Cinematic Image and National Identity in Fuentes' *Orquídeas a la luz de la luna*

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Orquídeas a la luz de la luna, the third and most recent drama by the Mexican author Carlos Fuentes, provides a fascinating evocation of two of Mexico's greatest cinematic actresses, Dolores Del Río and María Félix. This complex drama constitutes a play-within-a-play. It presents two aging *chicanas,* Dolores and María, living in seclusion in an apartment in Venice, California, who identify so strongly with the screen personalities of Dolores Del Río and María Félix that they—paralleling the self-deluded Don Quijote, who, intoxicated by his readings of the *novelas de caballerías,* sallies forth as a *caballero andante*—believe, in their self-delusions, that they actually have become these two cinematic stars. Thus they seek desperately to convince one another, the very audience watching *Orquídeas a la luz de la luna,* and the mysterious and sinister Fan who one day arrives at their apartment, that they are these two legendary actresses.

Having failed at their cinematic careers in their native land, Mexico, the two central characters of Fuentes' drama emigrate to the United States, where they attempt to pursue the glamorous illusion of a Hollywood film career. Denied entrance to their El Dorado, they are forced instead to dwell in a limbo realm, a shoddy apartment that is more like a penitentiary cell, symbolizing how much they remain entrapped in their fantasies. Here the two *chicanas* engage in a bizarre cult of their cinematic idols, even constructing altars to them, thus from the very start transforming María Félix and Dolores Del Río into household gods. The impoverished and desolate lives of the *chicanas* are, paradoxically, both fulfilled and destroyed through this fanatic cult of the cinematic Other, which both provides the means of communicating with one another, of transcending their solitude and alienation, and yet finally devours their original personalities and prevents them from responding to each other except as cinematic roles, as celluloid illusions. Their days are spent either in the obsessive viewing of the many films of Del Río and Félix, films like *Flying Down to Rio,* in which Del Río played the role of a glamorous and sophisticated socialite, Belinha de Rezende, dancing with Fred Astaire, and whose lilting

tango, "Orchids in the Moonlight," gives its title to Fuentes' drama, as well as films from the later, Mexican period of Del Río's remarkable career, like *Las abandonadas* and *La selva de fuego.* Fuentes' María, brash and impetuous, constantly identifies with the María Félix of *Doña Bárbara,* the powerful *devoradora de hombres,* and even attempts to play this role in real life.

The art of Fuentes is one of constant role reversals, of *cambios de piel,* in which the *conquistador* becomes the *conquistado,* and vice versa. In *Orquídeas a la luz de la luna,* the standard roles—so very different—with which each of these two actresses is identified, are suddenly and brutally exchanged. Throughout her career, in both the films she made in Hollywood, such as *Ramona* and *Resurrection* and *Revenge,* as well as in many of her Mexican films, such as *María Candelaria,* Dolores was cast in the role of the downtrodden *campesina,* or, as in King Vidor's *Bird of Paradise,* the exotic Polynesian maiden who sacrifices herself to placate her angry gods, whereas in film after film, María Félix has played just the opposite role—the fierce and dominating and castrating woman, the "Doña Diabla." Yet in Fuentes' drama, it is María who succumbs, taking her own life, unable to live in complete isolation after she mistakenly believes that Dolores, her soulmate, has abandoned her for the Fan. And the timid and subservient Dolores, in a stunning departure from the majority of roles played by her screen idol, becomes transformed into the vengeful *tigresa,* suddenly killing the Fan who has come, ostensibly to render homage to them, but in reality to blackmail María with a pornographic film that she had made in her youth, in the silent era of film, and that he now projects—demonstrating the power of the image not to redeem but to destroy. Through this sudden role reversal, Fuentes underscores the theme reiterated throughout his drama, that Del Río and Félix are components of the same, haunting and mesmerizing self.

The center of the stage is occupied by an immense wardrobe that contains all of the costumes worn by María Félix and Dolores Del Río in their many films. While Fuentes' Dolores throughout most of the play remains dressed in the humble *campesina* garb characteristic of Del Rio's Indian roles—and an ironic commentary on how she remained typecast in that role—the scintillating María constantly changes garments, passing from one elegant gown to another, after making a spectacular entrance swathed in furs and brocade, in emulation of the Czar in *Boris Godunov.* Yet underneath the façade of glamor and regalness, María is mired in depression and consumed by a *thanatos* impulse. Dolores too is highly unstable, crippled by fears, both of the dread Mother, who never appears on stage and yet whose image preys on Dolores' mind, and anxieties that she will never attain external confirmation of herself as the consecrated Other, as Dolores Del Río. So fanatic are the *chicanas* in playing their roles that they even criticize the real-life actresses for not being faithful to their cinematic selves, and the conversations between the two *chicanas* become an interchange of the dialogue spoken by Félix and Del Río in their films. Through the power and exuberance of their imaginations, their only weapons against an adverse and stifling reality, the two *chicanas* transform the seediness of Venice, California into an elegant and romantic and luxurious Venice of fantasy:

MARÍA (frenándose, cerrando los ojos)—Siempre tendremos Venecia.

DOLORES—Si asomas la cara por la ventana verás el Gran Canal, sí, el paso de las góndolas y las lanchas motor, aquí desde nuestro apartamento en el Palazzo Mocenigo que fue el palacio de Lord Byron en Venecia, asómate, dime si tengo razón.[1]

Throughout his work, Fuentes has been dedicated to elaborately recreating, exhaustively exploring, and then debunking, various types of myths—anthropological, sociopolitical, and cinematic. For example, in his novel *Una familia lejana,* Fuentes sees the myth of a New World Utopia as having quickly degenerated into an "épica sangrienta," a brutal demythification that he has also incisively portrayed in his vast, epic novel of the Old and New Worlds and their irremediable clash, *Terra nostra* (1978). In both *La región más transparente* (1958) and *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* (1962), Fuentes investigates and holds up to criticism the oft-touted myth of the triumph of the Mexican Revolution, and in his scathing portrayal of the self-styled New Revolutionary Men, Federico Robles and Artemio Cruz, Fuentes emphasizes the repeated betrayal in the hedonistic post-Revolutionary society of the original ideals of land, labor, and educational reforms. Similarly, Fuentes often debunks the myth of the grandeur and glory of Mexico's Aztec past, highly touted as part of the official Mexican rhetoric, but which Fuentes undercuts in novels such as *Cambio de piel* (1968) and his drama *Todos los gatos son pardos* (1968), emphasizing Mexico's Aztec past not as redemptive but as fatalistic, as having established the patterns of tyranny and blood sacrifice, the cult of the dread god of war and death, Huitzilopochtli, which has characterized Mexico throughout its conflictive history. In *Zona sagrada* (1967), and now again in *Orquídeas a la luz de la luna,* Fuentes concentrates on cinematic myth, the myth of the superstar, of the actors and actresses, magnified and even deified by the magical art of the screen, so that they become, as Fuentes himself has stated, the modern day equivalents of what the gods and goddesses were for the ancient Greeks and Romans. The real-life Dolores Del Río and María Félix have attained the status of modern myths—icons of dazzling beauty, glamor, and allure. Similarly, in *Zona sagrada,* Claudia Nervo, the *persona* of María Félix, is developed as both woman and myth, as *femme fatale* and as *fascinatrix, femina saga.* Claudia is seen as constantly changing and expanding the self, through the myriad roles that she plays as princess and sorceress and goddess, through her ever expanding financial empire, through the many lovers that she takes and then casts off. Yet in both *Zona sagrada* and in *Orquídeas,* the negative underside of the cinematic myth is explored—the negation by Claudia of her son because the reality of a twenty-nine year old son would undercut her myth of eternal youth; the adulation of the fans that both creates the stars and yet ends by destroying the human self of the actor or actress who is deified; the endless struggles against time and age that corrode the beauty of the actress; the necessity of constantly dehumanizing the self in order to maintain only the perfect and hallowed image of the goddess.

