

**ANNE L. WALSH**  
**CHAOS AND  
COINCIDENCE  
IN CONTEMPORARY  
SPANISH FICTION**



Peter Lang

This book is an investigation of contemporary Spanish fiction, specifically a group of fictional texts (written and film) that appeared in Spain in the first decade of this century (2001-2010). The author focuses on textual analysis and studies how chaos and coincidence appear in these narratives and shape them. The texts analyzed are *Soldados de Salamina* (2001) by Javier Cercas, *Tu rostro mañana* (2002-2007) by Javier Marías, *La catedral del mar* (2006) by Ildefonso Falcones, *Volver* (2006) directed by Pedro Almodóvar, *Instrucciones para salvar el mundo* (2008) by Rosa Montero and *El asedio* (2010) by Arturo Pérez-Reverte, with reference to other texts by these authors also included. Though very different storytellers, these authors share an interest in chaos as a theme and as a narrative device. This work shows that the recurrence in their stories of the theme of chaos indicates a move away from postmodern apathy to a growing sense of empowerment, both for characters and for their readers.

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*For Amy, Daniel, Kieran, Chloe & Brian*

*Go dtuga sciatháin an fheileacáin póg don ghrian  
Is go n-aimsí do ghualainn le luí air  
Chun ádh, sonas agus saibhreas a bhronnadh oraibh,  
Inniu, amárach agus san am atá le teacht*

*May the wings of the butterfly kiss the sun  
And find your shoulder to light on  
To bring you luck, happiness and riches  
Today, tomorrow and beyond*





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## Foreword

The following chapters will investigate the relationship of a selection of fictional works that have appeared in Spain during the first ten years of the new millennium, specifically from 2001 to 2010, with a phenomenon which has been labelled ‘chaos theory’ or ‘chaotics’. It is not intended to prove the scientific validity of this theory. Rather, following an explanation of certain elements that have become popularized, it will be shown how ‘chaos’ has become both a theme and a narratological device.

The notion of chaos has been present in society as long as there have been societies. For the early Egyptians, the world was surrounded by the waters of chaos, while the giant serpent, Apophis, dwelt in the underworld and represented the chaotic forces which had to be overcome each night so that the sun, the god Re, could be reborn. For the Greeks and Romans, chaos was the yawning void out of which the world evolved. Likewise, in Chinese mythology, chaos was the prequel to the binary order of yin and yang, male and female; heaven and earth, light and darkness.<sup>1</sup> Chaos, then, has often been considered the precursor of order and, as such, something that is not bound by the laws of nature, or, at least, the Newtonian ones, for it is before or outside of nature. However, this notion has been questioned by scientists (particularly in the realms of physics and mathematics), with their findings leading to an interest by critical theorists. Chaos theory has been applied to various conditions, for, as James Gleick points out, ‘Chaos breaks across the lines that separate scientific disciplines. Because it is a science of the global nature of systems, it

1 See C. Scott Littleton, *Mythology, The Illustrated Anthology of World Myth and Storytelling* (London: Duncan Baird, 2002). For Egyptian mythology, see pp.8-80; For Greek and Roman mythology, see pp.136-247; For Chinese mythology, see pp. 390-448;

has brought together thinkers from fields that had been widely separated'.<sup>2</sup> Those fields include that of literary criticism, following from the impact of theories of chaos on popular imagination. Since the 1980s, in particular, evidence has been gathering that seems to prove the presence of chaos as a key ingredient in a postmodern world, both in its reality and in fictional portrayals of that reality. For post-modernists, chaos is inescapable and cyclical, an apt metaphor for twentieth-century ideas of the circularity of history, economics, environmental catastrophes and so on. Mention may only be made of the present European economic crisis to bring to mind images of bubbles bursting, with the consequent imagery of the circular nature of the global economy.

The impact in literary fields has been two-fold, at least. Chaos has been either used as an element of fiction or chaos theorists have approached fictional texts with the idea of applying their theory to uncover previously unremarked elements. The latter phenomenon has produced uneven and, as some have said, misguided results.<sup>3</sup> For Pamela Gossin, the tendency to compare the two domains (literary criticism and chaos theory) is of little use unless it is followed by greater critical reflection, something that does not always ensue:

The most frequent use of chaos theory in literary criticism involves drawing a metaphoric comparison of some kind between specific aspects of the two domains [...]. The general concept of orderly disorder or 'order in chaos' finds ready literary analogues in writers who push the limits of language and sense (e.g. James Joyce) or emphasise the elusive nature of order and form (e.g.

- 2 James Gleick, *Chaos: Making a New Science* (New York: Penguin, 1987), p.5.
- 3 See, for example, Carl Matheson and Evan Kirchhoff, 'Chaos and Literature', *Philosophy and Literature*, 21, 1 (1997), 28-45. This article provides a good background to the rise of chaos theory and its application by literary critics as well as a critique of the flaws in that application. It is particularly convincing regarding the unhelpfulness of a purely scientific relationship (with stress made on terms such as 'fractals', 'bifurcation', 'fold' and so on). However, on another level, it would seem that popular notions of chaos have been influenced, if not shaped, by chaos science, particularly regarding the idea of order within disorder, thus making such ideas useful as a means of uncovering trends in fiction that forms part of popular culture.

