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## Interrogating Monstrosity and the Grotesque in Griselda Gambaro's *Nada que ver* and *Nada que ver con otra historia*

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**ABSTRACT:** This article examines the use of the grotesque in Griselda Gambaro's play, *Nada que ver*, and her novel *Nada que ver con otra historia*. The discussion first establishes key intertextual connections between Gambaro's work and other literary and theatrical antecedents, to then focus in detail on Gambaro's own use of the grotesque. Particular attention is paid to the ways in which the grotesque acts as a differentiating trope built around discrepancies between the dictatorial state and the monstrous. This contrast is epitomised at one extreme through the allusions to Onganía's regime in Argentina and, at the other, through a man-made creature that has a leading role in both texts. This article argues that, in Gambaro's work, the grotesque constitutes a new value of embodiment, subverting and generating practices of visibility which allow for participatory spectatorship and political readings.

**KEYWORDS:** Griselda Gambaro, *Nada que ver*, *Nada que ver con otra historia*, Grotesque, Monster, Dictatorship, Intertextuality, Latin American theatre

Griselda Gambaro's play *Nada que ver* (1972) opens in an evocative, albeit bizarre, setting. The curtains rise to reveal a messy room with a bed, two chairs and a table full of an eclectic mix of objects with a clear "mad professor" bent. There are books, a toolbox, insecticide, bread, surgical masks, a shovel, a broom, and rickety electric panels with loose cables. The main character, Manolo, a shabby looking veterinary student, is already on set, absorbed reading a book. He is wearing a grey lab coat and thick glasses. We are later informed that he had brought fragments of dead people and animals to the room in order to create a new body so as to imbue it with life. Immediately after this scene is set, Manolo starts spraying insecticide and killing cockroaches with a hammer as he shouts: "cucarachas de mierda" (41). He then uses the decaying electronics to create a current. A creature, hidden up to this point behind a room divider, begins to move and emit sounds. After this screen is removed for the audience to see the whole setting, we are introduced to a strange and misshapen being, characterised in the stage notes as having the appearance of Frankenstein's monster "pero más pintarrajeado e ingenuamente horrendo" (44). Both Manolo and the new being then ponder together as to what is the best name for the new creature, including the possibility of the clearly mocking diminutive, "Franki", but they settle on "Toni" as the most appropriate name, and the one the creature likes the most. After this, Manolo introduces himself to the new being as an aspiring vet and creator of bombs. This exchange, together with Manolo's act of creation of new artificial life, his unkempt appearance, and the assortment of disparate objects in the room, suggests from the outset that we are seeing a distorted version of Mary Shelley's account of creation in her book *Franken-*

*stein or the Modern Prometheus* (1818). For the spectators familiar with the famous cinematic adaptation of Shelley's text by James Whale from 1931, in which the dashing Colin Clive works in a neat laboratory to create a new being (Boris Karloff), the ramshackle setting will probably be even more strangely evocative of Shelley's story.

The first act of Gambaro's play is thus clearly delivered so as to effect a crucial sense of the grotesque. Its eccentric reminders of other texts and representations not only hark back to Shelley's novel, and its renowned cinematic adaptations, but also to Gambaro's own nearly homonymous novel entitled *Nada que ver con otra historia*, written a year prior to, and directly informing, the theatrical script. Indeed, the entirety of Gambaro's text seems to be set for contrast and comparison: first with *Frankenstein* as a clear literary antecedent; and secondly by using two different genres (her novel and her play) to focus attention on the divergences that arise from approaching that antecedent through this bifurcated prism. If intertextuality customarily places a text within a wider literary fabric, embedding implicit meaning in its references, Gambaro adds ramified perspectives and the grotesque to this process. In so doing, she brings distorting and peripheral plots to bear on a well-known English classic while at the same time generating a mocking *mise en abyme* effect. The grotesque thus forces attention onto differences and has a major role in assigning meaning. The attention of the spectator and reader is directed onto the precariousness of Manolo's scientific equipment, and the bizarre creature Manolo manages to fashion nevertheless. However, as I explain in this study, meaning is not only generated by the employment of intertextual and com-

ic twists, but also by inviting the reader and spectator to contrast Manolo's creation with the regime that ruled in Argentina at the time in which the texts are set. As such, the grotesque in Gambaro's work not only determines the tone of the intertextual dialogue, but also functions as a structure of signification, shaping essential elements: the theatrical style of the play, the hybrid and ill-proportioned nature of Manolo's creation in both the novel and the theatrical version, as well as the texts' political significance. Therefore, in this study, I will explore the precise ways in which, in Gambaro's work, the grotesque is a fictive practice that has the potential to re-visualise intertextual relations while placing an important weight on the socio-political import of the works.<sup>1</sup>