In *Orquídeas a la luz de la luna,* Fuentes continues his masterful exploration of a theme that has preoccupied him since his very first collection of short stories, *Los días enmascarados* (1954)—that of the relationship between indi-

vidual and national identity. Throughout his work, Fuentes creates characters who function convincingly as both individuals and symbols of *la mexicanidad*—Artemio Cruz, whose complex personality, a fusion of opposites, of idealism and corruptness, of cowardice and bravery, of social responsibility and ruthlessness, is developed as a continual paradox in order to grant him the weight and intricacy to symbolize an entire nation; Federico Robles and Rodrigo Pola in *La región más transparente,* who symbolize various phases of the Mexican Revolution and post-Revolutionary society; the commanding Claudia Nervo in *Zona sagrada* who in her immense wealth and power and international fame attains the status of a national symbol, and the despised La Malinche, whom Fuentes in his drama *Todos los gatos son pardos* vindicates, elevating into an eloquent and fiery advocate of the new Mexican nation, the fusion of both Indian and Spanish, that will emerge from the conflict and devastation of the Conquest. Instead of adhering to the traditional portrait of La Malinche as the Mexican Eve, as the betrayer of her people to the *conquistadores,* Fuentes portrays La Malinche as both conscience of Cortés, urging him to become the Quetzalcóatl, the god of life and love, that the Indians see him as, and as a bold resister of foreign domination. In *Orquídeas a la luz de la luna,* Dolores Del Río and María Félix emerge as positive national symbols, as exemplars of the cosmopolitanism and sophistication of modern Mexico, as well as its rich and variegated culture. Thus in *Orquídeas,* Del Río and Félix are evoked on myriad levels, as radiant and constantly changing cinematic images, as vibrant and authoritative exponents of the emancipation of women in Mexico, and as national institutions.

On the one hand, *Orquídeas* is one of the most cosmopolitan of Fuentes' works, with its inclusion of both Mexican and North American characters, its evocation of both Orson Welles and H. G. Wells, its use of intertextuality—the inclusion of a seventeenth-century poem by the baroque author Luis Sandoval y Zapata, and intervisuality—allusions to Verdi's *Aida* and to Michelangelo's *Pietá.* Yet, like all of Fuentes' works, *Orquídeas* is at the same time international in scope and, in its essence, uniquely Mexican. The two deracinated *chicanas,* and in particular María, feel the constant pull of the origins. At the end, right before her death, María engages in an elaborate ceremony of both evocation and exaltation of her Mexican past, acknowledging her identity not as the domineering María Félix but as the humble Maclovia, reaching out to the Mexican *pueblo* for spiritual support:

> María—Gracias, pueblo. Gracias por acompañarme en mi soledad. Ustedes han comprendido nuestro sacrificio (102).

The Mexican cult of death—death as not divorced from life but life's constant, inseparable companion—is portrayed throughout the drama. María evokes Venice not as a joyous realm of imaginative liberation but as a death city; the malevolent Fan, who writes the obituary column for a leading newspaper, seems to be an incarnation of death itself, suddenly appearing to fulfill the deepest desire of María. The weird and powerful Mother, like so many of Fuentes' mothers, Teódula Moctezuma in *La región más transparente,* Carlota/Consuelo in *Aura,* Isabel in *Terra nostra,* Claudia Nervo in *Zona sagrada,* and Ruth in *La cabeza de la hidra,* emerges as a mother of physical and spiritual

death, of death-in-life. The two *chicanas* attempt to hide the newspaper from this *mater terribilis,* who daily pores over the obituary columns, gloating whenever she encounters an item describing the death of someone younger than herself. Like the fierce Aztec goddess Coatlicue whom she seems to represent, the goddess whose immense statue is in the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City, with her skirt of serpents and gruesome necklace of severed human hands and skulls, the goddess who demands human sacrifice in order to nourish herself, the ominous and unnamed mother of Fuentes' drama derives new life from death. A Mexican Bernarda Alba, the Mother perhaps keeps her two daughters imprisoned in a state of living death, compelling them, as the only means of escaping from her despotism, to identify with the two titanic women presences, Del Río and Félix, who defeat the Coatlicue myth, who have been able to defy and escape from oppressive, tradition-bound familial structures, to transcend their pasts and to become symbols of the power of women to create and assert their own identities, freeing themselves from role-incarceration, oftentimes so severely imposed on women in Latin America—roles as dutiful and obedient wives, long-suffering mothers, and respectable society matrons.

In this drama as in so many of his works, Fuentes approaches his homeland as an outsider, through the perspective of the *chicanas,* who defend both their filmic idols and their native country, but from within the United States. The fact that Dolores Del Río herself transcended affiliation with a single country to become a universal symbol provides the bilingual/bicultural model on which this drama is based. In a major sense, *Orquídeas a la luz de la luna* is a continuation of Fuentes' novel that immediately preceded it, *Una familia lejana* (1980), in which for the first time in Fuentes' work, the Other is not the North American or European mask over the autochthonous identity assumed by Mexicans in order to bolster the weak, insecure, or unsophisticated self, as it is so feverishly done in *La región más transparente, La muerte de Artemio Cruz,* and *Cambio de piel,* but rather the Other, outside identity is the Mexican identity itself. In *Una familia lejana,* the only work in which Fuentes himself appears explicitly identified as a character in his own novel, the Francophilic "Carlos Fuentes" openly rejects his Latin American origins:

> —Oh, exclamé, Buenos Aires, Montevideo, son mis ciudades perdidas; han muerto y nunca regresaré a ellas. La patria final de un latinoamericano es Francia; París nunca será una ciudad perdida.[2]

Instead, Fuentes strongly identifies with the elegant and cultured Count Branly, and seeks to construct a new French identity, on the model of other illustrious Latin American writers like José María de Heredia and Jules Supervielle who became completely integrated into French culture, wrote in French, and are now considered as French authors—despite the pronounced Latin American tone and even thematic influence on their art. But in both *Una familia lejana* and *Orquídeas a la luz de la luna,* the origins cannot be negated. In both works the origins appear as a supernatural force, linked with death—in the form of the monstrous Mother in *Orquídeas* from whom Dolores at the end vows to hide the body of María so that she cannot claim a triumph, and in the figure of the diabolic master of time, André Heredia in *Una familia lejana.*

In *Una familia lejana,* the eloquent attempts by "Fuentes" to negate his origins are futile; the Latin American past rises up as a demonic power at the end, pursuing him to what he has all along self-deludedly believed is his sanctuary in Paris, in the sophisticated and genteel French Automobile Club, rapidly undermining his new-found and much-prized French identity, founded on Cartesian rationalism. Instead, the helpless Fuentes, like the victimized Felipe Montero in *Aura* who is also caught up and destroyed by the origins, by the ancient Mexican past that imposes itself as a present reality, is swept back into a phantasmagorical jungle. At the end, an internal, metaphysical vision assaults Fuentes' mind—images of a monstrous, even hellish jungle world reminiscent of the "green inferno" so terrifyingly evoked by the Latin American novelist José Eustasio Rivera in his epic novel *La vorágine.* In *Orquídeas a la luz de la luna,* as in *Una familia lejana,* the Latin American identity is always evoked from the outside. For the self-exiled María, Mexico is but a nostalgic memory that she evokes poignantly and fervently at the very end. Yet despite this brief, symbolic return to the origins by María, who orders an elaborate meal of Mexican delicacies, the predominant image of Latin America in *Orquídeas a la luz de la luna,* present in the very title of the drama and continued throughout, is the Hollywood image of Latin America as exuberantly represented in *Flying Down to Rio*—tropical island paradises, dark beauties on moonlit beaches, orchids blooming like weeds, sensuous Latin rhythms of the tango and the samba, endless gaiety of dance and song. Fuentes deliberately and ironically evokes Latin America not as a Latin American writer normally would, but from the perspective of a Hollywood film producer. Thus the Mexico that is finally conjured up by María is a combination of Aztec ceremony and mariachi bands, of Aztec and Hollywood rituals, of Nubian slave girls who might have stepped out of a Cecil B. DeMille epic motion picture of Cleopatra. Even truth itself is cinematic—the Fan makes a polar contrast between the verbal and the visual; the language that is used to deceive and the image—a veiled reference to the film that he has brought with him—that reveals the truth:

