacer los cambios apropiados para llegar a la verdad, pero uno de sus obstáculos es la falta de comunicación con otros. La soledad produce la alienación existencial que caracteriza al hombre moderno […] La indeterminación, inseguridad y ambigüedad de la vida.[283]

This sense of alienation, so central to existentialist literature, in which man sees himself lost in a vast universe that is indifferent to his ideals and hopes, is reproduced with fascinating clarity in Fuentes's novel. Cruz is alone in a world which is oblivious to his existence and in which human life seems strange and alien. Aware that his conscious life is the expression of hidden subconscious drives, impulses and urges, his very being is shown to be in a process of disintegration and collapse. Octavio Paz's famous elucidation of the condition of the Mexican man and of love as a process of conquest and struggle is also of relevance here for an understanding of the construction of the character of Cruz:

> El amor es una tentativa de penetrar en otro ser pero sólo puede realizarse a condición de que la entrega sea mutua. En todas partes es difícil este abandono de sí mismo: pocos coinciden en la entrega y más pocos aún logran transcender esa etapa posesiva y gozar del amor como realmente es: un perpetuo descubrimiento […]. Nosotros concebimos el amor como conquista y como lucha.[284]

In Cruz's case, the need to abandon one's self in order to be able to encounter the other is clearly unrealizable. Paz's observation about conquest is also replicated in Cruz's misguided attempts to reconcile with Catalina on his death-bed. In this regard, the retreat into the fortress represents the last gesture of his alienation, as he asserts that '[…] mi único amor ha sido la posesión de las cosas […] Eso es lo que quiero' (*La muerte*, p.151). Recognizing the way in which his lack of honesty has also led him to this position, he confesses to the

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[283] Kapschutschenko, pp.103-04.

[284] Paz, p. 46.

young Jaime Ceballos at his annual New Year's party that '[…] la herida que nos causa traicionarnos, amigo […] ¿se le ocurre que yo me engaño?' (*La muerte*, p. 289).

It can be seen, therefore, that from an existentialist point of view, Artemio Cruz's life is one of failure, a failure following from the series of disastrous choices made that affect the rest of his life. His personal philosophy of self-preservation and his inability to choose the kinds of ethical pathway advocated by Ortega y Gasset means that his alienated existence is inevitable. His own role in that process is acknowledged by him: 'Si estoy vivo y a tu lado, aquí, porque dejé que otros murieran por mí. Te puedo hablar de los que murieron porque yo me lavé las manos y me encogí de hombros' (*La muerte*, p. 124). In the view of Joseph Sommers, Cruz is

> An imperfect being, thrown into an imperfect world and forced to make definitive choices in situations of climactic pressure which he will be able to understand and evaluate only much later. Capable of deep love, indeed thirsting for love as was Artemio Cruz, he also houses an inner drive toward evil acts which, in the end, destroy both others and self.[285]

The idea of the imperfect individual in an impossible situation, capable only of retrospective evaluation, is certainly borne out in the character of Cruz who remains a quintessential figure of alienated subjectivity throughout. Sommer's assertion in this passage about situations of 'climactic pressure' raises the interesting question of the role played by time and circumstance in Cruz's fate. It is to this role – as it is developed and conceptualized by the existentialists – that attention will turn in the next section.

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[285] Sommers, p. 162.

4.4 Time and Space

Closely allied to the concept of death in existential philosophy is that of time. From the earliest days of civilization, man has been intrigued by the mystery of time. He has renewed it, incorporated it into his religious observances and measured it so meticulously that, today, atomic clocks can break it down into series of mili-seconds. The mystery of time has exercised the minds of scientists, philosophers and writers since the time of the Greek philosophers to the present day. They have tried to understand and dissect it in many different ways and with varying success. It has become a fundamental preoccupation of existentialist philosophy, and in his work, *Being and Time,* Heidegger was preeminent in analysing its influence on man's existence which, in turn, pervades the nature of man's being-in-the-world. The human person is not conceived by him as a thing or a set of events in time but rather as a being stretched out into a future, past and present. To be a human being is to be 'thrown' into an already established cultural tradition, to 'fall' into a current situation and to 'project' forward into the eventual closing down of all one's possibilities, to be 'towards death'. In this sense, there is a transcendental horizon for the question of being. In each case, it is time that makes sense of being, that is, makes it intelligible to us. Heidegger sees the ordinary understanding of time as a series of 'nows' which are constantly coming along and passing away.[286] Possibility hints towards the future while facticity has to do with the given situation and 'falling' implies absorption in the present. Man is thrown into the cycle of time at his birth, and moves along it as in a flowing stream, till his death. Birth and death mark the beginning and the end of human existence and existence itself is the stretch of time between these boundaries.

[286] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 478. Carlos Fuentes, *Tiempo mexicano* (Mexico City: Joaquín Mortiz, 1971), p. 9.

Fuentes is equally intrigued by the mystery of time, and he devoted considerable space to examining the concept in many of his novels and other works, including a study of time in the Mexican context, *Tiempo mexicano*.[287] On his death bed, Artemio remembers those times and events that shaped his life. In the Heideggerian sense, the present then slips into the past where it is fixed and unchanging, although it can be temporarily brought back to the present before slipping back again into the past. The novel enacts these temporal moments when the past becomes present before the inevitable slipping back:

> Tú sobrevivirás […] y sabrás que has sobrevivido, a pesar del tiempo y el movimiento que a cada instante acortan tu fortuna […] tu quietud no detendrá al tiempo que corre sin ti aunque tú lo inventes y midas tu inmovilidad y te somete a tu propio peligro de extinción […] medirás tu velocidad con la del tiempo […] de pensar el tiempo inexistente de un universo que no lo conoce porque nunca empezó y jamás terminará: no tendrá fin. (*La muerte*, p. 224)

Fuentes aligns the beginning of human time with that moment when man drags himself out of the primordial sea into dry land: '[…] emergerás con la amiba, el reptil y el pájaro cruzados' (*La muerte*, 225-26). Within this temporal framework, Cruz is seen as born out of the first moment of existence while simultaneously marching towards death. Fuentes's ideas on time are not unlike those of the French thinker, Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955) who, in his book *The Phenomenon of Man*, set forth a sweeping account of the unfolding of the cosmos and the evolution of matter from very simple beginnings to ever greater unities. Teilhard makes sense of the universe in terms of its evolutionary process. He interprets complexity as the axis of evolution of matter into a geosphere, a biosphere, into consciousness in (man), and then the supreme consciousness (the Omega Point, i.e. God).[288]

At the end of the novel, Cruz stands on a mountain waiting for his friend, Lunero. After the tragic shooting of Lunero, as already noted, he had to leave Cocuyo, the paradise of his youth, and face into the wider world:

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[287] Carlos Fuentes, *Tiempo mexicano*, p. 9.

[288] Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man* (Toronto: Harper Collins, 2008).

> Todavía te latirá el corazón con un ritmo acelerado, consciente, al fin, de que, a partir de hoy, la aventura desconocida empieza, el mundo se abre y te ofrece su tiempo […] tú existes. (*La muerte*, p. 338)

It is night time and above him, in the tropical sky, the Milky Way, with its millions of stars, stretches from horizon to horizon. It is a vast universe of time and space, and the light reaching his eyes has come from stars long since dead: 'La luz que verán tus ojos será sólo el espectro de la luz que inició su viaje hace varios años, navíos siglos tuyos' (*La muerte*, p. 338). Time is thus presented to Artemio as a gift: 'el mundo se abre y te ofrece su tiempo' (*La muerte*, p. 333). Artemio's singular life is inserted into this vast universe of space and infinite time, granting him existence. What he describes as a macabre game will ensue, one in which time and space will collapse and in which time itself will self-destruct:

> Un juego macabro en el que la vida avanzará al mismo tiempo que la vida muera; de una danza de locura en la que el tiempo devorará al tiempo y nadie podrá detener vivo el curso irreversible de la desaparición. El niño, la tierra, el universo: en los tres, algún día, no habrá ni luz, ni calor, ni vida. Habrá sólo la unidad total, olvidada… fundidos; espacio y tiempo, materia y energía. (*La muerte*, p. 338)

Fuentes wrote at length about his ideas on time:

> My conception of time is not linear. Sometimes it is a circular conception, sometimes of eternal returns, sometimes of Vican spirals like the ones we have seen in Joyce, inspired by the historical philosophy of Giambattista Vico […] my time is a constant recuperation of the past in the present and of the future in the present. It is a declaration that past time is memory in the present, and that which we call the future is also desire in the present.[289]

[289] Williams, p. 150.

4.5 Coming Together

In this final section it is proposed to isolate a passage from the novel as a way of drawing together the diverse strands of existentialist thought present in the text and exploring the ways in which sections such as this one function as vehicles through which existential ideas are interrogated.