Herman Melville). However, such comparisons often remained too general to prove of lasting value, for there is little of inherent interest in showing significant similarities between chaos science and literature if the comparisons are not then put to further use or submitted to critical reflection.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, the application of ideas of chaos to literature is not always a happy one. Nonetheless, it is an established critical approach with strong advocates.<sup>5</sup> Bearing all the debate in mind, the aim of this study is to uncover the presence of chaos as a theme and to illustrate that in certain recent Spanish fictional texts, its presence indicates a desire to break out of the vicious circle of postmodern apathy and offer readers a renewed sense of purpose, with an underlying theme of solidarity, the ability to walk in the shoes of another, to bridge the gap with 'the other', as the only way forward. As such, it neither needs to verify nor disprove the science of chaos but, rather, to illustrate how changed popular notions of chaos come into focus within the chosen texts.

To achieve this aim, three aspects of chaos theory will be discussed in particular, all of which will be further explained in chapter one.<sup>6</sup> First, the idea that life is filled with random and coincidental events that lead to unpredictable outcomes will be seen to belong to a view of the world more in keeping with twentieth-century concepts. Due to several scientists, particularly the meteorologist Edward N. Lorentz, questions are being asked about the nature of

4 Pamela Gossin, *Encyclopedia of Literature and Science* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002), p.74.

5 One of the most helpful chaos theorists is N. Katherine Hayles whose many critical works offer a clear insight into the processes of chaos theory as well as the advantages to be found in its application to the study of literature. See particularly 'Chaos as Orderly Disorder: Shifting Ground in Contemporary Literature and Science', *New Literary History*, Vol. 20, 2, (Winter, 1989) 305-22 and *Chaos Bound: Orderly Disorder in Contemporary Literature and Science* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990).

6 There are many other aspects of chaos theory that could, perhaps, serve to throw light on these texts (for example, the idea of strange or chaotic attractors, self-similarity, the Mandelbrot set, bifurcation, the domino effect, and so on) but for the purposes of maintaining order and not imitating chaotic patterns, it was felt that clarity would be gained through limiting the aspects considered to three.

chaos and events that have long seemed random are now deemed not to be so. The most popular example is that of the weather and the imagery often used is the idea of a butterfly which, if it flaps its wings in the Amazon basin, causes changed weather patterns, perhaps even a cyclone, to occur on the other side of the world. Lorentz's discovery that slight changes to initial conditions, such as the rhythm, intensity or even absence of the flapping of a wing, can cause vast differences in outcome has become popularized to mean that if initial circumstances are changed in any way, that change can have a significant impact on the final results in anything, from match scores, through world economy, to life itself.

Secondly, due to this 'sensitivity to initial conditions', there is a link between what happened in the past and present circumstances. However, unlike the ideas in vogue in postmodern Spain, for instance, knowing what happened in the past does not necessarily mean that a repetition of those events is either predictable or avoidable. For one thing, it is impossible to reconstruct the past completely and, therefore, our knowledge can only be limited. For another, present circumstances are different so, as the present, which contains within it those initial circumstances that will lead us to the future, these new initial conditions must, inevitably lead to different outcomes. In other words, though there is a strong link between the future and the past, we are not in a position to predict the future for our knowledge of the past is uneven, subjective, limited and will always be so. Furthermore, even if we regain a coherent memory of the past, there is no guarantee that similar actions to those that occurred in that past will lead to similar outcomes for there will always be differences, no matter how slight.

Thirdly, another popularized image, that of Niels Fabian Helge Von Koch's famous snowflake, has impacted on the notion of what is and is not possible. In short, this snowflake, made up of an infinite number of triangles, proved that infinity can be enclosed in a finite space, a completely counter-intuitive idea. Again, in popular culture, such counter-intuitive facts have been taken to imply that, for example, within the finite space of the earth, there are infinite



repetitions (known in mathematical science as fractals) possible, none necessarily exactly the same for each will be influenced by initial circumstances that are slightly different. In other words, each individual is a repetition but each, paradoxically, is different, opening up the possibilities of infinite different futures not impacted by an ever-repeating past, again challenging the circular nature of postmodern history.

Following an introductory chapter where these notions are explored in more detail, subsequent chapters will examine a series of stories that have appeared in Spain in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Their creators are well-known storytellers with a large following both in Spain and abroad and each will have a chapter dedicated to examining the theme of chaos as it appears in one (or more) of their fictions. Thus, the focus of chapter two will be Javier Cercas's *Soldados de Salamina* (2001). Chapter three will look at *Tu rostro mañana* (2002-2007) by Javier Marías. Ildefonso Falcones's international best seller, *La catedral del mar* (2006) will occupy chapter four while Pedro Almodóvar's *Volver*, first screened in that same year, will be the focus of chapter five. Rosa Montero's dramatically entitled *Instrucciones para salvar el mundo* (2008) is the subject of chapter six while Arturo Pérez-Reverte's *El asedio* will be used as the final text to be analysed in chapter seven.

Coincidentally, though not randomly, all of these were born within the same period of ten years (approximately) and, as such, have had similar experiences of Spain's past (their initial conditions). However, due, perhaps, to sensitivity to such conditions, they have all chosen to tell very different stories. The task here is to discover an area of overlap which may mark a particular trend in contemporary Spanish fiction of the early days of the new millennium. It will be argued that postmodern chaos, with its sense of powerlessness, apathy and disillusion has given way to a new interpretation. Now, a lack of predictability is just a symptom of current limitations and, to be able to overcome feelings of powerlessness, what is needed is to take action, any action. Furthermore, the type of action that will lead to a greater sense of happiness, satisfaction and fulfilment, if only for a