> ¿La verdad? ¿La verdad? No les dije que cuando las tribus pudieron emigrar hacia el norte ya no pudieron verse porque la luz era escasa y corta y debieron inventar la mentira del lenguaje para reconocerse en la oscuridad. Pero el cine . . . el cine, será la verdad porque en la oscuridad nos devuelve al mundo del puro gesto anterior al lenguaje, cuando no era necesario hablar para decir te quiero, te odio, voy a salvarte, voy a matarte, huye, ven . . . ? (86)

Throughout much of the play, the language of María has been a cinematic language, influenced by the tough, abrasive dialogue of the Hollywood gangster films of the thirties. Yet now, at the end, as she expresses her true Mexican identity, María's language also changes, achieving a characteristically Mexican rhythm, dulcet and piquant at the same time, to match the savory food that she is ordering. María's last meal will constitute a symbolic return to Mexico. And the Mexicanness of her speech is also underscored through the sudden proliferation of diminutives, expressive of a tenderness and of a love that were previously masked by her insolent and vituperative

language, as she so forcefully identified with the roles of Doña Bárbara and Doña Diabla, played by her idol:

> ¿Bueno? . . . ¡Patroncito! Mire, ésta es una ocasión muy especial . . . Sí, ya lo sé . . . pero ¿sabe qué? Me quedé sola, don Panchito, y tengo hambre . . . Ay, yo lo sé, patroncito, a usted me lo mandó Diosito santo . . . Mire: para empezar, su caldo tlalpeño con su epazote y su chile piquín, luego las quesadillas de huitlacoche, dos, sí, y dos de flor de calabaza, a ver, dos sincronizadas y unos sopes (98).
> Vamos a ver: los tacos, variaditos, que en la variedad está el gusto, cómo no, de nenepil, panza, cahete y lengua, con su guacamole al lado, nomás faltaba las enchiladas verdes, nomás verdes, que me sepa fresco el molcajete (99).

Throughout the drama, it has been the Hollywood song, "Orchids in the Moonlight," composed by the North American orchestra leader and flyer Roger Bond, that is evoked time and again by the plaintive Dolores, at moments of crisis or anguish. Now, however, the romantic vision is a Mexican one, the song is "Mexico lindo y querido, si muero lejos de ti." Thus we see why this drama of Fuentes is subtitled "Una comedia mexicana." Although in its themes of memory and oblivion, self and Other, time and death and immortality, this drama is universal in scope, at the end it becomes profoundly Mexican:

> María—¡Oh tierra del sol, suspiro por verte, ahora que lejos yo vivo sin luz, sin amor, y al verme tan sola y triste cual hoja al viento, quisiera llorar, quisiera morir de sentimiento! (103)

The litany of foods lovingly recited by María achieves both a sensuous, gustatory exuberance and also a patriotic significance. Here, as in Alejo Carpentier's masterful novel *El recurso del método,* in which the Latin American dictator, in exile in Paris, nostalgically recovers his homeland through sampling the culinary delights of the New World prepared for him by his devoted servant La Mayorala, María's last meal acquires a deeply spiritual import:

> Y mucha fruta, marchante, muchos colores para mi banquete, toda la santa República Mexicana en colores de frutas para mi banquete, mangos amarillos y papayas color de rosa y zapote prieto y mamey ocre y guayábanas blancas y membrillos pardos y tunas verdes y granadas rojas y tequila, mi patrón del alma, mucho tequila, mucha sal, mucho limón y sangrita de la viuda, sangre de Jalisco, faltaba más que desde que el Curita don Miguel Hidalgo prendió la llama de la independencia, ningún hijo de su pelona ha sido capaz de apagarla (100).

Both Fuentes' work and that of Carpentier deal with the anguish of exile and the attempt by the characters to celebrate their homeland. Yet there is a Rabelaisian gusto to the banquet evoked by Carpentier—a feast that like all banquets is a convivial celebration, a heralding of new life. María's banquet, in contrast, is only for one, and it is a final meal, a prelude for death. Whatever extravagance there is—the blaze of music and singing and color—is but a brief and glorious moment, like the final exploding of a fireworks

display—a prelude to darkness. Behind the banquet of the ex-Dictator, his companion in exile Cholo Mendoza, and his Frenchified daughter Ofelia, there is a reality of true camaraderie, strengthened by their exile; behind the banquet ceremony of María is the looming skeleton of La Calavera Catrina. Fuentes' tone is pessimistic and ironic; the humor is mordant, as when the lips of María, who assumes the role of an Aztec idol, are smeared with *mole*—an ironic reference to the smearing of the ancient Aztec idols on the lips with the blood of the sacrificed victims. Most important of all, while Carpentier's banquet leads to a genuine reconciliation, María's festive celebration leads to her permanent entrapment in solitude and to her suicide.

María finally adds an important moral dimension to the role-playing of Dolores and herself, by underscoring their own efforts to protect their idols from the machinations of the Fan. And she also indicates another reason for their identification with the real Dolores Del Río and María Félix—as one more way, like the very banquet that she is celebrating, of returning to their homeland vicariously:

> MARÍA—Si ellas nos hubieran visto, defendiéndolas a *ellas* del chantaje, si hubiera visto cuando Dolores le dijo al cerdo, ¿cuánto, cuánto por las copias?! En nombre de *ellas,* aferradas a *ellas,* a sus películas, porque sin ellas no tenemos manera de volver allí, a la tierra que perdimos, Dolores . . . (103).

At the end of *Orquídeas a la luz de la luna,* Fuentes evokes this enthusiastic but ill-fated return to the origins by María with a combination of irony and nostalgia, of parody and of genuine but permanently aborted longing. Like so many of his works, the ending of this drama represents a doffing of the mask over the identity, in this case María's revelation of her true identity as the *chicana,* Maclovia. And yet even here reality is subordinate to cinematic illusion; the "real" name of María is but an allusion to another film in which María Félix played the starring role—*Maclovia.* Thus at the end María is essentially trading one type of role for another.

The ending of the drama parallels the concluding scenes of works such as *La región más transparente, La muerte de Artemio Cruz, Terra nostra, Cambio de piel,* and Fuentes' most recent novel to date, *Una familia lejana,* in which the main characters literally, mentally, or supernaturally return to their origins, or to the origins of Mexico—to the ancient Aztec past, which the dread Ixca Cienfuegos in *La región más transparente* exalts as the fatalistic, unchanging core of Mexico. In three of Fuentes' works, *Cambio de piel, Todos los gatos son pardos,* and *Terra nostra,* the Aztec rites of blood sacrifices to deities like Huitzilopochtli, Coatlicue, and Tlazoltéotl are depicted in grim naturalistic detail. In contrast, Aztec ritual in *Orquídeas a la luz de la luna* is an elaborate parody both of the ancient rite of blood sacrifice and of the Hollywood spectaculars that have so enthralled the two *chicanas:*

> MARÍA camina reposadamente hacia su trono, seguida por las ESCLAVAS que la abanican y luego dejan los abanicos para apartar el trono mientras MARÍA toma su lugar. En seguida una de las ESCLAVAS corona a MARÍA con el aparatoso penacho de la reina egipcia y la otra le ofrece las insignias ptolomeicas que MARÍA se cruza sobre el pecho. Las

> ESCLAVAS comienzan a servirle la comida a MARÍA. Se la dan en la boca como a una niña, le manchan de mole los labios, de frijoles la barbilla pero MARÍA no pierde su compostura hierática, imperial (102).

