



Garro's Baroque Theatre: How *Recollections* is a Reality Blur

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Illusion plays an important role in Baroque art. Through a masterful use of techniques of deception, artists could rupture the threshold between reality and fiction. Baroque art forms are exemplary of viewer trickery, playing with the senses to obscure truth. The most important sense which artists control is sight; through elaborate detail, colors, and scenery, artists overwhelm the eyes, creating tantalizing uncertainty in their viewer's mind. Many art forms, including paintings, sculptures, and even architecture, utilize illusion to create, what I deem, the "reality blur." While plastic artists do play with sight, an even more prominent example of Baroque reality blur is found in theater; as an art form of embrasure, the stage corrals the viewers' eyes, ears, and emotions into believing the fictional events and characters on stage are real. In Baroque theater, the reality blur is frequently concocted when historical happenstances collide unabashedly with fiction, making the division between reality and fantasy seemingly impossible. Illusion becomes the main feature as viewers themselves become entangled in the imaginative world. Elena Garro presents Baroque theater in her 1969 novel, *Recollections of Things to Come*. Though externally, *Recollections* appears to be a mere piece of literary fiction, a deeper examination discloses its connection to Baroque theater and the brilliant illusions it plays on readers. Garro's use of

Baroque tropes—space, time, and light—coalesce with Baroque illusionism—through reality blur, character dualities, and the marvelous real—to forward *Recollections* as a literary manifestation of Baroque theater.

Before devling into Garro's novel, it is important to first define Baroque's characteristics. William Shakespeare's plays are great examples of Baroque theater. He instinctively "appeal[ed] to the imaginary, [and] he demonstrat[ed] the remarkable power of the chosen mode of representation in creating the strange and the marvelous" (Eriksen 9-10). In each play, the separation between reality and fiction is obsolete while events and characters appear undeniably real; even fantastical elements are believable. In his memorable comedy, *As You Like It*, character Jacque professes:

All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts...
(Shakespeare II.VII.139-142).

He beckons toward the essence of Baroque theater; outwardly, the world is assumed real, but intrinsically, reality is nothing more than fiction. Egginton describes how, in *As You Like It*, Shakespeare masterfully describes "the great



Illustration 1: Rembrandt, *The Night Watch*

uncertainty ... in the world as stage, however, is only tenuously held in check by a certain fiction ... that nothing within meditation can offer, that of immediacy, of the presence to itself that the theater of truth never ceases to seek, even if it was never really there” (55). Shakespeare further plays with the “mediation,” recognizing deception in the dual lives of his “players,” commenting on their multi-functional roles as people *and* actors. Shakespeare confirmed that the “ornateness and rhetoric” of Baroque theater were “firmly committed to the illusion of reality” (Martin 13). His integration of deception through illusion set an early precedent for the Baroque age of theater by incorporating reality blur into his fictional plays.

Reality blur is a term which accurately describes Baroque art. Through several mediums, the artist manipulates the viewer’s senses into submission; with virtually no consent, viewers are coerced into seeing fiction as an illusionary “truth.” *The Inordinate Eye*, by Lois Parkinson Zamora, carefully examines the spirit of reality blur, investigating how “Baroque illusionism subverts this kind of re-presentation by calling attention to its artifice, to its perspectival

manipulations, and thus to the problematic nature of referentiality as such” (243). Though viewers may doubt the illusion, ultimately, the Baroque steadfastly triumphs through ornate detail and constant reality-churning events to create an irreparable rupture of the world.

The vehicles for reality blur in Baroque art are dominated by three main tropes—space, light, and time. John Martin, author of *Baroque*, examines the roles each trope plays in disturbing reality in various Baroque paintings, sculptures, and architecture. Let us begin with “space.” According to Martin, space is not only the measurable length of a room; spatiality is also the shattered barrier which separates imagination from reality. Through space, the artist is able to “conceive of the subject represented as existing in a space coextensive with that of the observer” (Martin 155). The visual representation on the canvas comes to life and ushers the reader into a fictional world.

The most predominate example of spatial “coextension” was illustrated by Rembrandt in his painting *The Night Watch* (Below). Attention is drawn to the center of the piece where a man stands with an outreaching hand. The hand breaches the plane of fiction by thrusting itself through the picture’s plane which “accentuates the illusion of depth” (Huddleston 18). Spatially, the man’s hand is representative of reality blur; though he extends himself through the fictional space, his hand acts as a mere re-presentation. In actualism, viewers know that breaching the barrier into a fictional world is impossible; audiences consider accepting his extended hand, thus becoming a part of the painted realm. Reality is blurred as the two worlds join through ambiguous illusion.