> Te leerás esa carta, fechada en un campo de concentración, timbrada en el extranjero, firmado Miguel, que envolverá la otra, escrita rápidamente firmado Lorenzo:
> recibirás esa carta, leerás 'yo no temo … Me acuerdo de ti … No sentirás vergüenza … Nunca olvidaré esta vida, papá, porque en ella aprendí todo lo que sé… Te lo contaré cuando regrese': tú leerás y escogerás otra vez: tú escogerás otra vida:
> tú escogerás dejarlo en manos de Catalina, no lo llevarás a esa tierra, no lo pondrás al borde de su propia elección: no lo empujarás a ese destino mortal, que pudo haber sido el tuyo: no lo obligarás a hacer lo que tú no hiciste, a rescatar tu vida perdida: no permitirás que en una senda rocosa, esta vez, mueras tú y se salve ella;
> tú escogerás abrazar a ese soldado herido que entra al bosquecillo providencial, recostarlo, limpiarle al brazo ametrallado con las aguas de ese manantial breve, […] vendarlo, permanecer con él, mantener su aliento con el tuyo, esperar, esperar a que los descubran, los capturen, los fusilen en un pueblo de nombre olvidado […] a dos hombres sin nombre, desnudos, enterrados en la fosa común de los ajusticiados, sin lápida: muerto a los 24 años, sin más avenidas, sin más laberintos, sin más elecciones; muerto tomado de la mano de un soldado sin nombre salvado por ti: muerto:
> tú le dirás a Laura: sí
> tú le dirás a ese hombre gordo en ese cuarto desnudo, pintado de añil: no
> tú elegirás permanecer allí con Bernal y Tobías, seguir su suerte, no llegar a ese patio ensangrentado a justificarte, a pensar que con la muerte de Zagal lavaste la de tus compañeros.
> tú no visitarás al viejo Gamaliel en Puebla
> tú no tomarás a Lilia cuando regrese esa noche, no pensarás que nunca podrás tener, ya, a otra mujer.
> tú romperás el silencio esa noche, le hablarás, a Catalina, le pedirás que te perdone, le hablarás de los que murieron por ti, le pedirás que te acepte así, con esas culpas, le pedirás que no te odie, que te acepte así.
> tú te quedarás con Lunero en la hacienda, nunca abandonarás ese lugar
> tú permanecerás al lado del maestro Sebastián - cómo era, cómo era- no irás a unirte a la resolución del norte
> tú serás un peón
> tú serás un herrero
> tú quedarás fuera, con los que quedaron fuera
> tú no serás Artemio Cruz, no tendrás 71 años, no pesarás 79 […] no usarás camisas de seda italiana […] no encargarás tus corbatas a una casa neoyorquina […] no tendrás un Volvo, un Cadillac y una camioneta Rambler, no recordarás y amarás ese

> cuadro de Renoir […] no estarás escuchando a tu lado esa encantación, ese coro, ese odio que te quiere arrebatar la vida antes de tiempo.[…]
> ¡Cuán amarga es tu memoria para el hombre que se siente satisfecho con sus riquezas! ¿Se te han abierto las puertas de la muerte? […] ¿Has visto las puertas de la región tenebrosa? (*La muerte,* pp. 266-69)

The above extract treats of the death of Artemio's son, Lorenzo, and strongly suggests that the news of his death was a shattering blow to his father. Up to now the trajectory of his life was one of ever- increasing success, but in this passage, Fuentes subjects him to a rigorous analysis from an existentialist perspective. As noted in the earlier analyses, the role of making choices was considered fundamental in existential philosophy, which set out to lay down a road map for the individual as to how he should lead his life and to overcome all the obstacles to a fuller existence. In many ways, this passage represents a philosophical tour-de-force in terms of how it lays out the concept of individual choice and freedom. Furthermore, it is made clear that choices can be made differently and moral choices can dictate the course of a life. Here, perhaps, is where Cruz may be seen to most closely approximate existentialism's advocation of care, concern and openness to the 'other'. It is only now, on his death-bed, that Artemio realises that his life could have been "otherwise".

Allied to the concept of making choices, of course, is that of freedom. This passage dares to evoke a life, vividly re-imagined as something else, when an ethical pathway is presented as one in which the other may be embraced, quite literally, as a way of saving both lives. Through this staging of the ethical encounter between the self and the other, as dictated to the self from an outside force represented by the innovative use of the second person throughout, the existentialist imagining of an existence beyond alienation is suggested.

In Sartrean philosophy, man has been cast up in the world.[290] He is never just what he is. He is free and able to determine himself by means of the projects he chooses. The

[290] See Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*.

human being has access to freedom that is gained by decision and decision lies at the very centre of man. This freedom is brilliantly imagined in this passage when Fuentes unapologetically re-writes Cruz's life in a future that is suffused with the tender memories of the past:

> tú te quedarás con Lunero en la hacienda, nunca abandonarás ese lugar
> tú permanecerás al lado del maestro Sebastián - cómo era, cómo era- no irás a unirte a la resolución del norte
> tú serás un peón
> tú serás un herrero
> tú quedarás fuera, con los que quedaron fuera
> tú no serás Artemio Cruz, no tendrás 71 años, no pesarás 79 […] no usarás camisas de seda italiana […] no encargarás tus corbatas a una casa neoyorquina […] no tendrás un Volvo, un Cadillac y una camioneta Rambler, no recordarás y amarás ese cuadro de Renoir […] no estarás escuchando a tu lado esa encantación, ese coro, ese odio que te quiere arrebatar la vida antes de tiempo.[…]

Even daring to negate his own identity – you will not be Artemio Cruz – the passage invites the reader to contemplate a life lived otherwise and to glimpse a life in which different choices were made in the name of authenticity and belonging.

For Jaspers, decision-making is the way in which the individual becomes sure of himself and able to face the ultimate boundaries that limit his existence. These boundary situations, which are perhaps epitomized in passages such as this one in the novel, pose those questions of 'what if' and boldly suggest that, in the way that Camus imagines, man can consider himself free in the sense that he can direct his life once he has been sensitized to the absurdity of life and the fact that he could die at any moment, becoming aware that this 'freedom' is a 'lie'. This passage defiantly imagines Artemio Cruz's freedom as that space to take decisions that will dispel alienation and restore authenticity. In this sense, it is a utopian vision of reconciliation and a radical inscription of the moral imperative facing the Mexican male individual at this critical juncture of history (with regard to Mexico) and time (with regard to his own imminent death).

In bald terms, this means that Artemio could have lived a humble life as a peasant in the countryside. He did not need to get involved in the Civil War. He did not have to abandon a fellow wounded soldier in the forest. He could have stayed in prison with Gonzalo Bernal and Tobías instead of treacherously abandoning them to their fate in order to save himself. He could have gone to Spain instead of his son to fight in the Civil War. Instead, he transferred his idealism to Lorenzo in order to salve his own conscience. He did not need to lead such a lavish lifestyle vaunting his great wealth and power. His decision to inveigle himself into the Bernal family was one which had great consequences for himself and future wife, Catalina. Ill-suited to genuine love, Artemio's selfishness soon led to a sense of alienation between them. [291]

This sense of alienation and lack of communication is of primordial importance in the novel. Indeed, it is its very core. Existentialists use the word 'facticity' to designate the limiting factors in existence. Existential awareness of one's being is a fact that is to be accepted. All kinds of forces are operating to shape my life and limit what I can become. On the one hand, the individual is open and projects his possibilities, and on the other, he is closed in by the factual situation in which he finds himself. Thus his struggle for authentic existence is circumscribed and limited by forces beyond his control. Jasper's doctrine of 'boundary situations' is now accepted among existentialist thinkers. There are situationally, suffering, change, guilt and death. These constitute limits in the sense that we can do nothing to transcend them.

[291] For Sartre and Heidegger, an inauthentic life is a life lived in contradiction to their philosophy, as explained in detail in Chapter One.

4.6 Conclusion

How are we to evaluate the life of Artemio Cruz from an existentialist point of view? As a young man, he was full of ideals inspired by his teacher Sebastián. On the whole, he fought well in the Civil War but was not exempt from episodes of cowardice. The death of his girl-friend, Regina, upset him greatly and disorientated his attitude to life. Up to now, he was leading an authentic existence but towards the end of the war he changed course when he saw the opportunistic selfishness of those around him. He managed to craft his way into the Bernal property and the affections of Catalina. The accumulation of wealth and power now become his ambition and supersede his earlier ideals. His concentration on self, distanced him from the love and affection of the women in his life and the tenants who worked for him and he adopted a completely inauthentic life style that stayed with him until his death. Death, then, becomes the moment of possibility through which it is possible to imagine another way of life and it is central to Artemio's re-assessment of his condition. Through this, the reader comes to understand the way in which his choices have dictated a pathway of life that is inauthentic, as well as alienated, in the existential sense of the terms. This alienation is seen primarily through his inability to conceive of the other and is particularly explored through the relationship with his wife, Catalina. As we have seen, the gulf between them is too great to be surmounted and both of them lead lives of quiet desperation and frustration. Finally, time as a framework through which this different and other life might be glimpsed is one that is explored in a very innovative way in the novel through the principal character. As already pointed out, but important to underscore, nevertheless, existentialism itself was not a religion or a philosophy in the traditional sense but rather an exploration of the condition of modern man living in a turbulent world and trying to make sense of his precarious existence. *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* exemplifies the existential

nature of that struggle. The protagonists of the novel, Artemio and Catalina, suffer from angst, alienation, lack of love, the absurdity of life, the necessity of making choices and the nothingness of death. In this sense, Fuentes masterfully re-imagines the cornerstones of existentialist thought through a vivid, compelling exploration of post-revolutionary Mexican society.