María is a combination of Tlazoltéotl and the Hollywood version of Cleopatra. And this blending of Mexican ritual and Hollywood extravaganza is continued in that the folkloric music of the *mariachi* band—itself an allusion to the *comedia ranchera* of Jorge Negrete—combines incongruously with the aria from Verdi's *La Traviata* to compose a burlesque rite, which ends in a markedly unsolemn manner, as María falls head first into a plate of *guacamole:*

> Lentamente, MARÍA se pone el gran batón ceremonial de Cleopatra. Cuando termina de hacerlo, terminan también la canción y la película. Se escucha el trompetazo inicial del son mariachi "La negra" (10). Las ESCLAVAS, como autómatas sincronizadas cibernéticamente, tararean el aria de La Traviata, "Conosca il Sacrifizio." María levanta la copa de pulque (102-103).

This weird rite finds a grotesque antecedent in Fuentes' *Cambio de piel,* in the "happening" in the bordello, with the prostitutes and their ribald Madame La Capitana, who under the direction of the irreverent "Monks" engage in bizarre rites, including that of extracting a doll from the womb of the Monk called the White Rabbit, who is parodying the character of Elizabeth, just as María is burlesquing the imperial roles so often played by María Félix. The bizarre rites in the bordello are not of love but of death, similar to the extravagant ritual conducted by María.

Many of the Mexican elements of the drama concentrate and intensify at the very end—the ordering of the banquet of Mexican delicacies from Pancho Cáceres' La Fonda La Luz del Día by María, her evocation of a sun-drenched, romantic Mexico, as she finally renounces Venice, and the eloquent and moving poem of the colonial Mexican poet Luis Sandoval y Zapata, which celebrates the superb acting performance of the anonymous "cómica difunta," so outstanding that it confounds death itself:

> Tan bien fingiste—amante, helada, esquiva—, Que hasta la Muerte se quedó dudosa Si la representaste como muerta O si la padeciste como viva . . . (109).

This poem provides a reflection of the career of Fuentes' María herself, in that the poem, written in the seventeenth century, has, like the very theme it conveys, defied and conquered time—itself constituting a paean to the transcendental and death-defying nature of art. Now, at the end, the elegiacal tone of María brings her closer to the romantic attitude of the wistful Dolores, just as the tone of marked defiance of Dolores at the end signifies the merging of her identity with that of María:

> Dejamos la tierra del sol para venirnos a vivir a la cueva oscura del norte, ¡ay Dolores! y la condición fue no separarnos nunca, las dos bestias nunca se separan, cuando una devoradora sale a buscar su alimento la otra la acompaña, no es posible separarse. . . . Es la condición para vivir, ¿entiendes?, sola cada una volvemos a la selva de fuego, no a Dios sino a la selva: Todos los muertos son más jóvenes que

> Dios, no lo olvides, no me olvides, oh tierra del sol, suspiro por verte . . . (103).

Another of the deeply Mexican characteristics of this drama is its attitude toward death—death that is linked with extravagance and even celebration, like the Mexican *fiesta* as evoked by Octavio Paz in *El laberinto de la soledad,* in which the excess display of entertainment and the whirlwind of passion can lead either to communion or to death. The Mexican attitude toward death, that death travels hand in hand with life, so stunningly represented by the mural of Diego Rivera depicting La Calavera Catrina, is given powerful dramatization by Fuentes in the figure of the flamboyant yet death-haunted María. Dolores cites a remark made by Diego Rivera, who sees the two actresses as beautiful death-figures:

> DOLORES—Diego Rivera nos dijo que la edad no debía preocuparnos, porque teníamos lindas calaveritas (67).

In an interview, Fuentes expatiates on this remark, emphasizing the weird phenomenon of the exuberant life of death:

> Felix and Del Rio represent the beauty of death. They permit us to imagine death as something decipherable, attractive, fashionable, sexy. They go towards death with their colors flying, in swarms of ermine and trailing gowns, shimmering with jewels. Rivera himself painted this image in his murals at the Prado Hotel in Mexico City: it is La Calavera Catrina, the prancing skeleton of the day of the dead in Mexico, decked in a great hat full of flowers and with a hoop skirt, looking like a true Belle of the Nineties, looking like Mae West or Lillian Russell.[3]

Here is an attitude toward death that is particularly Mexican, not merely a stoic acceptance of death but a concept of death that is influenced by the ancient Aztecs, in whose society the sacrificial victims were considered as gods and were thus treated regally, like the *ixiptla,* the living representation of the god Tezcatlipoca, who for a whole year prior to his blood sacrifice was worshipped by the people. Blood sacrifice was seen as duplicating the original sacrifice on behalf of mankind made by the gods, and thus many of the victims went toward death shouting and singing. Here is the ultimate doubling in *Orquídeas a la luz de la luna*—the duality of life and death, phenomena that are evoked in this drama, as in ancient Mexico, not as opposites but as mirror reflections. Death is alive in Mexico, just as in Pre-Columbian times the god of the dead, Mictlantecuhtli, ruler of Mictlan, the place of the dead, was depicted as a living skeleton, and clay figures of man-gods were fashioned, one side fleshed and the other side fleshless, to symbolize graphically the confluence of life and death. It is significant that unlike the single reference to the Pietá, composed by Dolores and the dead María, as Dolores at the end of the play is evoked as the Mother of Sorrows, La Virgen de los Dolores, cradling the head of the dead María, the allusion to the mural of Diego Rivera depicting La Calavera Catrina is not a single, isolated visual metaphor but an integral part of the drama, to the extent that Fuentes makes La Calavera Catrina come alive in the figure of the impudent and dazzling María. In his

works, Rivera has also strikingly painted "The Day of the Dead," by showing masked skeletal figures interacting with living ones—an allusion to the elaborate celebration of El Día de los Difuntos in Mexico, All Souls Day, in which sugar skulls with the names of the dead on them and chocolate sweets in the forms of coffins are consumed. On the eve of El Día de los Difuntos, whole families go to the cemeteries to commune with the dead, decking the tombs with floral offerings and even with food, often spending the whole night at the cemetery, again underscoring the indivisibility of life and death in Mexico. Indeed the final, sumptuous banquet of María can be interpreted as a visualization not only of the splendor of La Calavera Catrina but also as a manifestation of the ceremonies held on El Día de los Difuntos—it is a funeral ceremony that María is conducting. The return to the origins, the explicit Mexicanness of the drama at the end, is underscored visually in that the centerpiece of the stage up until now has been the immense wardrobe containing the lavish costumes and gowns worn by María Félix and Dolores Del Río in their films, but now this wardrobe—the concretization of cinematic fantasy—is replaced by a table piled high with Mexican foods and adornments—an altarpiece to the lost Mexican identity of María:

> El escenario original . . . tiene ahora una armonía que le da la ausencia de los vestidores y el cúmulo de ropas en el centro. En vez, el espacio central es ocupado por una mesa de banquetes colmada de platillos y antojos mexicanos, barricas de pulque y botellas de tequila, ollas de barro y platones desbordantes de fruta (101).