Another Baroque trope is “light.” Light is a common tool used for manipulation; sight is easily distorted by extreme brightness or darkness. Careful execution of light is important

for creating reality blur insofar as the correct use through “vivid relief” obscures truth by casting knowledge into an “impenetrable shadow” (Martin 223). Reality blur is validated in “shadows”; the hazy overcast sensationalizes truth, creating wonderment about existence for viewers. This type of uncertainty is often associated with children and ghosts. At night, in extreme darkness, shadows play tricks on the imagination and deceive children into seeing figures that do not exist. In Baroque art, shadows are used in much the same way.



Illustration 2: Rembrandt, *Blinding of Samson*

A spectacular representation of shadow illusionism is again found in Rembrandt; his painting, *Blinding of Samson*, shows expert execution of light as an element of reality blur through sight manipulation. At first glimpse, viewers are cognizant of a struggling man; however, closer review reveals up to seven figures in the scene who are often initially overlooked. Casting light on certain figures and actions, while leaving others in darkness, enables artists to gain full control of viewer experience and knowledge. Likewise, light acts as a key feature of reality blur. How can viewers separate reality from fiction if they cannot see?

The third Baroque trope Martin prescribes is “time.” Though temporality is difficult to define,

Martin provides a collective understanding of time as a “theme [where] human life begins to take on more pointed meaning, and art itself seems actuated by the restless flow of time” (197). Time creates an illusion of progress derived from a fictional space where its passage signifies unexpected, non-linear movements. Visual representation of time is nearly impossible as time is a theory, not an object. However, the Florentine Codex, drawn and compiled by Franciscan friar Bernardino de Sahagun, captures why the movement of time is an important aspect of reality blur. The codex retells a story through a system of assembled documentation over decades. The non-linear “calendar” oriented fellow missionaries with Aztec culture, providing, amongst other features, vocabulary and historical events (Leon-Pontilla 5). Though the pictures are clear in purpose, time is organized chaotically, not adhering to linear representation. The effect of non-linear time is reality blur; the atypical mode desensitizes reality and constructs a fictional realm of an unregulated sphere of temporality.

Baroque theater employs space, light, and time in a similar fashion as art; the purpose of each trope is to alter reality and create an unexplored, fictional space for viewers and audience members alike. Elena Garro presents her novel, *Recollections of Things to Come*, as an undiscovered gem of Baroque theater. In college, Garro studied theater and choreography. Choreography plays an intrinsic role in theater as it necessitates the integration of Baroque tropes through movement and chronology. In an interview about *Recollections*, Garro gestured to her background in theater, stating “I was a great reader and I liked the theater” (Muncy 23). In addition to her interest in the art form, Garro also implied a personal connection to reality blur. She confessed that she had two roles in life as a parent and an author (Muncy 31). Through parenting, Garro remained grounded to realism;

in authorship, she floated through fantasy.

While her life remained betwixt reality and fiction, so did *Recollections*. Garro felt a deep connection to the Cristero Rebellion, a critical period of religious and political upheaval in Mexico. Being from Mexico herself, Garro experienced many events of the rebellion, and her own life was impacted by the physical and emotional tolls it caused. The novel is set during a period of similar struggle between military, religion, and civilians. The setting, events, characters, and even language in *Recollections* are closely related to the historical rebellion of 1926. For instance, the war cries of the rebellion—"Viva la Virgen de Guadalupe!" (*Long Live the Virgin of Guadalupe*)—are mimicked by several characters. Though the actual phrase appears several times unaltered, a prevalent war cry in the novel is slightly altered—"Long Live Nicolás Moncada!" (Garro 255). The small variation acts as the outreaching hand in Rembrandt's *The Night Watch*. Audiences recognize the explicit relation to history yet are reminded of its fictional basis as the idol becomes a character.

Before diving into the core theater tropes of *Recollections*, I wish to discuss *A House in the Country* by José Donoso. *Country*, written in 1978, is "a political allegory with echoes of the repressive Pinochet takeover in Chile" ("Pinochet's Chile"). Donoso masterfully manipulates Baroque theater to discuss the situation in Chile. Unlike Garro, Donoso's use of theater and reality blur is obvious and overwhelming. The story unfolds in a house where children are involved in a fictitious play, *La Marquise Est Sortie à Cinq Heures* (*The Marquise went out/left at 5 O'Clock*), where each child is assigned a role. The narrator makes constant references to stage "curtains" (Donoso 294) and "fictitious" nature of the play (178). Even further, all three Baroque tropes uphold

significant roles to restrict any comprehensible understanding of "truth." Reality blur occurs simultaneously for readers and characters through blinding uncertainties of control and knowledge instituted by the narrator. The Baroque tropes are spun further into the abyss until the only "reality" accounted for is non-existent. Therefore, while in *Country* Baroque theater is distinct and recognizable to the point of overload, I chose to investigate *Recollections* as Garro sneakily invites Baroque theater into her novel to create (dis)illusionment for readers and characters alike.

