



THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA
Department of French, Hispanic & Italian Studies

RMST 202

Romance Studies,
Modernism to the Present

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*The Old Gringo: Carlos
Fuentes, Repetition,
and History*

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The Old Gringo: Carlos Fuentes, Repetition, and History

with Jon Beasley-Murray

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“All great world-historic facts and personages appear, so to speak, twice [. . .] the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce.” (Karl Marx)

The Old Gringo is about history and centrally concerned with repetition, about how tragedy slips into farce, and vice versa. It is also about memory, writing, legitimacy, justice, freedom, and the ways in which revolutions so frequently degenerate into vicious reiterations of what they once promised to overthrow.

But this need not be reason to stop trying
to change the world.



REPETITION AS CONTENT AND FORM

“Now she sits alone and remembers.

“She sees, over and over, the specters of Tomás Arroyo and the moon-faced woman and the old gringo cross her window.” (3)

Recollection involves reliving or reviewing the past, experiencing it a second time. Moreover, this remembrance is itself multiple.

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Repressed trauma returns to haunt the present.

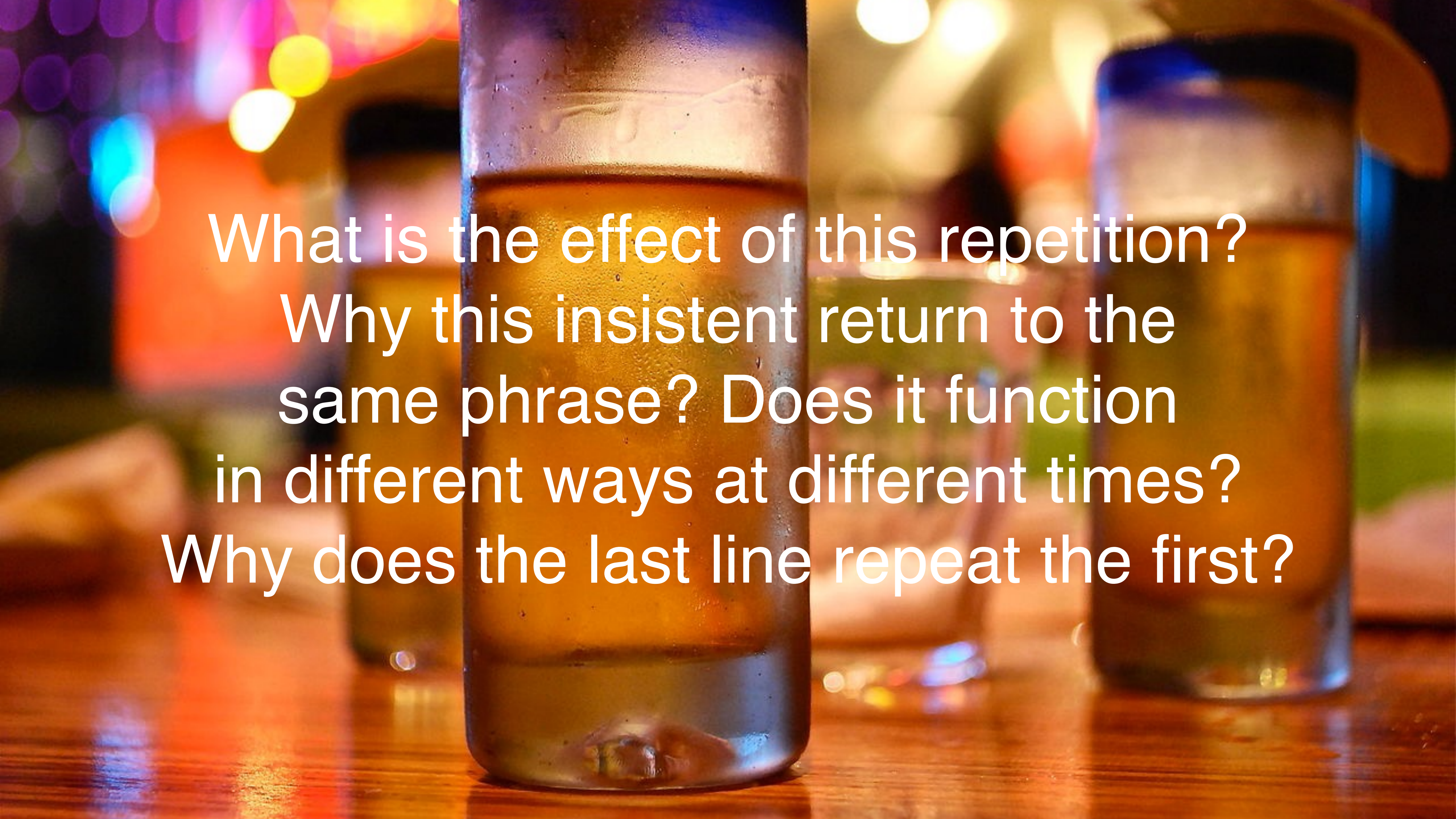
“But they are not ghosts. They have simply mobilized their old pasts, hoping that she would do the same and join them.” (3)

“Now she sits alone and remembers” (3);
“Now she sits alone and remembers” (24);
“Now she sits alone and remembers” (44);
“Now she sits alone and remembers” (71);
“She still sits and remembers” (74); “she
remembers [. . .] now she sits alone” (105);
“Now she is alone and remembers” (119);
“Now she sits alone and remembers” (163);
“*Now she sits alone and remembers*” (199).

