



## Objective Truth and Initial Conditions: Positioning *The Chronicle of a Death Foretold* in Postmodern Literature

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### Abstract:

Gabriel Garcia Marquez has often been regarded as a postmodernist writer in lieu of his works that pertain to the realm of magic realism. This paper, by means of close reading, is an attempt to situate his short novel *The Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, a story of the premeditated murder of a young Arab that takes place in a small

Colombian coastal town, in postmodernism, by exploring the alternate avenues of objective truth and initial conditions, through parallel readings of the movies *Vantage Point* and *The Butterfly Effect* (director's cut). Furthermore, the exploration of anamorphosis, journalistic narration, Baudrillard's third-order simulation, and Chaos theory in the texts discussed helps delineate the postmodern poetics present in the works.

**Keywords:** Postmodernism, chaos theory, objective truth, simulation, Gabriel Garcia Marquez.

## 1 Introduction

Gabriel Garcia Marquez was a Nobel prize winning novelist from Colombia. He gained fame world-wide with the Latin American Boom, and was known for the employment of magic realism in his works. His novel *The Chronicle of a Death Foretold* drew inspiration from an actual murder that took place in mid-twentieth century Colombia. Furthermore, the narrator of the story, who puts pieces together in a journalistic fashion, is said to be modeled after Marquez himself, with the author assigning the actual names of his mother and wife, Luisa Santiaga and Mercedes Barcha, to the counterparts in the narrator's life. This essay is an attempt to situate *The Chronicle of a Death Foretold* in the ambit of postmodernism, by pursuing the presence of some aspects that pertain to it such as the lack of objective truth, and the dependence on initial conditions, explored in comparison with other texts like the films *Vantage Point* and *The Butterfly Effect* (director's cut), and the artistic phenomenon of anamorphosis. To provide a passage to these arguments, the novel's existence as a journalistic narration will also be explored.

## 2 Journalistic narration

The novel unfolds as a journalistic narration, and this might be a reflection of Marquez's profession as a journalist. Considering the

fact that it was based on a true story and that the narrator is conducting multiple interviews and investigations into the incident, his similarity to the author becomes clearer as Marquez, through the composition of the novel, was, in a manner, being a journalist. The main event of the novel, which is the death of Santiago Nasar, is described in the first chapter itself - similar to how a news breaks out, where the crux is conveyed through the headlines, which is the component of news that one is immediately met with. What follows after the headlines is the investigations into the event, unravelling it as it proceeds. News itself, in this manner, is a subversion of the traditional mode of storytelling or structure of novels, where the event is built towards, and not from. In *The Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, like in a news report, the main event is presented first, and the unravelling follows later, through interviews of the characters involved. Another similar feature between the novel and news reports is the repetitions in the presentation of the events. Considering the news report of a murder, on the first day completely new information will be available. In the report published on the second day, along with the new information that is added will be the repetition of incidents, albeit partial, given on the first day. This repetition goes on as the reports go on. This phenomenon is observed in the novel as well because the same event is being recounted by different characters. In addition to the general information on the event accessible to everyone, aspects unique to each perspective are recorded by the narrator, including his own. Therefore, the novel does not become a tiring read as it renews its novelty plot-wise. For example, at first, the Arabs are presented as vengeful people angered by the death of their kinsman, with chasing the Vicario twins in the beginning to a possible plot of killing them while they were held in jail. But, when the narrator gets the account from the Arabs, the reader gets to know that the initial reaction was a highly emotional one at the death of Santiago, and that they had accepted the passing in mourning. They had not even thought of murdering the Vicario twins. This perspective of the Arabs is given in the final chapters, as opposed to the former image given in the

initial chapters. Through similar unravelling is how Marquez keeps the story alive, even though the novel boils down to twenty or so odd people giving an account of the same event.