The most recognizable features of Baroque theater in *Recollections* are Martin's tropes where Garro integrates space, light, and time into her novel to pervert reality. Spatially, Garro entangles reader-space and novel-space by utilizing the pronoun "we." After Ixtepec is seized by militia, the narrator asks "What were we waiting for?" (Garro 152). By addressing "we," Garro creates depth, inviting reader interaction in a fictional world. Readers access the question as actors, grappling with their own possible reasons for "waiting." The narrator then creates a communal "we," one where lines between the fictional "public" and realistic "private" realms are shattered into oblivion.

Light plays an important role through language as diction becomes an element which both highlights and/or darkens events. When deaths are described in the novel, for example, the narrator only exposes the aftermath; readers are never given details about how deaths occur. The narrator discloses, "Very early on Monday morning the noisy invaders go away, leaving me some dead bodies that are picked up by the municipal government" (Garro 4). Because death transpires off-stage, readers must determine the violent happenstances imaginatively. Light is also used to create "shadows." During a terrifying scene of ambiguity, Luchi's fate is

indeterminable because of darkness; the only image described is the shadow of a young woman, crossing dark terrain; “the street was quiet, the shadows of the trees and walls opposite were motionless” (Garro 218). In both cases, the masterful use of diction works similarly to theater; moments of grotesqueness occur off-stage, while terrifying scenes take place amidst fog and shadows. *Recollections* erases lines between reality and fiction through sight limitation, which effectively disables the readers from grasping a firm understanding of the literary situation.

Garro also blurs reality through non-linear time. Similar to the Florentine Codex, the events which transpire throughout *Recollections* are not described linearly. Instead, events are alluded to as a shift from normal time; scenes often jump between the past and the future without warning. More importantly, time is frequently deemed “motionless.” The narrator describes Martín Moncada’s sense of time as existing in a frozen state:

After dinner, when Félix stopped the clocks, he let his un-lived memory run freely. The calendar also imprisoned him in an anecdotic time and deprived him of the other time that lived within him. In that time one Monday was all Mondays, words became magic, people changed into incorporeal personages, and landscapes were transmuted into colors. (Garro 15)

Martín floats in a space of “presence and absence” (Zamora 15); though he is present in reality, his mind wanders through a timeless realm of fiction. The book meditates on this presumption, constantly removing “present” time and instead integrating an “absent,” motionless time. The non-linear chronology removes reader knowledge and creates reality blur as readers are prohibited from pinning down a certain time; instead, like the characters, they must float

through fantasy and attempt to capture a glimpse of reality for themselves.

In addition to the aforementioned Baroque tropes, Garro’s careful integration of character dualities and the magical real ground *Recollections* in Baroque theater. As Shakespeare alluded to in *As You Like It*, people are “merely players” with dual roles in reality and in fiction. Four characters in *Recollections* stand true to Shakespeare’s claim: Juan Cariño, General Francisco Rosas, Felipe Hurtado, and Isabel Moncada. Each character is represented as having more than one identity; for the three men, their dualities are illuminated by their nomenclature. The names of the three men—Cariño, Rosas, and Hurtado—work on similar levels of identity. Nomenclature acts as “adornment, costume, gestures, and other theatrical elements [which] serve individuals as indicators of identity” (Flack and Flohr 33). Each character has many names which are indicators of moods and location. Juan Cariño is also Mr. President and the madman; General Francisco Rosas is known as the general, Francisco Rosas, or General Rosas, and Felipe Hurtado’s alias is the Stranger. The function of each name is similar to actors in theater; on stage, actors are known by their character’s name, while off stage, they are known by their “true” identity. For General Francisco Rosas, for instance, the split comes between love and war. He is most “real” in conversation with Julia, his mistress; when he hears about Julia speaking to another man, “*Francisco Rosas* did not look in her direction” (Garro 52; emphasis added). In military company, however, he is “acting”; his true self is with Julia. When asking don Joaquín to join the army, the narrator notes “*The General* called to don Joaquín” (209; emphasis added). Though the separation between identities of each man is subtle, Garro indicates that there is indeed a shift between actor and true-self-identity.