What is the effect of this repetition?

Why this insistent return to the same phrase? Does it function in different ways at different times?

Why does the last line repeat the first?



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Why this insistent return to the
same phrase? Does it function
in different ways at different times?
Why does the last line repeat the first?

Such repetition is more akin to poetry than to prose. The reiteration of the same line over and over gives Fuentes's text a lyrical tone. It adds to the sensation that there is something dreamlike about this story, which hovers between the real and imagination.

The repetition of this particular phrase distances us further from the tale being told, as it reminds us of the frame within which the narrative is set.

Winslow is depicted as an unwilling participant in the history in which she is accidentally caught up.

“those gray eyes fighting to retain a sense of their own identity, of personal dignity and courage in the midst of the vertiginous terror of the unexpected.” (33)

“To be a gringo in Mexico . . .
ah, that is euthanasia.” (145)

Characters are depicted as reacting to and re-enacting aspects of their past lives that they cannot quite leave behind even amid a revolutionary process that is supposed to make everything new.

The otherwise farcical execution of a disinterred corpse with which the drama culminates is then portrayed as offering resolution to these secret personal tragedies.

It is only later, as she “sits alone and remembers,” that Winslow recalls the more complex dynamics that underlie and undercut the official stories of heroism and redemption, which seem to have transmuted melodramatic farce into solemn national tragedy.



PAPER POWER

The old gringo is not just anybody.



Ambrose Bierce

“History, *n.* An account mostly false, of events mostly unimportant”; “Love, *n.* A temporary insanity curable by marriage”; “War, *n.* A by-product of the arts of peace.”

(The Devil's Dictionary)

Bierce's provocation was to separate words from their accepted definitions, with the sly wink of collusion that suggests that we all already know that the commonplaces of everyday language have to be inverted to reveal their true meanings.

“All my life I’ve wanted to read
the *Quixote*. I’d like to do it before I die.
I’ve given up writing forever.” (11)

Having lost faith in the possibilities that writing offers, he proposes to read a book whose titular knight is deluded by his reading. It is as though the old gringo were armed with a further warning not to trust what is set down in print.

Often, those who are most convinced of the value of writing are those who cannot read at all. They show that the power of writing has little to do with whatever meaning it may convey, but rather with the book as fetish object, the materiality of paper.

“You see what’s written here? You see the writing? You see the precious red seal? These lands have always been ours, ours [. . .]. The King of Spain himself said so. Even he acknowledged it was ours. It says so right here. Written in his own hand. This is his signature. I am the keeper of these papers. The papers prove that no one else has a right to these lands.” (29)

“You are a fool, gringo. I may not be able to read, but I can remember. [. . .] I know what my papers mean better than any who can read.” (30)

For Arroyo, deciphering the text is hindrance more than help: for him, its power lies in the spell that it weaves that would be broken if it were disentangled.

If Arroyo is the keeper of the papers, he is also possessed by them. He thinks that they give him power, but it is they that have power over him.

As much as the papers tie the land to Arroyo, they tie him to the land, to territory and to sovereignty. Burdened by these ethereal manuscripts, he and his men are stuck in a quagmire, conceding authority to a long-dead colonial King.

The Old Gringo “knew the value of papers,
the papers that legitimized General
Arroyo’s quest: bounty and vengeance
and lust and pride and mere acceptance
by his peers.” (162)

It is only by getting rid of the papers that the revolution can come into its own, and that Arroyo may have the chance to be freed from the fate of repeating his progenitors' false moves, of confusing writing with legitimacy, and legitimacy with justice.

“Your name isn’t Arroyo, like your mother’s; your name is Miranda, after your father. Yes, [. . .] you’re the resentful heir, disguised as a rebel.

‘You poor bastard. You are Tomás Miranda.’” (175)

Resentment may fuel revolutions, but it ensures that they end up reiterating the old order in new guise.

The question posed by *The Old Gringo* is whether repetition can become difference: whether returning to a theme or a phrase can enable something new, can mobilize and rejuvenate, can open up the future rather than simply tying us to the past.

Sometimes once is not enough in
the search for liberation.


Sometimes once is not enough in
the search for liberation.

Yet another effort if you would
become revolutionaries!



MUSIC

Pianochocolate,
“Romance”



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