The analysis of the grotesque in *Nada que ver* and *Nada que ver con otra historia* has received little critical attention to date. In fact, the only scholar to carry out a study in that area is Dianne Marie Zandstra, and with specific reference to the novel. Zandstra sees the grotesque and the monstrous as having a key role in that work, characterising it as "embodying resistance" and as a "means of examining human nature [...] while calling into question the meaning of humanity" in Juan Carlos Onganía's regime in Argentina (1966-1970), which is subtly suggested as the historical backdrop in both of these pieces written by Gambaro. Zandstra's study is helpful in identifying the critical nature of the grotesque, but her focus on just Gambaro's novel leaves out the important significance of the play to the analysis of this trope. Zandstra locates the grotesque in the novel in what she identifies as an "unsettling lack of distinction between Manolo as a man and Toni as a monster" (29). While Zandstra's work has therefore looked at the ways in which the monster can be seen as humanised in the context of the novel, my own study is instead concerned with the importance of the *differentiating* character of the monstrous and the grotesque, and in both Gambaro's novel and play. Indeed, as I explore further in the following sections, in the hands of Gambaro, the powerful aggregation of the grotesque and the monstrous develops into a contrasting instrument of visibility that opposes the insidiousness of the dictatorial state.

Among scholars who have looked at intertextuality in Gambaro's works, Claire Taylor examines *Nada que ver con otra historia*, however she does so to review the analogies between body and text in that novel and Gambaro's later work, *Dios no nos quiere contentos* (1979), to argue that bodies and discourses in these texts are constructed within problematic power relations. In this way, these novels are "situated both within and without the master discourse, striving to find a voice for the repressed", which Taylor identifies as being the feminine in patriarchy, and the marginalized under dictatorial regimes (23). For that scholar, these works by Gambaro evince her search for self-expression, which includes both the construction of a feminine voice and a recodifying of previous textual paradigms in a local context.

Sandra Messinger Cypess's study is part of the scant body of work that considers both *Nada que ver* and *Nada que ver con otra historia*, opening up fruitful ways of understanding intertextuality in

Gambaro's texts, although not dealing with the grotesque. Cypess's article traces some of the links between Gambaro's work and that of Mary Shelley, focusing on how the monster created in the Argentine's texts "rather than a creature of Gothic horror, [...] evolves into a compassionate, caring and sensitive figure" (354). Cypess's analysis of the *paraleptic* nature of the titles of both Gambaro's novel and play is particularly informative. As she explains, through the use of *paralepsis* "it appears that one is denying what is really being affirmed, so that the writer or speaker feigns to dismiss an idea while really stressing it" (349). For that scholar, the textual references to Shelley's work are disguised in Gambaro's titles "in a *paraleptic* manner" (349) for both titles use the colloquial expression "nada que ver" to assert that they have nothing to do with anything else and, in the case of the title of the novel, that it bears no relationship to any other story or history. Cypess also deems the titles ambiguous, for the texts never clarify what exactly "each work is not supposed to have anything to do with" (349).

In an interview in 1982, Gambaro also observed the *paraleptic* nature of both the novel's and the play's titles, although she did not explicitly mention the rhetorical device but rather highlighted the intertextual value and the connections with the socio-political context: "la llamo *Nada que ver* porque *tiene que ver* con la historia de Frankenstein y con nuestra propia realidad" (34). Adding to Cypess's and Gambaro's observations, it should further be noted that the polysemic title of Gambaro's play, *Nada que ver*, can also be considered *paraleptic* in that it affirms there is nothing to be seen in a theatrical composition written for performance – which by its very genre invites one *to see* – and whose meanings and imagery are particularly invested in its own *visuality*, as can be seen in my description above of Act I. As a *paraleptic* title, and its assertion that there is nothing to see, *Nada que ver* is also *meta-theatrical*, in that it draws attention to the relationship of those seeing and what is being seen in the theatrical space, whilst complicating notions of spectatorship.