Isabel Moncada is the ideal representation of dual personages. Though she is referred to by a single name, she is described as being “two Isabels, one who wandered through the rooms and the patios, and the other who lived in a distant sphere, fixed in space” (Garro 25). Isabel is a representation of a “radical aesthetic [in the] conception of duplication” (Ellenbogen 27). She has two distinct roles, one located in reality and the other in fantasy. Her dualistic nature directs attention to Baroque illusionism and theater; she is “positioned as being engaged ... in a play of appearance [from]... a model borrowed from the stage” (Egginton 24-5). In reality, Isabel “wanders,” but in fantasy, she exists in “a fixed sphere,” much like an actor. Readers are aware of her existence, though they are uncertain of which Isabel is being described. Her presence creates reality blur by entangling reality so tightly with fiction, that separation becomes nearly impossible.

The final element of *Recollections* is the integration of the magical real—a hybridization of reality and fiction. Magical illusions, such as cigarettes appearing “out of thin air” (Garro 35), indoor hail storms (126-7), and zooming houses (47), are tools of deception frequently used by Garro to erase any sense of reality. Knowing the magical elements in *Recollections* is important for understanding the relationship between reality and fiction insofar as “Magical realist texts question the nature of reality and the nature of its representation... and aim to present a credible version of experienced reality” (Zamora and Faris 500). Alejo Carpentier, renowned Baroque author, coined the term in “On the Baroque and the Magical Real,” defining it as a tension of opposites: “... something that causes admiration because it is extraordinary, excellent, formidable... [but] the extraordinary is not necessarily lovely or beautiful... it is amazing because it is strange. Everything strange, everything amazing, everything that eludes

established norms is marvelous” (Carpentier, *Marvelous Real*, 101). Audiences are meant to believe the illusion, even though they are aware the occurrence is nothing more a deceit of reality.

Although the presence of magical realism in *Recollections* is not as strongly felt as in Carpentier’s *The Kingdom of this World*, where the protagonist shape-shifts into an eagle (180), many “strange” events occur in *Recollections*. Actions, events, and characters are presented with illusionary happenstances, including Felipe Hurtado, Julia Andrade, and the Moncada’s house. When Felipe Hurtado first arrives in Ixtepec, he meets hotelkeeper, don Pepe Ocampo and offers him cigarettes; don Pepe recalls they were “picked... out of thin air” (Garro 35). Later, Felipe Hurtado “passed through [a] storm with [his] lamp still lighted and his clothes and hair dry” (Garro 100). Julia Andrade exhibited magical traits after she causes “a violent blast of hail” to blow through a room (Garro 126-7). Lastly, the Moncada’s home is characterized as owning a “rhythmical, exact life” (Garro 47) and “For a few seconds the whole house zoomed through the sky, [and] became part of the Milky Way” (Garro 29). What do all of the above examples do for *Recollections*? Each situation presents an experience of illusions where “the marvelous opposes the real and also resides within it” (Zamora 146). Though the events may not be conceivable in practice or theory, the imagination argues for the opposite; in fantasy, anything is possible. The characters, though they are only “illusions,” they belong “as much to the external world of reality as to the created world of art” (Martin 161). Though space, light, and time perverts our sense of truth and reality, possibility is gained from the implementation of illusion and fantasy. Is that not the function of theater?

The purpose of Baroque theater is to create effects that are similar to art; to capture fleeting

shots of (dis)illusion for the purpose of blurring the lines between reality and fiction. Though *Recollections* is not an obvious theater text, the deeper allusions to Baroque art tropes create the foundation for theatrical illusionism. Through theater, Garro eliminates distance between reader and novel, encouraging the two to mesh in a communal space of certainty and ambiguity. Her novel is allegorical of terrible destruction for Mexico during a time of great despair; in *Recollections* Garro utilizes Baroque theater to instill a certain catharsis for her characters, readers, and herself. The integration of history through an illusionary play allows Garro to experience the terrible tragedies through a new form of expression: by disassociating events through reality blur. Through amalgamation of Baroque tropes—space, light, and time, with dual identities and magical real, Garro effortlessly spins reality into a “faraway place,” to a theatrical world where both readers and characters are distanced into a sphere of belief and uncertainty (Garro 36). Garro's novel leads the reader through a realm of magical happenstance, a realm of altered reality, and a realm where anything, and nothing, is possible.



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