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Literary Lion's Speech Provides Little Insight; An Analysis Of Fuentes

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When Carlos Fuentes, the literary lion of Mexico, spoke at Copley Symphony Hall on Sunday, one of the most interesting aspects of the event was the audience.

It ranged from college kids to octogenarians. It was multiracial, multicultural and mainly middle class.

Several professors from UCSD chatted happily before Fuentes made his entrance. A cluster of young Hispanic men and women in their 20s discussed their current film projects and one young woman's recent journey to Mexico City and Chiapas in search of footage.

In short, Fuentes, who spoke as part of the InSite '94 effort to create an arts and cultural dialogue across the U.S.-Mexican border, was preaching to the choir. These people came to hear Fuentes because they already are engaging in the dialogue.

Despite the importance of his message, and except for a few flashes of intriguing insight, Fuentes' speech was a disappointment. The author's English is stately and elegant, yet he stumbled over phrases and had to reread

parts to achieve the correct emphasis.

While his slides were magnificent, especially those of Mexican churches, one art student from San Diego State University complained that she had heard his message many times before in her art history classes, right down to the gringo scolding at the end.

On the other hand, perhaps the student's professors at SDSU were merely recapitulating what Fuentes had said in the first place.

A novelist, essayist and diplomat, Fuentes was born in Panama City in 1928, the son of a Mexican career diplomat. He spent most of his youth in Latin American capitals and in Washington, D.C.

Fuentes' lengthy and ornate novels — among them "Where the Air is Clear," "The Death of Artemio Cruz" and "Terra Nostra" — present a panoramic vision of Mexico. North Americans are most familiar with Fuentes' book "The Old Gringo," about the last days of journalist Ambrose Bierce in Mexico. "The Old Gringo" was vastly simplified in a film starring Gregory Peck and Jane Fonda. Fuentes' essays on Latin American issues frequently appear in U.S. magazines and newspapers.

Fuentes has taught at Harvard and Cambridge and served as Mexico's ambassador to France.

Nobody is more qualified than Fuentes to be a spokesman for Latin American and leftist causes. While his talk was about art, in Mexico, Central and South America, it is impossible to separate art from culture, religion or politics.

Appropriately, Fuentes' speech was co-presented by the Cultural Affairs Institute of the Mexican Consulate, Installation Gallery and the San Diego Museum of Art.

Fuentes traced the history of art in the Americas from the indigenous form to the current blending of indigenous, European and African expressions. The European explorers were dazzled by the art, architecture and culture they found in the Americas, Fuentes said. They saw the new world as a way to recapture the primitive instinctive relationship with the natural world that Europe had long lost. The European settlers were

utopians and the Americas were their ideal place.

"We were obligated to be happy (in the new world) whether we liked it or not," Fuentes said. "It has been a heavy burden."

Like most people in love, the settlers wanted first to possess, then to change and finally to exploit the wonderful world they found.

The native and mestizo artisans made themselves heard, despite subjugation by the discoverers. When Mexican artisans were told to decorate a church near Potosi, they followed instructions, except that all the angels and saints had faces like theirs and all the devils had the faces of the Spaniards.

The baroque art that developed in Latin America after the arrival of Europeans tells the emotional history of the Americas. Religious, public and folk art alike reflect pain and suffering, but also energy, enthusiasm, impatience and pretensions to be something different.

But this tumultuous art is perhaps tepid compared to what is ahead, Fuentes said.

"The cultural reality is going to become extremely complicated in the years to come," he predicted. For both Americas, the problem is the same — the crisis of urban civilization.

"This is visible more and more in the new baroque turbulence," he said. "Clash, conquest, counter-conquest, rediscovery of America."

Yet we need to come to terms with the truth of the situation. The economic problems that plague the U.S. are not created by immigrants, Fuentes noted, but rather by technology, the end of the Cold War and by 12 years of voodoo economics.

A wrong response, he implied, could be disastrous. Fuentes pointed out that the cultures that attempt to become exclusionary always pay a high price, but those that are inclusionary prosper.

"Let us avoid at all costs xenophobia and racism," Fuentes pleaded. These attitudes invariably end in pogroms, a police state or in holocaust.

Perhaps drawing from the lessons so visible in the baroque art of early Latin America, Fuentes concluded, "If we do not recognize the humanity in others, we will never recognize it in ourselves."