Chapter Five

Cambio de piel: Modernity and Violence

In 1967, Fuentes published his sixth novel, *Cambio de piel*, which was well received by the majority of literary critics and added further to his literary reputation, both nationally and internationally. George R. McMurray writes that

> In this sophisticated, complex book, Mexico's most widely known contemporary novelist displays his mastery of literary techniques including procedures borrowed from modern painting, music, theatre and experimental films.[292]

Van Delden argues that 'it is more ambitious in scope and more radical in its rejection of the traditional novelistic form'.[293] The concern with Mexican history and culture, however, does not disappear completely. Fuentes's earlier novels, *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* and *La región más transparente*, were mainly concerned with the Mexican Revolution and its aftermath, whereas this novel appeared to widen the scope of his endeavours and universalize his thematic content, appealing to a wider transnational audience, especially that of the USA. As seen in previous chapters, Fuentes's preference for both ambiguity and complexity at the level of novelistic form is further in evidence and advocated by him as the proper literary response to the new socioeconomic realities. In this way, Fuentes's literary trajectory might be understood in terms outlined by Van Delden:

> Latin America moves, in both history and literature, from a stage of "epic simplicity" to a stage of 'dialectic complexity'. The first stage took place in the century after independence the era of dictatorships […] In the sphere of literature, these historical conditions resulted in the dominance of certain themes, such as the opposition between civilization and barbarism, and of certain forms, such as the naturalistic novel.[294]

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[292] George R. McMurray, '*Cambio de piel*, an Existentialist Novel of Protest', *Hispania*, 52 (1969), pp. 150-54.

[293] Van Delden, *Carlos Fuentes, Mexico and Modernity*, p. 76.

[294] Van Delden, *Carlos Fuentes, Mexico and Modernity*, p. 80.

After the success of *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* and *La región más transparente,* Fuentes seemed to express an anxiety to be considered as part of a more international literary community and on a par with novelists such as Dos Passos, Faulkner and Joyce. As Ilan Stavans points out, *Cambio de piel* signals a change of attitude in Fuentes as a novelist.[295] Here, for the first time, he builds a purely fictional construct with no reference to the realist frameworks of some of his previous work. And, as Fuentes himself has said, 'The only way to understand this novel is to accept its absolute fictitiousness […]. It is a total fiction. It never pretends to reflect reality'.[296]

The title of the novel is intriguing itself, since the narrative is based mainly in Cholula, an important religious site in Aztec culture. The novel re-visits the customs associated with the Aztec myth of Xipe Totec, the god of fertility, who flayed himself in religious ceremonies to bring prosperity to his people. Captives were likewise skinned alive in these ceremonies. Thus, the four characters in the novel, Franz, Elizabeth, Javier and Isabel, set out on a journey hoping perhaps to rejuvenate their lives – to 'change their skin' – and return regenerated. Commencing an analysis from within an existentialist framework, the lives of the four characters are designated heretofore as very inauthentic, lacking in moral values and full of anxieties and frustrations. Indeed, they encounter a total collapse, culminating in greater alienation, violence and death. The novel moves back into different historical times, including the Spain of the Inquisition, German concentration camps, the atrocities in Hiroshima at the end of World War II and the period of the Vietnam war. The opening section of the novel moves from the twentieth-century journey of the four protagonists to the sixteenth-century conquest of Mexico by Cortés. The past, the present and the future coexist here and disrupt any linear sense of progress or history. As Fuentes suggest-

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[295] Ilan Stavans (ed.), *A Luis Leal Reader* (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2007), p. 211.

[296] Ilan Stavans, p. 211.

ed in an interview with Emir Monegal about the novel, 'No hay progreso histórico, eso es lo que está diciendo un poco la novela'.[297]

The plot of *Cambio de piel* is as follows: Javier Ortega and his wife Elizabeth and two friends Franz and Isabel, set out from Mexico City to go to the seaside in Veracruz, but are forced to spend a night in Cholula, the site of a famous Aztec pyramid, 'el gran Cu' (redolent of the gruesome ceremonies carried out on that site), when their car breaks down. Here, it is apparent that the narrative trope of the journey will serve to illuminate the central themes and there are echoes of Fuentes's love of Cervantes's heroes, Don Quijote and Sancho Panza, setting out on their own journey of adventure. In this way, the journey motif gives Fuentes a platform from which to analyse the psychological interactions of the four protagonists in the novel.

Although the principal action takes place in less than twenty four hours, the author, by means of dialogues, interior monologues, and flashbacks, outlines the history and backgrounds of the four characters. Javier is a frustrated writer who meets Elizabeth when he gets a scholarship to study in New York. Elizabeth is disappointed with his lack of ambition: 'Me hieres con tus mentiras y tus fracasos, me hieres con con la desilusión'.[298] She is Jewish and the daughter of Russian immigrants, and Franz is an architect from Prague, now living in the USA. During the war, he had collaborated with the Nazis in building crematoria for them in a concentration camp. Isabel, the least developed character of the four, is the rebel daughter of a wealthy Mexican family. During their enforced stay in Cholula, they decide to visit the local Aztec pyramid but tragedy befalls them when there is a sudden rockfall in one of the tunnels and Franz and Elizabeth are killed. Javier and Isabel return to their hotel and Javier in a fit of mental aberration kills Isabel. This last section of

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[297] Monegal, *El arte de narrar,* p. 126.

[298] Carlos Fuentes, *Cambio de piel* (Mexico City: Biblioteca El Mundo, 2001), p. 307. All subsequent references are to this edition and appear in-text.

the novel is confusing, switching back and forth temporally in the story of Javier and Elizabeth. As Fuentes playfully remarks, 'y yo que soy el narrador y puedo cambiar a mi gusto los destinos' (*Cambio de piel*, p. 404). It soon becomes apparent that Javier and Elizabeth are still alive and did not die in the pyramid. In fact, at the end of the novel Elizabeth goes to visit Freddie Lambert (another narrator) who is now confined in a mental institution: 'Te agradezco que hayas venido a verme' (*Cambio de piel*, p. 412).

Commenting on the novel, Wendy B. Faris points out evidence to Fuentes's preference for open-ended structures, the exploration of linguistic resources, wordplay, slang, regionalisms, and violently surprising images that destroy traditional thought patterns. In this regard she writes:

> *Cambio de piel* is a highly experimental novel. The characters continually 'change skins' or switch roles. Descriptions, events, conversations – in the past or in the present – form a collage of juxtaposed fragments with few explicit connections between them.[299]

The last section of the novel is full of contradictions and inconsistencies and it is clear that, from a technical point of view, Fuentes distances himself from the conventions of the traditional realist novel and embraces modernism and postmodernism.[300] This employment of a more postmodern, ironic, distant mode of literary expression aligns him explicitly with literary trends in Europe and the USA. Indeed, the postmodern elements are most striking in this regard. As is widely acknowledged, postmodernism's strong reliance on techniques such as fragmentation, paradox and unreliable narrators means that *Cambio de piel* sits comfortably within this tradition.[301] Fuentes, too, had emerged from the early years of the

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[299] Faris, pp. 119-36.

[300] 'Narrative strategies using fragmented structures, multiple points of view, etc. all became part of the common literary tools of Fuentes' generation'; see Williams, p. 98.

[301] For further considerations of Postmodernism, see, for example, Joseph P. Natoli and Linda Hutcheon (eds), *A Postmodern Reader* (Albany: State University of New York, 1993); Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991).

Latin American boom[302] with its emphasis on magical realism[303] to practise a more playful form of writing that might be more appropriately considered within the context of post-boom Latin American literature.[304] The use of *pastiche* or the pasting together of a multiplicity of events or narrative modes is also apparent in the novel. In *Cambio de piel*, this collage effect is derived from the chaotic combination of different genres of literature such as science fiction, detective stories and fairy tales. Indeed, the insertion of the story of Urs Von Schnepbrucke, the dwarf, the beatnik group, the Monks, the long notes on films and stars, the snatches of songs and the English language make up the cacophonous panorama of different voices, languages and genres that locate *Cambio de piel* within a postmodernist aesthetic.

Ludmila Kapschutschenko draws attention to the efforts of the protagonists in the novel to seek regeneration, but without success, due to the lack of communication with others. The consequent solitude, she argues, produces that existential alienation which is characteristic of modern man. She goes on to highlight various existential themes, including freedom of choice and responsibility; the absurdity of the human condition and the negation of the process of humanization.[305] Likewise, George R. McMurray draws attention to the existentialist dimension of *Cambio de piel*:

> Fuentes grapples with several basic themes of existentialism philosophy. For example, his protagonists are irrational, unpredictable creatures […] The author's fellow countrymen likewise exemplify the existentialist theme of complex human nature in

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[302] 'Implicit in the complex narrative structures of much fiction of the Boom was the possibility of a key, of making sense of the labyrinth. In much of the fiction of the post-Boom it is the very process of "making sense" of things that constructs the labyrinth'; Philip Swanson, *The Novel in Latin America: Politics and Popular Culture after the Boom* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), p. 126.

[303] 'Magic Realism was a technique popular among Latin American writers. The themes and subjects are often imaginary, outlandish and fantastic and have a dream-like quality. Some of the characteristics features of this kind of fiction are the mingling and juxtaposition of the realistic and fantastic or bizarre'; Van Delden, *Carlos Fuentes, Mexico and Modernity,* p. 112.