This centerpiece encounters a remarkable parallel in the home altars for the *difuntos,* as is evident in the following description of the elaborateness of these shrines to the dead:

> Home altars for the visiting souls are arranged with an extensive variety of objects: fruits and flowers, breads shaped like shrouded corpses or decorated with pink sugar bones, savory sauces, tamales, caramelized pumpkins, skulls and little animals made of colored sugar, a photograph of the deceased in a handsome frame, tequila and coca-cola, a glass of water, cigarettes and a bandana handkerchief for a man, a toy for a child—the finest is never too good, and the candles must be of the purest beeswax.[4]

For Fuentes, both Dolores Del Río and María Félix form part of the mythic Mexico that he has been evoking throughout his work. Over and over again in their film careers, they have starred in roles that have underscored their link with the Mexican national identity, with the *pueblo mexicano,* or with the triumph of the Mexican Revolution—Del Río in *Flor silvestre* and *Las abandonadas,* María Félix in *Río escondido* and *Enamorada.* Del Río very early in her career, which began not in Mexico but in Hollywood, in the film *Joanna* (1925), transcended her links with any one country, as she rapidly became stylized by Hollywood into a universal symbol of beauty and elegance and mystique. Yet, because of the second Mexican phase of her career, which began with her brilliant performances in the films of the distinguished director Emilio Fernández, films such as *Flor silvestre* (1943) and *María Candelaria*

(1943), that are now regarded as forming part of the Golden Age of Mexican cinema, Del Río is for millions of Mexicans regarded as a symbol of their country. As Del Río herself has stated in an interview, she was "eager to play in stories concerning my native people, the Mexican race. It is my dearest wish to make fans realize their great beauty, their wonder, their greatness as a people. . . . My ambition is to show the best that's in my nation."[5] Similarly, Fuentes has brilliantly captured the pre-eminent *mexicanidad* of María Félix, both in *Zona sagrada* and now again in *Orquídeas.* As Claudia Nervo, in one of her endless press conferences, states defiantly, "Antes el símbolo de México era Pancho Villa. Ahora soy yo."[6] Fuentes is intrigued with Félix as a mythic figure, and the vibrant and spell-binding Claudia emerges, both on the screen and in her daily life, surrounded by a veritable court of glamorous models, all of whom have been forced to remake their identities in the image of Claudia, as a combination of Doña Bárbara and the Aztec goddess of carnal love, Tlazoltéotl, and for the hapless son whom she alternately embraces and rejects, kidnaps from his father then consigns to an existential limbo, a paradoxical combination of the nurturing and terrifying mother, of Penelope and Circe, of Venus and the castrating Medusa.

It is significant that María Félix was scheduled to play the role of Claudia in a movie version of *Zona sagrada* that was never brought to fruition. In contrast with Claudia's introspective, self-deprecating and finally self-destructive son Guillermo, Claudia, like the relentlessly active superstar that she represents, incessantly expands her roles—not only on the screen but as shrewd businesswoman, as symbol for many women of the victories that women can achieve in a male-dominated society, and finally as national spokeswomen.

In *Río escondido,* for example, María Félix, in the role of the spirited and indomitable school teacher Rosaura Salazar, is commissioned by the president of Mexico to bring educational progress and the message of the Mexican Revolution to the small, *cacique*-dominated town of Río Escondido. Rosaura battles against the reactionary force of the *cacique* and triumphs over him, only to succumb to illness, being elevated at the end into a martyr *por la patria.* As García Riera points out, analyzing the importance of Rosaura as a national symbol:

> Si María Félix había hecho en *Enamorada* en papel de arte colonial mexicano, ahora interpretaba a la Patria misma, bella, arrogante y desbordante de amor por sus hijos. Su muerte, como la de Cristo, servía a la Resurreción del espíritu encarnado en quienes habían recibido el ejemplo, o sea, en todo el pueblo beneficiado por la instrucción pública.[7]

The President of Mexico himself, Miguel Alemán, appears in this highly nationalistic film, and María Félix is cast in the role of the dauntless educational leader who must keep alive the spirit of the Revolution—of the need to maintain the spirit of reform that is designed to rescue towns like Río Escondido from their backwardness and corruption. As Mora states emphasizing the continual interplay between the individual and the national in this film:

> Rosaura arrives at Río Escondido, a desolate, poverty-stricken community tyrannized by one of the *malos mexicanos* alluded to by the president—the *cacique* Regino Sandoval (Carlos López Moctezuma), an ex-*villista* gone bad. Rosaura shows her pluck by courageously defying Regino and his murderous henchmen. He is unsuccessful in forcing her to become his mistress, as he had done with the previous school teacher. She calls Felipe back from the village to which he had been assigned to combat a smallpox epidemic in Río Escondido. Rosaura and Felipe force Regino to fix up the school and have the townspeople vaccinated in exchange for medical treatment, for he has also fallen ill. The village priest (Domingo Soler), heretofore powerless against the *cacique,* gains heart from Rosaura and Felipe's courageous example and helps to gather the villagers for vaccination. In the repaired school building, Rosaura exhorts the boys and girls: "Learn so you can regenerate Río Escondido, Mexico, and the world" She lectures them about "dark forces" in Mexico, especially ignorance; she points to Juárez's picture as an example of Mexico's (and the Indians') ability to reach the heights. "But what am I saying?" she interrupts herself. "We have to start where Juárez did—with the first letter of the alphabet."[8]

This is the role that presumably inspires the Dolores of Fuentes' drama in her behavior toward the Fan, who like the *cacique* with Rosaura is finally unsuccessful in his attempts to possess Dolores. Rosaura fiercely resists Sandoval's attack upon her, and finally kills him with her rifle. Rosaura herself ultimately succumbs to her heart condition, yet just before her death she receives a letter from the President, commending her for her service to the nation. Although Fuentes, unlike El Indio Fernández, does not as obviously flaunt his *mexicanidad,* he nonetheless has assumed the role of Mexican national conscience—a role that he has inherited not only from distinguished Mexican novelists such as Mariano Azuela, Martín Luis Guzmán, Agustín Yáñez, and Juan Rulfo, but also from leading Mexican dramatists who are concerned with defining, through antihistorical, mythic visions, the components of the Mexican national identity, such as Rodolfo Usigli and Salvador Novo. Just as does Usigli in *El gesticulador,* Fuentes throughout his work expertly uses satire, caricature, irony, and myth-debunking to attack pretentiousness and to reveal corruption and venality. Both Usigli and Fuentes strip away the many masks—linguistic, social, historical, political—placed on the Mexican identity, in order to affirm its true meaning. Fuentes probes the wellsprings of the Mexican national identity with sincerity, with passion, with a deep love for his homeland—not with a blind nationalism nor inflated rhetoric, but with a critical and a creative consciousness. And it is Fuentes' love for his homeland that is so poignantly and eloquently and lyrically expressed by María at the end of *Orquídeas a la luz de la luna.*

Just as Fernández's *Río Escondido* is laden with national and presidential symbols, such as the famous bell of the church of Dolores rung by Father Hidalgo, that signifies the beginning of the struggle for Mexican Independence from Spain, to the private audience that Rosaura has with the president, so also is *Orquídeas a la luz de la luna,* like Fuentes' novel *La cabeza de la hidra* (1978), laden with symbols, paintings, and myths that celebrate *la mexicanidad.*

The tremendous impact of Dolores Del Río, not merely as a "Latin in Hollywood" but as a remarkable symbol of the Mexican people and of their outstanding cultural accomplishments, has been emphasized by Gómez-Sicre:

> Dolores del Rio's was the first Latin American woman's face to peer out from the screens of the world. From the beginning it has exercised an influence that has remained undiminished in forty years of appearances in darkened rooms where we still adore those gods who vanish with the light. Coming to Hollywood in the most splendid age of movie-making in the United States, Dolores survived its crises. She had the best directors, shared honors with other top stars, and played in almost every type of movie. When she felt that Hollywood was no longer a propitious field, she returned to her own country—she had never relinquished her citizenship—and was, in part, responsible for the best period of the Mexican cinema.[9]

Indeed, after her return to her native country, Del Río "has four times been awarded the Ariel, Mexico's Oscar, for *Flor silvestre* in 1943, *Las abandonadas* in 1955, *Doña Perfecta* in 1950, and *El niño y la niebla* (which won eight Ariels overall)."[10]