The phenomenon can also be observed in Pete Travis' *Vantage Point*, where the same event is presented from different perspectives or 'vantage points', although the presentation drags on after a while. Each perspective has something new to offer, and keeps on adding meaning to the plot. For example, in the first perspective, a person running onto the stage and being tackled by a secret service agent after the president is shot is presented. This leads the viewer to believe that he is complicit in the act of terrorism that took place. It is when his perspective is presented that the viewer identifies him as Enrique, a police officer who was assigned with the responsibility to guard the mayor, who was also on the stage when the incident occurred. Such unravelling question how news is presented to viewers as they are mostly retellings through select perspectives. There is always the presence of an absence of a perspective that can change or make opinions. This points to the question of representation of events, through news or any other media including novels, being biased to perspectives. In fact, *Vantage Point* opens by placing this bias in front of the viewers.

The first perspective presented to us in the movie is from inside a mobile television studio stationed outside the Plaza where the assassination attempt takes place. The event is the inauguration of a world summit against terrorism, whose disruption is the aim of the terrorists. A character named Angie Jones reports the event for a channel called GNN, the studio of which forms the first perspective that the viewers are presented with. After talking about the event, Jones starts to report on the protests against the summit going on outside the plaza, and is immediately stopped by the producer, stating the presence of vested interests that do not want the world to be aware of the protests. The producer also gives similar instructions to a cameraman who changes his focus to a visual of the protests, and answers a phone call from an unknown person in which she

assures that the protest will not be shown. This is a deliberate attempt to portray the summit as a hopeful and peaceful organization against terrorism to the whole world, and quash the possibility of protests and unrest towards western interference on eastern land. This echoes Baudrillard's view on how reality is presented. The reporting of the event can be posited as a third order simulation, where the real and the representation becomes detached from each other. The event is presented as a solution to end terrorism, when in fact the effort will lead to further actions adopted by terrorism such as missile strikes and bombings. The protest is fuelled by the factuality, the unmasking of the summit, but the media supported by vested interests want the mask to remain, and portray the governments of the world as anti-violence and anti-terrorism. Therefore, the question of objective truth in these texts open up the biases that can creep into productions such as news and other media. Furthermore, this opens up the question surrounding reality and truth - are both entities really accessible?

### **3 Inaccessibility of truth**

Liotard's and Habermas' opinions on the accessibility of an objective truth stand in opposition to each other. While Habermas calls postmodernism anti-modern as it works against the modernist spirit of a rational consensus, Lyotard says that such a consensus is impossible, and that an objective reality is inaccessible. This stand of Lyotard's reflects the ontological doubt that characterises postmodernism, as is also agreed by Richard Wasson. In *The Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, the existence of the subjectivity in multiple perspectives can be discerned, which makes truth inaccessible. It boils down to the question of who to believe, of whose answer the narrator cannot provide with him being unbiased about the opinions apart from the one opinion he espouses - that Santiago was not the person responsible for Angela Vicario's loss of virginity. In other matters, he presents different perspectives, but abstains from prescribing to anyone. Consider this excerpt from the

novel describing the first time Bayardo San Roman laid eyes on Angela Vicario:

*It had never been too well established how they had met. The landlady of the bachelors' boarding house...told of how he'd been napping in a rocking chair...when Angela Vicario and her mother crossed the square...Bayardo San Roman half-awoke...asked who the young one was...(he) followed them to the other side of the square with his look..."When I wake up," he said, "remind me that I'm going to marry her."...Three people who had been in the boarding house confirmed that the episode had taken place, but four others weren't sure. (27-28)*