[304] See, for example, Williams, pp. 171-72.

[305] Kapschutschenko, pp. 103-04.

> their curious combination of piety, violence and courtesy serving merely to disguise violence.[306]

Taking a cue from Kapschutschenko and McMurray, this chapter will continue the analysis of the existentialist dimension of Fuentes's prose with an exploration of the centrally important themes of violence and alienation in *Cambio de piel*. This vision of violence as something intrinsic to Mexican society and to the Mexican character was examined previously in relation to *La muerte de Artemio Cruz*. As was noted then, Fuentes finds common ground in this respect with the major intellectual figures of Samuel Ramos and Octavio Paz in their influential studies on Mexican identity. In *Cambio de piel*, however, Fuentes departs from this narrow, nationalistic view of violence and sees the roots of violence in man's sense of alienation from the world about him. The violence of *Cambio de piel* begs many questions in relation to the human condition and man's propensity to commit aggressive acts. The violence depicted here precipitates a crisis in the human condition and an accompanying sense of alienation. As has been seen in earlier discussions, the existential philosophers stress the disruptive influence of this sense of alienation and lack of authentic care for one's fellow beings. These will be the two main existential themes that dominate the novel as will be seen in the analysis that follows.

5.1 Existential Violence: The Crisis of the Alienated Man

The central theme of the novel is the persistence of violence in the world, not only in Mexico but seen as a continuing cycle that is perpetuated through the conquest of Latin America by the Spanish *conquistadores*, through the persecution of the Jews in Europe in the

[306] McMurray, pp. 150-54.

Middle Ages and finally reaching its apex in the Second World War holocaust. Javier is well aware of this latent violence in Mexican society:

> Entras a la cantina A y les ofreces tragos a todos, y te aman y lloran contigo; entras a la cantina B y haces lo mismo, y sacan los puñales para matarte […] - Es que es un país con un tigre dormido en la barriga, y todos los mexicanos tienen miedo de que un día vuelva a despertar. (*Cambio de piel*, pp. 152-53)

Francisco Javier Vázquez is of the same opinion:

> El mundo de hoy vive sumido en el engaño del orden y el progreso, cuando en realidad lo que demuestra la historia es la perdurabilidad de una situación dominada por la violencia que adquiere distintas máscaras dependiendo del lugar o el momento.[307]

Existentialism attributes this violence to man's sense of alienation from himself, his fellow man and the world around him. This feeling, based upon insights into the uniqueness of human existence, runs throughout existentialist literature and is explicitly tied to the notion of alienation. The idea that man senses that the physical cosmos is alien to himself, to his very existence, a vast universe in which human existence and history appear as transitory and irrelevant events is central to existentialist thought. In the words of John Macquarrie:

> For the existentialist, alienation is understood chiefly in inward terms. It is the existent's alienation from his own deepest being. He is not himself but simply a cipher in the mass-existence of the crowd or a cog in the industrial system.[308]

In this way, the human subject remains ignorant of the origin of the universe and its purpose. What is called 'the world' is only a tiny island carved out of the vast and mysterious context which surrounds it. Furthermore, the individual becomes a riddle: being told that his conscious life is the expression of hidden subconscious drives and impulses leads to a sense of frustration and disintegration.

Fuentes provides many illustrations of this sense of alienation in *La muerte de Artemio Cruz*, *La región más transparente* and *Cambio de piel*. In her work on Carlos

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[307] Vázquez, p. 534.

[308] Macquarrie, p. 204.

Fuentes, Carole C. Bland explores the existential aspect of alienation at the heart of modern literature:

> One of the major concerns of twentieth-century literature has been to explore the plight of man in a dehumanized universe. The steady enrichment of modern technology, with its concomitant secularisation of the environment, has left man alienated and rootless, with his life bereft of transcendental values and meaning. Themes of solitude and isolation permeate the writings of today's authors.[309]

In this passage, Bland draws comparisons between Fuentes and other writers of his generation elsewhere in terms of their modernist concerns about technology and progress and their fears around the alienated human subject. The most forceful expression of this alienation in *Cambio de piel* comes through its explosive expressions of violence. Samuel Ramos and Octavio Paz both concur with Fuentes in highlighting this aspect of the Mexican man's character and being.[310] The fear of violence and its omnipresence pervades the novel as seen through the character, Elizabeth, who had experienced violence in New York when her invalid brother was senselessly killed by a gang of youths. Now, in Mexico, she senses the same atmosphere of violence around her. When she goes for a walk she keeps to a certain part of the city and avoids:

> Él salía a recorrer la ciudad y tú lo imitabas en parte, dragona. - Como tú, salía a caminar sola, pero no escogía los mismos rumbos que tú. Yo me limitaba a nuestra colonia, […] encontrabas otro México, ah, sí, una ciudad desaparecida, un *quartier réservé* que te acogía, y te defendía de la otra ciudad, la que te asustaba, la que sólo veía a trozos […] esa ciudad sombría, de caras duras, dragona, de ojos criminales, de cicatrices y azares, de un hablar corto, injurioso, siempre al borde de la violencia. […] todo eso te llena de espanto, todos esos lugares te hacían sospechar que eras seguida y espiada, te hacían temer que un piropo, sin transición, se convirtiera en hecho de sangre, te hacían dudar de tu integridad, como si los ojos vidriosos de los hombres, las mujeres y los niños supieran más de ti que tú misma, como si estos millones de seres oscuros, con su pasividad intolerable, con su violencia atroz, con sus sonrisas sin alegría, con su tristeza a carcajadas, brutal, rencorosa, fueran todos adivinos, magos que sonríen con ironía ofensiva al darse cuenta, en un simple encuentro callejero, en un simple cruce de miradas, de alguna muerte mezquina, de algún destino tan sombrío como el de ellos que cargan en su mirada, en sus manos callosas, en

[309] Bland, p. 77.

[310] As seen in Ramos's book, *El perfil del hombre y la cultura mexicana*, and in Octavio Paz's *El laberinto de la soledad.*

> sus labios gruesos, tantos siglos de humillación y de venganzas frustradas. (*Cambio de piel*, p. 89)

The above passage in the novel tells us that when Elizabeth walks through the old quarter of the city, she becomes aware of the latent violence in the faces of the people around her. Their suspicious and resentful looks fill her with existential dread and anxiety. In existential philosophy, angst is the dread occasioned by the individual's realization that his existence is open towards an undetermined future, the emptiness of which must be filled by his freely chosen actions. Even the dilapidated condition of the area emphasizes the uneasy feelings of fear and dread experienced by Elizabeth. In choosing to go for a walk, she keeps within the boundaries of the old city, the safe city of the traditional life style. The flood of migrants from the country side after the Revolution have led to an unregulated development of suburbs and an amalgam of social classes competing with one another, as Elisabeth is portrayed as vulnerable prey to a violence that is always just about to break out. Her fears are justified when she and Javier arrive home one night from a cabaret and find the body of a young man lying in front of their apartment:

> Un policía trató de separar a una pareja que se besaba. El estudiante pasó en ese momento y le reclamó al tecolote […] El policía se le fue encima al estudiante. El estudiante se defendió. El policía sacó una navaja y se la clavó en el vientre al estudiante. (*Cambio de piel,* pp. 189-90)

She is equally shocked at Javier's reaction to the murder and his acceptance of violence as a Mexican fatalism:

> Me dijiste que ese hombre muerto estaba, al fin, vivo. Que todas las muertes están vivas. Que estaban observando un arreglo vital, no mortal, de las relaciones de ese hombre. Que su asesino le regaló un valor al asesinado que no tuvo otro valor. Que te olvidaras de tu lógica bárbara. Que nadie muere por venganza. Que nadie muere por castigo. Que nadie muere por algún motivo. Que nadie muere porque el asesinado no tuvo palabras para convencer al asesino con la razón y sustituyó el asesinato a las palabras que no quiso o no pudo pronunciar: ni siquiera eso. No lo mató para vengarse, para castigarlo o para convencerlo. No. Lo mató para regalarle la totalidad de su vida. Le hizo el favor de matarlo. (*Cambio de piel,* p. 197)

Elizabeth's utter horror at the events witnessed here seems to try and draw a distinction between the Mexican perception of violent death and that of 'other' people. This distinction, however, begins to be eroded as the novel continues and as the violence is depicted as part of a universalized human condition rooted in the negation of subjectivity.