In many senses, then, Dolores Del Río was a pioneer—one of the first Mexicans to gain international renown in the cinema, a dynamic and forceful personality who defied tradition-bound Mexican society, and a prime force in the development of the Mexican film. Fuentes parallels Dolores Del Río in the literary sphere. The universality attained by Del Río is matched by that of Fuentes, whose works have been translated into many languages, and who as a novelist, dramatist, and essayist can no longer be linked exclusively with Mexico or even with Latin America. Like his distinguished countryman, the great poet and essayist Octavio Paz, like the other outstanding Latin American writers such as Rubén Darío, Pablo Neruda, Jorge Luis Borges—Fuentes has gained a truly international stature. The word Ariel can be linked not only to Dolores Del Río but to Carlos Fuentes as well. Within the context of Latin American literature, Ariel is expressive of the spirit of enlightenment, the force of humanism that appears as an inspirational ideal in the essay *Ariel,* by the Uruguayan author José Enrique Rodó. The thesis of Rodó is that Latin America, in contrast with the spirit of pragmatism and materialism that prevails in the countries to the North, is the inheritor and upholder of the great cultural, humanistic tradition of Mediterranean Europe. And this immensely rich cultural tradition is flourishing as never before in Latin America, which in the second half of the twentieth century has fully actualized the idealistic thesis of Rodó, producing some of the world's foremost writers—Gabriel García Márquez, winner of the Nobel prize, Julio Cortázar, Mario Vargas Llosa, who like Fuentes is also a master of the novel, short story, theatre, and, of course, Fuentes himself. And, more so than any other Latin American author, Fuentes has achieved in the literary sphere what both Dolores Del Río and María Félix have achieved in the cinema—the capacity for seemingly endless renewal. Although many of the leading novelists in Latin America, like José Eustasio Rivera and Rómulo Gallegos, are known primarily for one outstanding work, even though their literary production may have been extensive, Fuentes, like the great Spanish novelist, essayist,

poet, and dramatist Miguel de Unamuno, by whom he has been influenced, has a seemingly inexhaustible capacity to expand and renew the self artistically, conquering new areas like drama and film, creating vast epic works like *Terra nostra* on the one hand and tightly structured *novellas* such as *Aura* on the other, and synthesizing in his art philosophy, painting, sculpture, history, psychology, anthropology, religion, music, poetry, and film. Fuentes' artistic trajectory has moved from initial novels such as *La región más transparente, La muerte de Artemio Cruz,* and *Las buenas conciencias,* which focus almost exclusively on Mexico, although these works incorporate structural and stylistic techniques of modern experimental novelists such as Dos Passos and James Joyce, to works such as *Terra nostra*—an amazing synthesis of Old World and New World civilizations, of the Rome of Tiberius with the Hapsburg Spain of Felipe II, of the New World at the time of its Conquest by Cortés with Mexico of the year 2000, a vast eight-hundred page novel that explores time and memory and consciousness, that experiments with myriad and constantly changing narrators. And yet, although some critics thought that Fuentes would have exhausted himself after this narrative *summa,* he went on to produce a masterpiece of the supernatural, *Una familia lejana,* and to further develop his great talent as a dramatist with *Orquídeas a la luz de la luna.* Thus the final word that Dolores utters, "Resurección," is symbolic not only of the multiple roles and multiple screen lives of Dolores Del Río and María Félix, but also of the proteanness and the endless capacity for renewal of Fuentes' own creative talent. What Dolores Del Río accomplished in one of her first major films, Walsh's *Resurrection,* she was to attain over and over agin, in *Flor silvestre* and *María Candelaria* and *Las abandonadas* and *Cheyenne Autumn,* to recreate her screen personality—glamorous and seductive in *Flying Down to Rio,* tender and stoic and self-sacrificing in *María Candelaria.* Here is the way that Gómez-Sicre describes a key moment in the career of the real Dolores Del Río, once again confirming how the theme of the film *Resurrection* marked a rebirth for Dolores Del Río herself:

> Now a fundamental work was needed to confirm the importance of the new discovery of the U.S. cinema, and Carewe had it reserved for himself. That was *Resurrection,* based on the novel by Tolstoy. Dolores appeared as a full-fledged star.
>
> With the premiere of *Resurrection* in 1927 the fans everywhere confirmed that a new personality had been born, different from all the rest, in her physical appearance and in the Latin emotion that she could impart to her work. The psychological development the protagonist had to undergo—from an innocent Russian peasant girl to a prostitute, finally converted into a derelict and redeemed by love in full defeat and unhappiness—was a challenge for any actress with more experience than the young Mexican, who still didn't know English. Relying on her intuition, she received the director's instructions through interpreters. *Resurrection* was the decisive proof of her dramatic potential. As an artistic expression, every close-up of Dolores was a revelation. A distinctive person had taken over the screen. We Latin Americans had placed our own goddess on the Olympia of silent films.[11]

The marvellous versatility of both Dolores Del Río and María Félix, and one of the basic themes of Fuentes' drama—that these two great actresses are essentially one—are underscored through the concluding litany of the films of both actresses that is recited by Dolores, films made in Hollywood and Mexico, in France and in Spain, films directed by outstanding personalities such as Raoul Walsh and El Indio Fernández, Jean Renoir and Orson Welles, John Ford and King Vidor, titles that are given life by the clips from these films that compose the backdrop to the final scene. As occurs so often in Fuentes' work, the background contains the most important part of the scene. Fuentes utilizes the form of the drama, ironically, to underscore the power and the fascination and the triumph of the cinema, the resurrection for the two economically and spiritually impoverished *chicanas:*

> Resurreción . . . Río Escondido . . . Wonder Bar . . . Mare Nostrum . . . Evangelina . . . Juana Gallo . . . Los amores de Carmen . . . La escondida . . . In Caliente . . . Miércoles de ceniza . . . La casa chica . . . Vértigo . . . Flor de Mayo . . . La Malquerida . . . La Paloma . . . French Can-Can . . . El poder y la gloria . . . Amok . . . La otra . . . Lancer Spy . . . Corona Negra . . . Madame Du Barry . . . Mesalina . . . Doña Diabla . . . Los héroes están fatigados . . . El monje blanco . . .
>
> *Dolores se apoya contra la puerta.*
>
> Resurreción (111).

Both *Orquídeas a la luz de la luna* and *Una familia léjana* (1980) exemplify an interesting paradox concerning Fuentes' art. Although both of these works, along with dramas such as *El tuerto es rey* seem to indicate that Fuentes' art is becoming less Mexican than in his early phases, nonetheless all of these works demonstrate a profound although in many cases more implicit *mexicanidad* along with, in his theatrical works, an expert utilization of sophisticated theatrical techniques, reflecting the influences of Bertold Brecht and Arthur Miller, of Jean Genet and Samuel Beckett. In the comments that he has made in his interviews, Fuentes underscores this combination of the nationalistic and the international that makes his art an extremely open one, eclectic and synthesizing, and yet at the same time deeply committed to the exploration of Mexican themes:

> My work is probably becoming less and less "Mexican". . . . I've been living outside my country for a long time. Maybe I've paid my nationalistic dues by now. Nonetheless, even in "Orchids" there is an element of identification with Mexico.[12]

In an earlier interview with Sosnowski, Fuentes underscores how strong his *mexicanidad* is, as he appraises the whole of his art as being committed, like Diego Rivera, to portraying Mexico in all of its epochs:

> . . . no he podido dejar afuera de mi cuadro todo lo que a mí me obsesiona en la vida mexicana. Digo, no se trata de un cuadro exhaustivo, no puede serlo. Pero sí está todo lo que me obsesiona respecto a México. Pero después de todo . . . el resorte principal de mi

> actividad literaria ha sido *mi* país, la lengua de *mi* país, la identidad de *mi* país a través de su lengua, de su gente.[13]

Indeed, just as Federico García Lorca in dramas such as *Bodas de sangre* and *Yerma* and *La casa de Bernarda Alba* evokes the rural life of Andalusía in mythic and universal terms, just as the contemporary Mexican author Juan Rulfo in his short stories and in his novel *Pedro Páramo* concentrates on Mexican rural life but through his fantastic and mythic vision universalizes his regional setting, so too does Fuentes, who is obsessively dedicated to portraying contemporary urban life, particularly that of the vast city-state that is Mexico City, universalize that culture.