As aforementioned, the author lays down the perspectives, but refuses to stick by any. In the novel, the perspectives sometimes cross, disable and negate each other, due to which there exists a lack of objective truth. In contrast to this, an objective truth is present in *Vantage Point*, though it unravels at a slow pace. This can be connected with a phenomenon generally found in artworks, called anamorphosis. Philip Hickin says, 'Anamorphosis refers to an image or drawing which is distorted so that it can only be recognized when viewed in a particular way, or using a special device'. In art that espouses anamorphosis, there exists one vantage point from where the intended meaning can be accessed. But when it comes to the context of social relations and representations, the democracy of this accessibility needs to be questioned. For that, in the case of *Vantage Point*, the audience and the participating characters should be delineated. It is clear to the audience that the president was not shot at. With the information regarding the assassination attempt, he was replaced with a look-alike. But this information is withheld from everyone excluding his wife and immediate security personnel. Therefore, although the objective truth is accessible in the world of the viewers, it is inaccessible in the world of the participants. This undemocratic move in the accessibility of truth takes us back to Baudrillard's view on reality again, where, as discussed, reality and representation is detached, thereby forming a hyperreality.

## 4 Dependence on initial conditions

Bonnie Lenore Kyburz, in her essay “Meaning Finds a Way: Chaos (Theory) and Composition”, talks about her hope at knowing the order that underlies the chaos of the world. Determinism is a philosophy that states that all events, including moral choices are determined by previously occurring causes, and Chaos theory, in mechanics, is ‘the study of apparently random or unpredictable behaviour in systems governed by deterministic laws’ (Britannica). This line of thought directs us to the butterfly effect, which was first observed by American meteorologist Edward Lorenz, and describes the sensitive dependence of events on initial conditions. In both *The Chronicle of a Death Foretold* and the director’s cut version of the film *The Butterfly Effect*, apt presentations can be found, where initial conditions are stressed to have had impacts on the events that transpire.

In *The Butterfly Effect*, Evan Treborn can travel back in time with the aid of a media that can transport him. After discovering this gift, he goes back in time to make changes to some decisive events, following which he returns to the present time, where he suffers seizures due to the intense reconfiguration his brain undergoes. In the present, he finds unpredictable changes that occurred due to the minor changes he made in the past. For example, rescuing everyone from a blockbuster blast as a child results in a present where Evan is disabled and his mother suffers from lung cancer. In the end, through a video tape where his mother is shown going into labour, he travels back to the time when he was a foetus in his mother’s womb, and chokes himself with the umbilical cord. With him not being born, the film ends with a montage of images where everyone supposedly has happy endings. In *The Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, minor changes could have ultimately stopped the murder of Santiago Nasar. Special attention to this aspect is drawn in the final chapter, where a couple of characters talk about the ways in which they could have acted that would have prevented the tragedy, in addition to characters displaying the same sentiment throughout

the novel in different instances. For example, had Divina Flor not told Placida Linero that her son had gone upstairs, Linero would not have locked the front door seconds before her son was murdered right in front of it, thinking that the Vicario twins might come in through there to kill Santiago. Because she locked the door, Santiago could not get into the house and save himself. In a way, every novel and film ever written can be analysed in terms of the initial conditions that determine the events that transpire. But what makes the case of *The Chronicle of a Death Foretold* and *The Butterfly Effect* different is that both texts draw deliberate attention to these conditions. These initial conditions make the plot and contribute to their watchability or readability. Marquez uses them as a tool for remorse that the characters feel at what they could have done, even after years have passed since the incident, while in *The Butterfly Effect*, there exists an attempt to manipulate these conditions and bring changes in the present, with the protagonist ‘playing god’.

## 5 Conclusion

Through the analysis of the presence of objective truth and dependence on initial conditions in *The Chronicle of a Death Foretold* by comparisons with *The Butterfly Effect* and *Vantage Point*, and the phenomenon of anamorphosis, the core text can be labelled as postmodern, as it embodies the poetics associated with it. The journalistic narration of the text is used as an opening point towards the presentation of news and multiple perspectives in reality, which in turn led to the question on objective truth. The arguments were exemplified by the support of texts by postmodern critics such as Baudrillard, Lyotard and so on, which further helped situate the novel in the ambit of postmodern literature. Nevertheless, the analysis shouldn’t be a limitation as the text has various other postmodernities within that are unexplored here, such as magic realism, which is a trademark of Marquezian writing.

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