Therefore, while the above scholars' works have been instructive and illuminating for my own study, my account is instead concerned with the ways in which the grotesque and monstrous, in both Gambaro's novel and play, determine the contours of political allusions and imagery. My study also shares an interest with notions of intertextuality, but my readings place emphasis on the grotesque as related to those notions, including Gambaro's drawing from a theatrical style called *grotesco criollo* and her use of that mode as a productive, albeit distorting, textual and bodily trope. My concern is fundamentally with the distinct visual experience generated by the creature-monster and the grotesque, in that they are used as tools for demonstrating the complexities of visual dynamics in society under political repression. While the monstrous is contingent on Toni's body and the grotesque exceeds it, both are, however, categories of representation that do not simply function to show (or 'mostrar', as implied in one of the etymological meanings of the word monster) but constitute new values of embodiment through

which we can pierce the apparent incorporeality of the repressive regime. In the following section, I review Gambaro's borrowings from the *grotesco criollo* in order to scrutinise important theatrical intertextual relations at stake in *Nada que ver* and *Nada que ver con otra historia*.

### Grotesco criollo

In several interviews, Gambaro stated that her work stems from Argentine dramaturgy, specifically from a current called *grotesco criollo*, inaugurated in the early 1920s. When Gambaro was directly asked by interviewers about her influences, while asserting the importance of the Argentine mode, she insisted on the lack of connections between her theatre and European absurdism, commonly ascribed to her plays by critics. For Gambaro, the theatre of the absurd contrasts instead with her own (and Argentine) preoccupations, for the former "is so metaphysical [and] presents the world as a fact with inexplicable laws [whereas] our theatre is much more connected with a social element, and our plays deal directly with political and social content. We also believe that society is modifiable" (1987a, 195). Gambaro posits the tradition of the *grotesco criollo* which, as I explain in detail below, closely engages with bodily and socio-political experiences, as more suited to the task of interrogating the realities of Argentina. Furthermore, the view that "society is modifiable" can be traced back to the questioning of the status quo in both Gambaro's play and novel, as well as her positing of alternative, albeit unreal and comedic paradigms. Several critics such as Catherine Boyle, Sharon Magnarelli, Becky Boling, Peter Roster, Nora Mazziotti and Joanne Pottlitzer endorse Gambaro's own appraisal of the influence of the *grotesco criollo* in her work.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the national circumscription of the *grotesco criollo* as referred to by Gambaro, the genesis of this genre can also be traced to European sources, more specifically the output of a group of playwrights in Italy at the beginning of the twentieth century called *teatro grottesco* and whose main exponent was Luigi Pirandello (1867-1936). Further influences on the development of the Argentine *grotesco criollo* include the jocular and popular short play named *sainete porteño* (a comic sketch from Buenos Aires) which, in turn, combined elements from nineteenth-century Spanish *zarzuela* with the *género chico* (literally "little genre", denoting a short and light play accompanied by music). Despite its diverse roots, *grotesco criollo* was intrinsically connected to social experiences in Argentina, particularly those of the immigrants who encountered extremely harsh living conditions when they arrived in the country at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century. Indeed, some of the *grotesco criollo*'s most important characters are derived from the social types found in those migratory waves. For David Viñas, the lives of these characters, as depicted in *grotesco criollo* theatre, provide a strikingly realist note to contrast against the triumphalist discourses of integration during the period when immigration to Argentina was at its height. Indeed, lack of as-

similation coupled with the need for social cohesion, as experienced mainly by immigrants, are amongst the key themes developed in plays of the *grotesco criollo* genre (73). As I will explore further, the theme of social disunity (albeit without a focus on immigrants) is a strong element in Gambaro's theatre, which posits questions about what kinds of social and political bodies can exist and survive at times of political unrest.

Another important aspect of *grotesco criollo* that resonates with Gambaro's work is that the genre often focuses on a character pitted against "un determinado orden oficial alienante e injusto" (Kaiser-Lenoir 9). This is certainly the case in both of Gambaro's works examined in this study, where the main characters find themselves in conflict with the official authoritarian order established by a repressive state. Other echoes from *grotesco criollo* appear in Gambaro's work more generally, such as the theme of failure, characters displaying a combination of bitter and ludicrous qualities to provoke mixed reactions in the audience, the rejection of the status quo and the individual's lack of control over their own personal and social circumstances.

Both in *grotesco criollo* and in Gambaro's pieces, body and language act as signifiers of the grotesque, giving this trope a physical form. Viñas situates the *grotesco criollo*'s key linguistic materialisation in the characters' use of *Lunfardo*, an amalgam-language that developed in Argentina in the wake of multiple waves of large-scale immigration (73). The hybrid nature of *Lunfardo* gives it a "grotesque" quality; it is a linguistic mixture, a clear departure from normative language, both difficult and distorting, containing traces of the incomplete assimilation of first-generation immigrants. Thus, for Viñas, the challenges that *Lunfardo* poses to communication are the "expresión de una contradicción social" (89) that can be located in the body itself. For this reason, Viñas uses bodily metaphors such as "incontinencia expresiva" (87) and "desgarramiento personal" (89) to define the *Lunfardo* and characterise it as an expression of how language dwells in the body and bodily experiences. Through their use of *Lunfardo*, the characters of *grotesco criollo* live out a conflict and a sense of alienation, not only with reference to wider society but also concerning their own thoughts and their linguistic and communicative abilities.