A further incident of violence witnessed by Elizabeth was a fight provoked by Javier with a *mariachi* in a restaurant: 'le arrojó las pepitas a la cara' (*Cambio de piel*, p. 231). The onlookers revelled in the ensuing violence:

> Todos hicieron círculo. Rieron y gritaron […] pégale, dale, zámbale, chíngalo […] mételo en su camisa de madera […]. Ver a Javier con la sangre corriéndole por la nariz y las encías. (*Cambio de piel,* p. 231)

The violence here is conveyed through the presence of blood but also through the aggressive language employed by the onlookers that surround him with their exhortations to more violent acts: 'dale, zámbale, chíngalo'. The culmination of this violence is seen in the deaths of Elizabeth and Franz in the bowels of the pyramid and the subsequent strangulation of Isabel by Javier (*Cambio de piel,* p. 353). Overshadowing it all, is the violence of the concentration camps as witnessed and facilitated by Franz:

> Y trató de entrar, delirante, al hospital, antes de que ese rostro se olvidara para siempre, antes de que lo borraran del mundo el gresil y el formol, las inyecciones de agua de mar, los experimentos con el tifo y el transplante de tejidos, la transformación de rostros y manos y glúteos barajados en este laboratorio donde el universo es vuelto a ordenar libremente, sin límite. (*Cambio de piel,* p. 331)

The cold, calculated violence perpetrated by the Nazi regime is juxtaposed with the more visceral, primeval violence of urban Mexican society. The contrast in language is striking, as seen in the following lines:

> En pocos días, Heinrich organizó eficazmente los transportes Atentat Auf Heydrich para vengar el asesinato del protector de Bohemia y Moravia. Reunió a tres mil judíos checos del ghetto de Theresiensdat y le dijo a Franz que nadie los volvería a ver. (*Cambio de piel*, p. 332)

Here, Fuentes seems to point to a distinction through language between the distanced descriptions of holocaust violence ('nadie los volvería a ver') and the more frenzied, spontaneous eruption of violence on the streets of Mexico as experienced by Javier. Samuel Ramos and Octavio Paz, as already noted, have made studies of what they see as the Mexican's endemic propensity to violence and hostility, and ascribe it to the violent nature of the Spanish conquest experienced as a sudden and brutal act.[311] As Elizabeth remarks: 'I think all Mexicans just want to get even' (*Cambio de piel*, p. 190). [312] However, by tracing the genealogy of violence back to pre-Hispanic times and by linking it to violence elsewhere, Fuentes argues that it is inescapable and omnipresent and in this way begins a process of deconstruction of the idea of the violent Mexican essence. Indeed, in considering the roots of violence, perhaps it receives its maximum expression in the novel, in the cold, aseptic murder of millions of Jews in the Nazi concentration camps:

> Entre 1942 y 1945, trabajaron como enfermeras en el manicomio de Obrawalde […] Al llegar cada paciente, era examinado. Los más fuertes eran enviados al 'Departamento 19', al campo de trabajos forzados. Los débiles, al 'Departamento 20', el cuarto de la muerte. La técnica consistía en dosis enromes de barbitúricos administrados por las enfermeras con inyecciones intravenosas. […] Un total de ocho mil personas fueron asesinadas en el manicomio de Obrawalde para cumplir el programa de exterminio eutanásico de los retardos mentales y monstruos físicos del Tercer Reich. (*Cambio de piel*, p. 205)

In the opinion of Francisco Javier Ordiz Vázquez, the death of Franz symbolises punishment, death and the end of the old world.[313] Furthermore, Fuentes's narrative presents a view of the world according to which the new is always condemned to acquire the negative features of the old and history just keeps repeating itself in a recurring cyclical manner.

Thus, Fuentes aligns the violences perpetrated in different historical contexts with different sets of victims into one clear denunciation of violence and its destructive potential

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[311] See Ramos *El perfil del hombre y la cultura mexicana*, and Paz, *El laberinto de la soledad.*

[312] Original English quotation from *Cambio de piel*.

[313] Ordiz Vázquez, p. 532.

in society, emblematized most forcefully by the Nazi regime. Throughout *Cambio de piel,* the dominant theme is undoubtedly the prevalence of violence in the world, not only among nations but also on a personal level. As already indicated, the novel opens with the four main characters at the city of Cholula, site of the historic Spanish massacre of the Aztecs, as well as recalling violence perpetrated by the Aztecs themselves while in power there. Underpinning the novel, then, is the idea of violence as cyclical and core to both the individual and the community. Fuentes argues that the modern world is deceived into the belief in order and progress while in fact what history teaches is the persistence of a situation dominated by violence hiding itself behind different masks. In this regard, in an interview with Emir R. Monegal, he states:

> Tanto la violencia de los españoles en Cholula como la posterior violencia de los beatniks en la pirámide, como la violencia que quemó a los judíos en Estrasburgo, o la violencia Nazi, son la misma violencia.[314]

This idea of a central, violent seam that unites humanity was also seen in *La región más transparente*, and as a result, Fuentes argues, the future is totally improbable, dangerous and unpredictable.[315]

5.2 Freedom, Alienation and Love

The novel's impulse to depict historical incidences of violence in Europe and the Americas as part of an overarching vision of violence overshadowing the condition of modern man is sharply realized. There are, however, many other common existential themes explored throughout such as freedom of choice, responsibility for one's actions, the absurdity of the human condition and the negation of human progress. The desire for regeneration is also

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[314] Monegal, *Homenaje a Carlos Fuentes* (New York: Las Americas, 1972), p. 41.

[315] Monegal, *El arte de narrar,* p. 118.

implicit in the cyclical theory of history espoused in the work. The view of history professed in *Cambio de piel* is indeed tragic, focusing upon the recurrent patterns of violence and brutality, as discussed above.

Central to the action is the relationship between the two main characters of the novel – Javier and Elizabeth. During the car journey to Veracruz and their stay in the hotel in Cholula, we learn about their backgrounds as they reminisce about their respective childhoods and subsequent life stories. The time sequence switches from a previous sojourn in Greece to the here and now in the hotel. Elizabeth remembers the idyllic time both of them spent in Falakari, in Greece, when she provided her husband with emotional support while he struggled with his literary work: 'No tienes más preocupación que querer a Javier' (*Cambio de piel,* p. 137). They were young then, in their twenties, and now in their forties, fissures are beginning to appear in their relationships. Javier has become a hypochondriac and Elizabeth is becoming increasingly frustrated and alienated. As referenced in an earlier section of this thesis, interpersonal relationships are a very important concern of existential philosophy since they impinge on the freedom of the individual. Jean Paul Sartre has made a searching study of these relationships in *Being and Nothingness*:

> Everything which can be said of me in my relations with the other applies to him as well. While I attempt to free myself from the hold of the other, the other is trying to free himself from mine; while I seek to enslave the other, the other seeks to enslave me.[316]

This Sartrean view of freedom and enslavement finds echo in *Cambio de piel* when Javier accuses Elizabeth of being too obsessive and possessive in her love. In his view, she has become an obstacle to his vocation as a writer:

> Sé que en Falaraki quisiste cansarme con tu amor exigente […] Nunca entenderás cómo me destruiste […] me casé con una tigresa, no con una mujer. (*Cambio de piel,* pp. 301-04)

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[316] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, pp. 474-75.

> Me robaste con tu amor mis años de creación […] que con tu amor me hiciste creer que había algo más importante que escribir y era amarte a ti. (*Cambio de piel,* p. 306)

Sartre offers a further elucidation of the role of love in human relationships:

> If love were in fact a pure desire for physical possession, it could in many cases be easily satisfied […] the notion of 'ownership' by which love is so often explained, is not actually primary […] it is the other's freedom as such that we want to get hold of […] the man who wants to be loved does not desire the enslavement of the beloved […] He does not want to possess an automaton […] He desires a special type of appropriation. He wants to possess a freedom as freedom.[317]

Fuentes echoes Sartre's concept in an almost literal transposition of his words:

> Isabel acercó la boca a la oreja de Javier –Dime, repíteme eso. –No lo dije yo. Es de un clásico […] El dominio del cuerpo y del placer sexual de una mujer es signo suficiente de posesión para el hombre modesto, otro [….] desea pruebas más finas para saber, especialmente, si la mujer no sólo se entrega a él, sino también renuncia por él a lo que posee […] sólo entonces él la considera poseída. Un tercer hombre, sin embargo, no está satisfecho en este límite de la posesión […] quiere ante todo, ser total y profundamente conocido, a fin de ser amado permite ser descubierto. Sólo entonces siente a la amada como suya. (*Cambio de piel,* pp. 124-25)

Sartre concludes his argument by stressing that 'such then is the real goal of the novel in so far as his love is an enterprise – i.e., a project of himself'.[318] Sartre's contention that what is actually sought after is the freedom of the other, is interesting when viewed in the context of Fuentes's treatment of the relationship between Isabel and Javier when he states that the third level is a desire to be profoundly known as a way of possessing the lover's consciousness. Not surprisingly, this represents the start of conflict in their relationship and Elizabeth starts to remember the early signs of this conflict and the ensuing sense of alienation. Little things begin to annoy her, such as the way Javier puts the key in the keyhole and his detestable 'cortesía' of knocking on her door as if he were a stranger. Yet, despite his irritating mannerisms, she still loves him, but in a disturbing way:

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[317] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 478.

[318] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 478.