Another very important aspect of the doubling phenomenon in *Orquídeas a la luz de la luna* is that these two great cinematic actresses can be interpreted as doubles of Fuentes himself. Like a Hollywood star, Fuentes develops a legendary status by constantly appearing in the public eye, through his many lectures, in both Spanish and English, his television appearances, and his writing of columns on Latin American politics in leading newspapers in the United States. In a conversation with the author of this essay, Fuentes stated that he was a frustrated actor, and that he sought to become another Sydney Greenstreet or Conrad Veidt. Fuentes was set to appear in a movie in France, a film version of "Benito Cereno," but left to return to Mexico. His appearance, his poise, his dramatic flair, his sensitivity to factors such as gesture and timing, are all evident in the compelling lectures that he gives. Like Del Río, whose triumph in the United States was matched by her great success in Mexico, Fuentes' literary career in the United States, his success as a novelist most of whose works have been translated into English, as a journalist who writes directly in English, and now as a playwright, rivals his success in Mexico. Unlike many writers, like Juan Rulfo, for example, who prefer seclusion or semi-seclusion, who rarely if ever make public appearances or public statements, Fuentes actively courts publicity. And both his father's extensive diplomatic background and Fuentes' own diplomatic experiences, as he served as Mexico's ambassador to France from 1975-1977, make him at ease talking either with individuals or with huge audiences. In his lectures, Fuentes adroitly blends incidents from his personal life with commentary and analysis of sociohistorical events, thus transferring the process of individual and national identity that so definitely characterizes his art to his own life and career. The biculturalism of both of Mexico's leading actresses—María Félix who races horses in France, Dolores Del Río who at the time of her death was living in exclusive Newport Beach in California, the complementary residence to the one in Coyoacán, Mexico, is paralleled by the biculturalism or even triculturalism of Fuentes, at home in New York or London or Paris or Mexico City, and expressing in his novels and short stories—*Cambio de piel, La cabeza de la hidra, Terra nostra, Una familia lejana,* and the collection of short stories *Cantar de ciegos*—his distinctly international orientation.

The biculturalism and bilingualism of Fuentes continue to be reflected in *Orquídeas a la luz de la luna,* which for many reasons—theme, structure, style, countless international influences, and the fact that it was written simultaneously in Spanish and English by Fuentes, without the need of a translator—constitutes a major development in the universalization of the Mexican and

the Latin American theatre. Although Fuentes has had the experience of writing brief articles and reviews and editorials directly in English, this is the first work of art that he has created in what has become his second tongue, so that Fuentes himself reflects the status of the two *chicanas,* as he is suspended between two cultures—a Mexican-American writer. It is significant that the world premiere of *Orquídeas a la luz de la luna* was the English version, *Orchids in the Moonlight*—an American Repertory Theatre Production at the Loeb Drama Center, Harvard University, in June of 1982. In an interview, Fuentes refers to a *novella* also written directly in English, which he subsequently stated treats the experiences in Mexico of the writer Ambrose Bierce, who as an old man first joined the troops of Villa and then deserted and was ordered shot by Villa:

> he tenido una experiencia muy curiosa este verano, y es la de haber escrito por primera vez una novela en inglés, una novela breve en lengua inglesa, para ver que se siente ser Conrad ¿verdad? Pero he sufrido enormemente y por un hecho muy claro. Me sentí vigilado constantemente mientras escribía en inglés. Sentí que había una serie de fantasmas que aparecían por las ventanas, que asomaban por los *closets,* debajo de las camas, me hacían caras. "¿Cómo te atreves a escribir eso?" me decía Faulkner, y Hawthorne me decía, "no, no, no, no, eso no." Y Herman Melville me echaba un arponazo digno del capitán Ahab y salía George Eliot (la mujer) y me decía otras cosas. Y me sentía yo sumamente incómodo y sin la libertad a la que estoy acostumbrado en lengua española. Yo creo que sencillamente se escribe en la lengua en la que se sueña y en la que se hace el amor, y se jura, ¿verdad?[14]

Yet, despite Fuentes' initial reservations about writing in English, he is never one to back down from a challenge, from breaking through narrative conventions, as he has proved over and over again, first with *La región más transparente,* then again with *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* and most recently with the highly debated work *Terra nostra.* Fuentes has recently stated that he has a novel in progress, entitled *Cristóbal nonato,* which he is also writing in both English and Spanish at the same time, and regarding the process of artistic creation in this bilingual mode, his work on the English version of the novel causes him to rethink and revise and add to the Spanish version, and when he resumes work on the Hispanic version, a similar process occurs, impelling him to make modifications in the English draft.[15]

Fuentes was schooled in the United States, spending several years in Washington, D.C. in the 1930's, when his father held a position in the Mexican embassy there. Thus the temptation to write in English is presumably a long-standing one. In another interview, Fuentes explains why he chose to write *Orchids in the Moonlight* in English:

> I wrote the play in English and Spanish at the same time. It's very curious. I had the two Mexican actresses in mind so I started in Spanish. But the third character, the fan, was American, and this character ran away from me. He started doing a series of puns on "Citizen Kane" that simply wouldn't work in Spanish. They had to be in English. There were some jokes I could not say in Spanish. The

> demands and opportunities of Spanish are very great and very exciting but they are other. The particular kind of humor I wanted I could get only in English.[16]

The Fan is explicitly evoked in terms of archetypes from the Hollywood cinema—as a combination of Harold Lloyd and James Cagney, to reflect his highly paradoxical nature. Lloyd was famous as a comic genius in the silent era, starring in films such as *The Freshman* and *Safety Last,* and Fuentes' homage to Lloyd is contained in the elaborate punnings that the Fan engages in. But the markedly sinister aspect that lies beneath the façade of boyishness and ineptitude of the anonymous Fan is alluded to in his link with Cagney and with the violent, even pathological criminal types that Cagney played in films such as *Public Enemy* and *White Heat.*

It is ironic that the two *chicanas,* wildly alternating throughout the drama between scenes of invective and character assassination and those of tenderness and reconciliation, are both unified and destroyed by the cinematic myth that they so fanatically believe in. Cinema provides them with self-fulfillment and also provides some of the most poignant moments in the drama—particularly when the two squabbling and acid-tongued women become reconciled as they dance the lilting tango, "Orchids in the Moonlight." Yet the final unity between the two *chicanas* is gained only symbolically, only ironically, through the blending of the cinematic images of Dolores Del Río and María Félix, images that dominate the human characters of the play. These gigantic and consecrating images first coalesce in terms of death, as Dolores refers to the role of her ego ideal in *Flor silvestre,* as Esperanza follows her husband to the wall where he will be executed. Indeed, all of the characters in Fuentes' drama converge at the end, but, ironically, only in death—the suicide of María, the brutal death of the Fan, the death of "Orson Welles," the endless life-in-death and sadistic rejoicing at the deaths of others by the Mother, and, finally, the film-clip from *Flor silvestre:*

> DOLORES: Ah, mírate, qué hermosa y enamorada, siguiendo a Pedro Armendáriz rumbo a la revolución, Enamorada, Flor silvestre, la airosa, mírame siguiendo a Pedro Armendáriz rumbo al paredon, Enamorada, Flor silvestre . . . (109)

These two films have been carefully chosen by Fuentes; in *Enamorada,* María Félix, who plays the role of the proud daughter of a Porfirista, at the end abandons her North American fiancé to follow the revolutionary, played by Armendáriz; in *Flor Silvestre,* Dolores Del Río, loyal unto death to her husband, follows Armendáriz to the execution wall. Thus these films provide an artistic transposition and a transcendence of the negative act of Fuentes Dolores in following the malevolent Fan. And these two films emphasize as well the ironic oneness of both the real-life María Félix and Dolores Del Río and their *chicana* counterparts, by demonstrating how both of these great Mexican actresses played in essence the same role, that of upholder of the values and ideals of the Mexican Revolution, as followers of the Mexican cinematic Revolutionary *par excellence,* Pedro Arméndariz.