> Hermoso, cálido, pródigo, dispuesto a todos los excesos para complacerme – y fue eso, más que nada, lo que me turbó, esa admiración sin reservas a ti, esa gratitud porque sabías quererme, ese amor, que nos daba lo mejor de cada uno – (*Cambio de piel,* p. 129)

She feels that his love is insincere and inauthentic and that he is hiding behind a mask: 'No querías que amara tu máscara amable, sino lo otro, lo que fuese, lo que tú misma desconocías, otra máscara también' (*Cambio de piel,* p. 129)

Javier had already been unfaithful to Elizabeth by having an affair with Isabel and, in so doing, had increased that existentialist sense of alienation between himself and Elizabeth. She was furious at his conduct especially since she had made so many sacrifices to facilitate his work as a writer. She had left her country and family to marry him and even had an abortion so that a child would not be a hindrance to his work:

> […] nuestro hijo, el niño que no debía venir a interrumpir la maravillosa creación […] ¿Adónde está lo que ese niño iba a impedir? ¿Adónde están tus libros, Javier, dónde? (*Cambio de piel,* p. 308)

Javier retorts that the decision was her own and taken for selfish reasons: 'Tú no querías que tu juventud se perdiera' (*Cambio de piel,* p. 308). With that, their relationship descends into a bitter series of exchanges that signal their mutual sense of betrayal and anger. First, Elizabeth upbraids Javier for his callous insensitivity and, in a burst of anger, lays bare her feelings of despair and frustration:

> Tú eres mi amo. Así te quería. Ahora eres un hijo de puta que juega con la juventud de esa niña (Isabel) para emponzoñarme. Justificas tu fracaso culpándome de él. Cuando podríamos hasta en el fracaso, ser un hombre y una mujer que se apoyan y se aman […] ¡Que todos sepan cómo se pierde un amor y qué grande es el odio entre los que se amaron! (*Cambio de piel,* p. 309)

This painstaking depiction of the loss of a love is captured in the words of the narrator: 'no tienen otra manera de hablar, Lillie. Eso es todo. Una comunicación desesperada' (*Cambio de piel,* p. 298). As their pent-up feelings of frustration, anger and angst finally culminate in bitter mutual recrimination, Elizabeth resents the rejection of her love and

Javier exhibits his own sense of frustration as a failed writer, widening the gap of separation and alienation between them. He expresses this frustration by smashing a mirror:

> -Me has convertido en una ruina estéril […]
>
> -Tú, si tú, que robaste con tu amor mis años de creación, que con tu amor me hiciste creer que había algo más importante que escribir, y era amarte a ti […] y sólo ibas a vivir una vez y sólo ibas a ser joven una vez y yo ya tendría tiempo de sobra cuando nuestra juventud pasara […] (*Cambio de piel,* p. 306)

His anger at the overwhelming, complete nature of her love and its expression is countered by Elizabeth:

> -¡Pero tú decías que necesitabas el amor para crear, no yo! […] me hieres con tus mentiras y tus fracasos. Me hieres con la desilusión. Y ahora con la juventud de Isabel ¿Qué son tus heridas junto a las mías? (*Cambio de piel,* p. 307)

Javier answers her tirade by reminding her of all he had done for her:

> -Te saqué de una casa triste y destructiva, te llevé al mundo, te di mi amor a cambio de todo ¿qué más quieres? (*Cambio de piel,* p. 310)
>
> -¿Qué quieres que te prometa? Si yo mismo no sé. Son demasiadas promesas. Promesa de amarte. De hacerte feliz. De escribir a tu lado. De no dejarme vencer. Promesa de no mencionar la razón de todo, el motivo de mi alejamiento.(*Cambio de piel,* p. 309)

By the end of this painful textual excavation of their relationship, what emerges is a portrait of their total alienation, from each other, and from their earlier selves. Alienation as the result of interpersonal relationships is a prominent feature of existentialist literature. As outlined earlier, in Chapter One, Kierkegaard, Sartre and Camus were foremost in analyzing people's quiet struggle with the apparent meaninglessness of life.[319] For Kierkegaard, it manifested itself as a strange emotion of 'dread' and became apparent as anxiety, boredom, melancholy and despair. Javier and Elizabeth display this broad spectrum of emotions in turn: anxious, bored with each other, melancholic for a past that was never fulfilled and ultimately despairing. This is seen in Javier's frustration at his limited creative successes

[319] See, for example, *The Essential Kierkegaard;* Camus, *Sisyphus;* and Sartre, *Being and Nothingness.*

and his subsequent blaming of Elizabeth for his failure. She in turn, reciprocates this feeling. As the narrator points out: 'Cree que sacrificó, que mató sus ambiciones al casarse con Ligeia […] era una manera de morir' (*Cambio de piel,* p. 350). This likening of coupling with death possibly constitutes the most pessimistic judgement of their doomed relationship.

The individual stands alone in a world which is foreign to him and where he cannot feel at home. The tendency to suppress the sense of isolation and alienation from the surrounding world and by allowing total absorption or becoming 'tranquillised', as it were, in ready-made schemes of beliefs and values which prevail in their societies, is also very pronounced. Heidegger cautions against such suppression, noting the dangers that lie therein. Since man is not an isolated individual but is interrelated with the world of things and persons, it follows that he can never escape from this impersonal anonymous form of existence which is rooted in 'the one' – *Das Man*.[320] This is an inauthentic form of existence. He can, on the other hand, take personal responsibility for his destiny and achieve authentic existence. In this regard, Fuentes's characters here in *Cambio de piel* fail this existentialist test and make disastrous choices which impinge on their own lives and those about them.

Sartre's existentialist understanding of what it is to be human is that it is up to each individual to exercise his freedom in such a way that he does not lose sight of his existence as a facticity, as well as a free human being. In so doing, he will come to understand more about the original choice which his whole life represents and the values thereby projected.[321] Such an understanding comes only through living in this particular life and avoiding the pitfalls of self-deceit and concomitant 'bad faith'. Javier and Elizabeth are

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[320] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 164.

[321] See Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*.

both guilty of this conduct and, thus, their lifestyles are not in accord with true, authentic living. Fuentes further emphasizes this conduct in the case of Franz Jellenik, who made no attempt to save his girlfriend, Anna Werner, from being sent to a concentration camp. His pusillanimous argument was:

> ¿Quién era yo para intervenir? Yo, un arquitecto adscrito al campo, un pequeño funcionario […] quizás un hombre sin convicciones […] que no mandaran a Anna Werner en un transporte a Auschwitz […]. (*Cambio de piel,* p. 386)

Here, the display of Sartre's 'bad faith' is manifest in Franz's conscious unwillingness to involve himself in actions that ultimately lead to Anna's death. Following this, Franz, having fled his Nazi past struggles to reconcile his past actions with his present realities. In denying his freedom of choice, he has become a victim of self-deception and, in this sense, Franz becomes an existential figure: he is free to make choices, but unaided by God and fearful of death, the individual sees himself in a situation that existentialists considered a breakdown of communication. This collapse of the channels of communication is viewed as one of the causes of the dissatisfaction, loneliness and alienation which typify the life of modern man and characterize the four protagonists of the novel. Various critics, including Gyurko and Jasinski, make reference to the process of doubling in the novel, whereby Javier and Franz function as parallel versions of each other, examples of monstrous masculinity, locked in eternal battle with each other and themselves. Unable to engage with the world around him, Javier cannot bring his literary work to fruition. This sense of alienation leads on to frustration. He picks unprovoked fights with the mariachi musicians, is indifferent to the murder of an individual on the doorstep of his apartment, and goes on to strangle Isabel. Similarly, the internal contradictions of Franz's character are never explained and indeed the violent core of masculine identity is one of the many troubling facets of the novel, one that is never resolved.

5.3 Authenticity and the Absurd

All the existentialist philosophers are united in pointing out the dangers to authentic existence from the influence of a mass psychology which suppresses the individual in favour of the whole. Kierkegaard saw that men were determined to lose themselves in the world of things and history and no one wanted to be an individual human being.[322] Nietzsche and Ortega y Gasset saw this diminution and levelling down process as the greatest danger facing European man.[323]And, according to Jaspers, the basic problem of our time was whether an independent human being was still even possible given the fact that the so-called mass world order brought into being a universal life apparatus which proved destructive to the world of a truly human life.[324]

Fuentes shows us that all the four main characters in *Cambio de piel* are, from an existentialist perspective, leading very inauthentic lives. They are frivolous and hedonistic and lack any moral compass. They make no attempt to hide their unfaithfulness to one another. Elizabeth sees herself as an 'object' for Javier while Isabel glories in the wealth her father has accumulated: 'Ahí tienes que mi papa ha hecho un montón de lana. Un montón como los Alpes […]' (*Cambio de piel,* p. 141). Javier admits that their search for the Golden Fleece ('el vellocino de oro') (*Cambio de piel,* p. 314), for a happy and fulfilling life, was a disappointment and failure resulting from the disastrous and delusional choices they made: '¡Se perdió Ligeia, se perdió, no lo encontramos, hemos pasado nuestras vidas buscándolo […]' (*Cambio de piel,* p. 314).

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[322] 'Oh, to what degree human beings would become -human and loveable things- if they would become single individuals for God'; as cited in Hong and Hong, p. 454.

[323] Ortega, *The Revolt of the Masses*; Jaspers, *Man in the Modern Age.*

[324] Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil.*

When Javier and Isabel return to their hotel after the tragic deaths of Franz and Elizabeth in the pyramid, Isabel thinks that she can take the place of Elizabeth and become a source of support for him: '[…] guía al pobre escritor fracasado y le hace renacer; le devuelve la confianza; lo sienta a trabajar bajo su ala protectora' (*Cambio de piel,* p. 351) But Javier can read her mind and is determined not to be enslaved again and cause her pain and disillusionment: 'Ella no entiende que el infierno con Ligeia es mi costumbre […]' (*Cambio de piel,* p. 351):

> Ella cree comprender; pero exige, para comprenderme y colmarme con sus imaginarios bienes, esta sujeción, esta fidelidad, éste ser solo para ella, para que ella me cuide […] no romperé ese instinto de hierro […]
>
> Qué bien conozco las lágrimas, la desilusión, los sentimientos heridos, la convicción de que no sé apreciarla, al fin el odio, la rebeldía, su propia traición […]. (*Cambio de piel,* p. 352)
>
> Sufrirá el desencanto […] lo odiará […] volverá a darle el infierno de Ligeia. (*Cambio de piel,* p. 352)

In a state of mental aberration, he decides to end her life: 'Isabel no será Ligeia […] Isabel será un amor fugaz, nunca se convertirá en Ligeia, será una hermosa joven siempre, un recuerdo tibio y dulce, nunca una vieja' (*Cambio de piel,* p. 353). This act of calculated misogyny is profoundly unsettling involving the desire to inflict pain and the self-hatred that comes along with it. Javier seeks 'un cambio de piel', a renovation, but instead sees all hope for love is destroyed.

Cambio de piel should end here, but Fuentes goes on to give an alternative ending. The Six beatnik hippies called the 'Mad Monks' enter the pyramid and carry out a mock trial of the four characters of the novel. The whole episode may be read as an illustration of the absurdity of life in modern day Mexico but it also speaks to a cyclical violence that is inherent in the human subject. The absurdity of the human situation, then, recurs frequently throughout the novel, and is best illustrated by the mock trial. When the 'Mad Monks'

leave the pyramid, they repair to a dilapidated house belonging to the narrator (Freddie Lambert) where they enact a burlesque ritual and stuff themselves with magic mushrooms and play and howl Beatle songs – 'aúllan como coyotes' (*Cambio de piel*, p. 358) – before proceeding to pass judgement on Franz:

> No importa lo que haya hecho. Es lo viejo. Debe morir. El ciclo ha terminado y lo nuevo debe nacer sobre los despojos de lo viejo. (*Cambio de piel*, p. 406)

Jacob Werner, Anna's son, and concentration camp survivor, organizes the proceedings. Later on, they drive to a brothel and, on the way, stop at a petrol station and spray one another with petrol and used matches. They continue this bizarre conduct in the brothel where they create a child doll and engage in a Rabelaisian romp. The whole section appears to bear out Fuentes's view that we inhabit an absurd world, devoid of reason. It exemplifies the existential absurd nature of that world we live in and man's interaction with it: '[…] el mundo está lleno de enigmas que no deben interrogarse a menos que se desee la catástrofe' (*Cambio de piel*, p. 413). Indeed, all of the protagonists of the novel are irrational, unpredictable creatures. However, it is also a world in which judgement is passed on the absurd actions of these irrational beings. Indeed, harsh conclusions are drawn about the Mexican and, in the midst of this absurdity, a nihilistic view of subjectivity is presented:

> […] también hay un no ser al que quisiéramos jugar y que en cada instante, llenos de terror, o risa, o locura, nos está convocando. Porque, quién quita, de repente sólo seríamos desempeñando el papel de nuestro no ser, nuestra posibilidad eternamente presente y eternamente negada (*Cambio de piel*, pp. 57-58).

The presence here of a subjectivity that is always on the brink of denial seems to connect then to the ideas around the inherent violence at the heart of the Mexican condition: 'No sé. Todo es lo mismo. Todas las miradas mexicanas son estas tres cosas. Matan, desnudan y consagran […]' (*Cambio de Piel*, p. 190). This nihilism manifests itself particularly ferociously towards the end of the novel:

> Si la dejáramos, la verdad aniquilaría la vida. Porque la verdad es lo mismo que el origen y el origen es la nada y la nada es la muerte y la muerte es el crimen. La verdad quisiera ofrecernos la imagen del principio, anterior a toda duda, a toda contaminación. Pero esa imagen es idéntica a la del fin. El Apocalipsis es la otra cara de la creación. La mentira literaria traiciona a la verdad para aplazar ese día del juicio en el que principio y fin serán uno sólo. Y sin embargo, presta homenaje a la fuerza originaria, inaceptable, mortal: la reconoce para limitarla. No reconocerla, no limitarla, significa abrir las puertas a la pureza asesina (*Cambio de piel*, p. 408).

The idea of truth annihilating life is one that has been present throughout the first two novels studied in this thesis. Here, however, the notion that the origin is nothingness which in turn equates to death and to a death that is violent and hollow is one that is brought to new extremes in *Cambio de piel*. In this way, the protagonists exemplify the existential theme of complex human nature with their combination of piety, violence and courtesy, with courtesy serving merely to disguise violence.

5.4 Conclusion

Speaking about the ending of *Cambio de piel* in 1967, Fuentes admitted that:

> All the traditional psychological elements are in the novel, but they are there to be destroyed. I have had so many fucking, god-dammed Mexican and Latin American readers say, 'The novel was very good until this point – when you had a magnificently traditional novel and suddenly you destroyed yourself'. I say this is the whole point of the novel.[325]

In his efforts to dramatize what he called the twentieth-century human tragedy, Fuentes grapples with several basic tenets of existential philosophy, such as alienation, authenticity, violence and death among others. Following on the success of his earlier novels, it is clear that Fuentes wished to expand the scope of his literary output and, to this end, he created a fictional work in the postmodern idiom then in vogue. *Cambio de piel* is a highly experimental novel and difficult to interpret. Writing about the novel Fuentes himself said: 'The

[325] Brody and Rossman, p. 209

creative process of *Cambio de piel* was born with the intention of documenting all the vulgarity, the excesses and the impurity of our world'.[326] As seen elsewhere, Fuentes was reacting to the realistic-naturalistic fiction of the late nineteenth-century, with its reliance upon documenting the social life and physical environment rather than presenting an integrated vision of that society. Instead, he preferred open-ended structures that allowed readers different interpretations and the use of postmodern techniques that deconstructed traditional thought patterns. As Wendy B. Faris states:

> Movies and other popular art forms particularly the exaggerated styles of 'pop art' and 'camp' interest Fuentes because they correspond to the world as it has become violent, expressionist and baroque.[327]

This resulted in a richly experimental work in which he introduces elements that have no relevance to the novel, such as the deaths of Linda Darnell and La Bella Otero.[328] The impulse to deconstruct and reinvent tired literary forms was central to Fuentes's creative project and is very much in evidence in this novel.[329] The success of the resulting literary *pastiche* is debatable, though it could be argued that this was precisely the author's intention in order to mirror and reflect the existential and problematic world, a world full of cynicism, violence, alienation and absurdity.

As we saw at the start of the chapter, Ludmila Kapschutschenko draws our attention to the efforts of the protagonists in the novel to seek regeneration - a change of skin- but without success due to the lack of communication with others. The consequent solitude produces that existential alienation which is characteristic of modern man. She goes on to highlight various existential themes as discussed: '1) La libertad de elegir y la responsabil-

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[326] Ilan Stavans, p. 213.

[327] Faris, *Carlos Fuentes*, p. 119

[328] See the Introduction (Section 5.1) of this chapter.

[329] 'Luchaba con la realidad para deformarla, reformarla, afirmarla'; *Cambio de piel*, p. 77.

idad total por las acciones. 2) Lo absurdo de la condición humana and 3) La negación del proceso humano'.[330] From an existentialist perspective she points out man's responsibility for his decisions and consequent actions and in this analysis the ways in which these are played out in the novel have been examined. Despite the absurdity of the world about him, the novel ultimately seems to suggest that man might still be capable of making the appropriate changes in order to reach the truth, even if this risks the potential annihilation of his very being. The greatest dangers that beset him are isolation and lack of communication, both products of modern life and both leading irrevocably to destructive violence.

[330] Kapschutschenko, pp. 103-04.

CONCLUSION

In 1987, Fuentes published his intriguing novel, *Cristóbal Nonato*, a text that can be considered to be a satirical and frequently sardonic re-visiting of his earlier existential analysis of Mexico and the Mexican psyche, and an evaluation of their evolution in the intervening thirty years. These earlier novels had portrayed the grave social problems in Mexico with a bitter, denunciatory voice. His analysis from the vantage point of the late 1980s paints an even more depressing portrait of a Mexico that is ever more inauthentic and even, at times, phantasmagoric. Moreover, there is an underlying violence that haunts the novel's structure and plot, in a logical continuation of its earlier treatment, as seen in the study of *Cambio de Piel* in the previous chapter, and perhaps in an eerie foreshadowing of the violence engulfing Mexico since the dawn of the twenty-first century. As a way of synthesizing Fuentes's approach to existentialism, a brief detour through *Cristóbal Nonato* is undertaken here as a way of seeing how the ideas around authenticity, freedom and subjectivity are present again some thirty years later in Fuentes's literary encounters with the realities of Mexican society.