At the end of the drama, the *mexicanidad* of the play is further underscored through Dolores' evocation of the films that Dolores Del Río and María Félix

made under the superb direction of Emilio Fernández. El Indio Fernández comments on the envy and jealousy that Dolores became the target of once she began to reach out for acceptance among her own people, as he recalls the problems surrounding the opening of *Flor silvestre:*

> This film was really an adventure because, as a result of one of those things that occasionally happens, Dolores was not liked here. The day of the premiere, at the Palacio Chino, there were perhaps fifteen people in the audience. We were really very few, and all Dolores's friends. But there were important people. I remember Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, David Alfaro Siqueiros, Manuel Rodríguez Lozano, and Miguel and Rosa Covarrubias. The rest were acquaintances, with a reporter here and there . . . Dolores, faced with that emptiness, literally wanted to die, perhaps even to kill herself. But between Diego, David, and the others, we cheered her up and convinced her that the whole thing was just a coincidence. Guerrero Galván, whom I had forgotten but who also attended the premiere, loudly declared that with that film was born the Mexican cinema of the Revolution and that Mexico regained its most beautiful woman, who was in addition an excellent actress. The next day an intense campaign was initiated by Arturo on the radio and the reporters through their newspapers, and before the week was out there was standing room only at the theater.[17]

In this poignant film, Dolores plays the part of Esperanza, whose very name is symbolic of the hope for the Mexican Revolution, which must continue to struggle, this time not against the *porfiristas* but against the lawlessness that the climate of upheaval and violence has unleashed and that finally claims the life of Esperanza's husband:

> Triunfa la Revolución, con el concurso de José Luis. Este, que vive feliz con Esperanza (ya embarazada) se entera de que los hermanos Ursulo y Rogelio Torres, bandidos que pasan por generales revolucionarios se han apoderado de la hacienda de don Francisco a quien han ahorcado. José Luis, en venganza, ahorca a Ursulo pese a que éste ya ha muerto de tifo. Mientras, Rogelio captura a Esperanza y a su hijo recién nacido y amenaza a ambos si José Luis no se entrega. Por salvar a su familia, José Luis muere fusilado ante la desesperación de Esperanza. [18]

In *Flor silvestre,* Del Río admirably plays the role of the loyal and courageous wife, risking her own life on behalf of her husband, and, like María Félix in *Río escondido,* becoming a symbol of the Revolutionary spirit in Mexico that cannot be snuffed out. As García Riera states:

> resultan altamente expresivas las palabras del bandido (que el propio *Indio* interpreta) al ver como Dolores Del Río insiste en abrazar a su hombre en trance de muerte: "Quítame de ahí a esa vieja o la quemamos también." En el muy legítimo orden de ideas del *Indio,* la Revolución triunfará sólo si Dolores Del Río y su pequeño hijo siguen viviendo, puesto que son ellos la encarnación del ideal revolucionario atacado y desmentido por la violencia pura.[19]

And in *Orquídeas a la luz de la luna,* Dolores once again plays a defiant role, challenging the absolutism of the Mother, rebelling against her solitude, affirming the victory of both María and herself over time and age and death.

From the beginning to the end of Fuentes' drama, which expertly combines various levels of fantasy—dreams and reveries and nightmares, psychological and supernatural fantasies; artistic fantasies, murals and songs and poems,and the play-within-a-play, as dramatic actresses play the roles of *chicanas* who play the parts of cinematic actresses—it is the cinematic image, the cinematic presence, and not the degrading and brutalizing marginality of the real-life existence of the two *chicanas,* that is the most important. At the very end, the sound of the shovelsful of earth that are burying María is drowned out by the music, "Orchids in the Moonlight." So strong is the grip of illusion on the fragile mind of Dolores that, instead of confessing the truth to the Fan that they, like he, are impostors, Dolores kills him in order to defend the reputation of María, and in order to protect her precious cinematic illusions, which she exalts as part of the funeral ceremony for María:

> DOLORES—¿La cámara, María? ¿La cámara es nuestra salvación? ¿En la cámara de cine se reúnen nuestras oraciones, la cámara es nuestro altar común, mi amor? (109)

Through their total identification with the screen, in life and even after death, as Dolores props up the body of María and projects on the screen in front of them the images from the films of their idols, the two *chicanas* ironically gain what so many of Fuentes' characters obsessively search for—immortality. They preserve themselves as eternally young and eternally beautiful—the obsession of the wizened sorceress Consuelo in Aura and of Claudia in *Zona sagrada,* who like Dolores fanatically courts the camera, insisting that she be photographed again and again, as a means of defying her Nemesis, Time.

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NOTES

1. Carlos Fuentes, *Orquídeas a la luz de la luna* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1982), p. 17. Subsequent references are included in the text.
2. Carlos Fuentes, *Una familia lejana* (México: Ediciones Era, 1980), p. 28.
3. See "Fuentes on Orchids," an interview with Thomas Riccio, included in *American Repertory Theatre Magazine,* Program for Carlos Fuentes' *Orchids in the Moonlight,* Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1981, n. p.
4. Consult Louisa Reynoso, "Celebration in the Cemetery: Mexico's Day of the Dead," *Americas* (October 1980), p. 29.
5. See Larry Carr, *More Fabulous Faces* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, 1979), p. 44.
6. Carlos Fuentes, *Zona sagrada* (México: Siglo XXI Editores, 1967), p. 33. An investigation of the complex, paradoxical character of Claudia Nervo, both supercilious victor and anguished victim, both emancipated woman and self-tyrannized, is provided in my study, "The Pseudo-Liberated Woman in Fuentes' *Zona Sagrada,*" *Journal of Spanish Studies: The Twentieth Century,* III, 1 (Spring 1975), 17-43.
7. See Emilio García Riera, *Historia documental del cine mexicano, Epoca sonora,* Tomo III (1945/1948), (México: Ediciones Era, 1971), p. 203.
8. Consult Carl J. Mora, *Mexican Cinema: Reflections of a Society, 1896-1980* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), pp. 78-79.
9. See José Gómez-Sicre, *Dolores del Río,* translated by Flora Phelps (Washington, D.C.: General Secretariat of the Organization of American States, 1970), n. p.

10. Consult Carr, *More Fabulous Faces,* p. 44.

11. See Gómez-Sicre, *Dolores del Río,* n. p.

12. Consult Arthur Holmberg, "Carlos Fuentes Turns to Theatre," *New York Times, Arts Supplement* (June 6, 1982), p. 12.

13. See Saúl Sosnowski, "Entrevista a Carlos Fuentes," *Hispamérica,* IX, No. 27 (1980), 74.

14. Consult "La experiencia de los novelistas," a round-table discussion with Carlos Fuentes, Mario Vargas Llosa, Juan Goytisolo, and Jorge Edwards, conducted by José Miguel Oviedo and included in *Revista Iberoamericana,* núms. 116-117 (julio-diciembre 1981), 313.

15. From an interview with Carlos Fuentes conducted by the author of this study at the University of Utah, Salt Lake City, in May, 1983.

16. Consult Holmberg, p. 12.

17. See *Mexican Cinema: Interviews with Thirteen Directors,* by Beatrice Reyes Nevares, translated by Elizabeth Gard and Carl J. Mora (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1976), pp. 17-18.

18. Consult García Riera, *Historia documental del cine mexicano, Epoca sonora,* Tomo II, 1941/1944 (México: Ediciones Era, 1970), 118.

19. See García Riera, *Historia documental del cine mexicano,* II, 121.