While Cristóbal is gestating in his mother's womb, waiting to be born, he wonders what sort of Mexico he will be born into. Fuentes answers the question by undertaking an excoriating existential analysis of the period since the publication of *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* and *La región más transparente*. The analysis is far from flattering. In this picture, the disconnect between the government and the people has increased and the sense of alienation has deepened, leading to frustration and violence. The time sequence comprises nine months, representing the nine month gestation of Christopher in his mother's womb, and the main character is Christopher who provides a commentary on the outside world

round about him and the existential struggles of his parents, Angel and Angeles, to try and make sense of the world:

> Mi padre y mi madre […] Yo los escucharé a lo largo de esta historia y me enteraré, poco a poco, de que su unión, su amor verdadero, no va a excluir una lucha constante entre lo que son y lo que quisieran ser […]. (*Nonato*, p. 114)

Christopher wonders what sort of world awaits him when he will be born, and Fuentes equally wonders how he can describe this world for him. Its reality is overpowering and tragic, a society lacking a moral compass from an existential perspective that would point out how life should be lived. Instead of a frontal attack on this inauthentic society, however, the narrative confronts it through the prism of irony and sarcasm.

The year is 1992 and the national debt has reached $1,492 billion. When the eponymous protagonist, Cristóbal Nonato's uncle, Don Fernando Benítez flies over the territory of Mexico to survey what is left of the country he sees a territory that has literally been 'sold': the territory of Yucatán has been ceded exclusively to Club Mediterranée in order to pay the interest on the national debt and the Chitacam Trusteeship has been ceded to the U.S. oil company called the Five Sisters. Veracruz is occupied by the U.S. Marines and he has no desire to turn his eyes towards that atrocious and sinister nation on the northern border; Mexamerica, independent of Mexico and the United States. The *patria dulce* or Sweet Fatherland has been dismembered and destroyed:

> […] los bosques talados, las nuevas carreteras, las perforaciones de las Cinco Hermanas, el curso desviado del río, las huellas del pasado borradas para siempre por el lodazal y el petróleo:[331]

Under the sole rule of the PRI party, the country is losing its identity and falling prey to American consumerism and the consequent degradation of the environment. The two most powerful ministers of the government – Robles Chacón and Ulises López – are successors

[331] Carlos Fuentes, *Cristóbal Nonato* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1994), p. 28. All subsequent quotations are in-text and are taken from the same edition.

and copies of Artemio Cruz and Federico Robles. Like him, their ambition is to acquire more and more wealth, and their corruption knows no bounds. The endemic violence which is treated in *Cambio de piel*, is still simmering under the surface here and corruption is widespread. As Fuentes himself asserts: 'All the evils of Mexico city I tried to exercise in Cristopher Unborn came true with a bonus: pollution, crime, corruption'.[332]

On a superficial reading, *Cristóbal Nonato* appears as a Rabelaisian style romp but it constitutes a scathing indictment of modern Mexico and indeed the modernizing process of Mexico of the 1990s. Like *La región más transparente*, *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* and *Cambio de piel*, the novel criticizes post-Revolutionary society and exposes the moral bankruptcy of its political system after sixty years of one party rule under the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). As a social satire, dealing with a cataclysmic Mexico on the brink of economic collapse, it depicts a bleak future for Mexico, one of ecological disasters and problematic survival. The vacuity of the citizens is reflected in the dismal aspect of the city, enveloped as it is in a constant acid rain, a fitting backdrop to a crumbling city and an impoverished populace:

> Lo constante de la ciudad es el goteo de los cielos; llueve incesantemente, una lluvia negra, aceitosa, carbonífera, que opaca los más vistosos anuncios luminosos; la sensación de cielo encapotado, oscuro, en cuyas brumas se pierden los esqueletos de los edificios, muchos de ellos sin terminar, hierro oxidado muchos, torres truncas, cúes del subdesarrollo, rascatonatiús […] (*Nonato*, p. 326)

The darkness of the skies and the incessant rain serve as apt metaphors for a society and a culture that is bankrupt, its citizens devoid of the opportunity to achieve the fuller existence as envisaged and imagined by existentialist philosophy. In broad terms, existentialism set out to lay down a road map for the individual as to how he should lead his life and to overcome all the obstacles to a fuller existence. In some ways, similar to religious dog-

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[332]'Professor Carlos Fuentes: Author whose work fuelled the rise of South American Writing', www.independent.co.uk/news (13/07/2014)

ma although, of course, eschewing its formal properties, it lays a strong emphasis on the ethical values that the individual should embrace as consonant with his inherent freedom and obligation to make choices whether he wills it or not. Sartre argues that a person's existence is an 'issue' for himself, and that, in confronting it, he must develop beliefs, values and interpretations of his situation which will direct and shape his life.[333] As seen earlier, just because man is free does not mean he can do what he likes. It is not an absolute freedom and choices have to be made. Man makes himself; he is not found readymade; instead he makes himself by his choice of moral system. In *Cristóbal Nonato*, the choices are taken by the few and citizenship is a concept which has little to do with the ideas around freedom and responsibility which existentialism sought to privilege.

We have seen, elsewhere, how Kierkegaard was the first to point out the 'aesthetic' way of life which is characterized by its frivolous nature and commitment to the pleasure of the moment.[334] In this way of life, the world is revealed to the individual as a vast array of passing objects and events but with no ultimate commitment. In a general way, all the existential philosophers point out the propensity of individuals to slough off their individual responsibility in favour of immersing themselves in the supportive assurance of the consumer society, just as Fuentes does here, not only with regard to the individual but to Mexican society in general. And Fuentes shows us the tragic consequences of this attitude when Ulises and his wife are assassinated by the rabid mob organized by Matamoros Moreno. Leaving Mexico City towards the end of the narrative, the narrator makes an appeal to his compatriots:

> […] dejen atrás la corrupción y la muerte de México, dejen atrás la miseria interminable y los vicios seculares de su patria para salvarla un día, arrebatándola poco a poco, parcela tras parcela, a su estupidez corrupta y a su locura histórica: (*Nonato*, p. 547)

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[333] Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, p. 59.

[334] Hong and Hong, p. 77.

If the dark and pessimistic version of Mexico showcased in *Cristóbal Nonato* tells the reader anything it is that the existentialist concerns of his earlier work are still central, still foregrounded and ultimately still unresolved.

This thesis has sought to explore the echoes of existentialist philosophy in selected novels by the Mexican novelist and essayist, Carlos Fuentes (1928-2012). After a general overview of Fuentes's varied output including novels, short stories and philosophical reflections, and a consideration of this output within its biographical and literary-historical contexts, the thesis has examined in detail three novels from Fuentes's fictional output from 1958-1967. As noted earlier, concerns closely related to the central tenets of existentialist thought permeate Fuentes's fiction but to date, there has been little scholarly attention devoted to their examination. In tracing the genealogy of existentialist themes through this body of work, it is possible to see how Fuentes's deep engagement with the subject matter is evident at the level of characterisation, form, plot and also, and perhaps most effectively, in his literary encounter with the complex issues of Mexican national identity. Through a comprehensive evaluation of the origins of existentialism and its legacy and evolution in Latin America in Chapter Two, Chapter Three embarked on a detailed study of *La región mas transparente*, a snapshot *par excellence* of Mexican post-Revolutionary urban society. Treating the existential themes of authenticity, freedom and alienation, this chapter argued that Fuentes's kaleidoscopic envisioning of Mexico City enabled an exploration of these tropes through the central figures of Robles, Cienfuegos and, to a lesser extent, Zamacona. Chapter Four undertook an examination of Fuentes's 1962 novel, *La muerte de Artemio Cruz*, continuing his preoccupation with the toxic stagnation of post-Revolutionary society, but channelled through a painstaking exploration of male subjectivity in the character of Artemio Cruz. These features are clearly delineated throughout the

structure of the novel, such as the role of choice in Artemio's life, his ambition and ruthlessness, his incapacity to achieve a loving relationship and his consequent isolation, as well as alienation and inevitable death. As the novel's title suggests, death as the possibility of nothingness and as the ultimate experience of solitude is also of paramount concern in the novel and receives incisive treatment as Fuentes seeks to probe the legacy of the Revolution. Chapter Five sees the exploration expand outwards from national concerns to an attempt to link these existentialist tropes to a broader, global context. Seeing violence as part of a cyclical history that involves pre-Columbian civilizations but also the violence of the holocaust among other well-documented instances, Fuentes's novel, *Cambio de piel* stages an encounter with this viscerally violent self in ways that challenge, provoke and question.

The evolution of existentialism from its European origins has been traced in this project alongside careful consideration of its metamorphosis in Latin America via the erudite interventions of Leopoldo Zea, Octavio Paz, Ortega y Gasset, and José Gaos, among many others. These pivotal thinkers sought to refine and re-imagine those European concerns in the context of a continent ravaged by colonialism and immersed in its own image of itself as underdeveloped, culturally, socially, psychically. The great tropes of these novels – modernity, violence, nation, revolution as well as masculine identity – return again and again, refracted through the musings of Heidegger, Kierkegaard, and Sartre, among the many other European thinkers who have helped to shape the literary tradition of Mexico and the literary trajectory of Fuentes. The thesis has sought to establish that this existentialist lineage is central not only to Fuentes's literary concerns but also to his ethical ones. Those ethics and that cultural, literary and social commitment ensures that Fuentes's legacy remains alive and among the most important of the many worthy intellectual contributions to Mexican letters in the twentieth century. And perhaps it is in this excavation of the

relationship between literature and society, a quest that Fuentes's work so relentlessly pursues, that his existentialist echoes are best experienced and enjoyed.

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