In keeping with Viñas's observations about the social contradictions and "expressive incontinence" evidenced by the use of *Lunfardo* in *grotesco criollo*'s pieces, we can identify in Gambaro's play an important instance of linguistic dysfunction in which communicative limitations also mark out a character, distinguishing her from Manolo, Brigita María (Manolo's girlfriend), and Toni. In Act II, after the assassination of Brigita María (who was presumably killed by the police or the military), Manolo decides to engineer a new being modelled on his deceased partner, mainly as a new companion for Toni. The scene opens in the same jumbled room as in Act I, with the divider extended behind the table. The electric panel however has been revamped and it now includes multicoloured light bulbs. Manolo is wearing his same old lab coat and there is a birthday cake

on the table. After Toni enters the room, Manolo conveys his wish to create a new companion as his present for Toni's birthday.<sup>3</sup> Toni argues that such a resuscitation is impossible and that the reconstruction of Brigita María is a hopeless endeavour. Manolo generates his life-giving current nonetheless, and shortly, a stammering and hollow voice begins to sing "Happy Birthday" in English. The stage directions specify that the singing is followed by the appearance of a figure that looks like Brigita María, "es ella, pero claramente la imagen femenina del monstruo de Frankenstein, las costuras en la frente, la palidez. Viste como Brigita María, pero a través de una transformación grotesca" (100).

The new creature's ability to sing "Happy birthday" might initially suggest that she could be an interactive companion for Toni, and this certainly appears to be the hope that motivates Manolo. However, very soon we realise that the execution of Manolo's idea does not live up to his satisfaction or expectations. The new, or replica, Brigita María does not stop singing when they ask her to and keeps breaking into uncontrollable and imbecilic laughter. Toni decides to ask the creature if it hurt when she was shot to death, but the replica simply replies by once more intoning "Happy Birthday". We become aware then that this new creature is more life-less than life-like, closer to a machine than to a being like Toni. Unlike the human Brigita María, who was shot for participating in acts of resistance against the repressive state, the replica's lack of communicative reason evinces her failed autonomy. The creature's mechanical and repetitive answers clearly account for her limitations, showing the spectators a noticeable exacerbation of the communicative difficulties that affected the characters of *grotesco criollo* plays. As a replica of Brigita María, the automata created by Manolo also interrogates the possibility of political action and free will under the Onganía's regime and seems to pose questions about how humans should function in such a context.

Manolo's intentions to resuscitate Brigita María are partly driven by his desire to give her a fairer death than her previous, unjust, and politically-motivated one and, during Act II, we hear Manolo wish the new creature a "Happy Death": "que esta vez tengas feliz muerte" (103). Although *this* death does not take place on stage, it seems to both signal and loom over the ending of the drama. As the play's finale, after Toni blows out the candle on his birthday cake, Manolo and the replica Brigita María resume singing "Happy Birthday", at first together, but ultimately only the creature's voice lingers on as the lights dim and the play ends in complete darkness. This last act shows how the lethal effects of political repression are far-reaching and tragic: the reproduction of a life without the right to free speech is a sad and alienating simulacrum, and Brigita María's death a blow without resolution. Gambaro's use of echoes and distortion is, in this instance, a clear political commentary. By the end of the play the voices that previously held the stage are reduced to a hollow hum, sounding in the darkness where there is, quite literally, nothing to see.

Gambaro clearly draws from *grotesco criollo*, but in order to

account for a different kind of social contradiction and alienation from that of the immigrant experience, instead placing the Onganía regime's political intolerance under the spotlight. Despite some critics questioning the connections between *grotesco criollo* and Gambaro's work, my comparisons above show that both *Nada que ver* and *Nada que ver con otra historia* clearly evoke that representational tradition and some of the staging protocols it entails though, of course, this intertextuality is not unidirectional. Gambaro herself clarified that, though the grotesque is but one genre, her own approach introduces changes by making it more resonant with contemporary events and adding, in turn, a more acerbic and nostalgic tone (In Seoane 165). For example, if we take the case of miscommunication, this might be one of the most significant imprints of *grotesco criollo* in Gambaro's oeuvre, but also one that has clear resonances with the theatre of the absurd. What becomes especially important in *Nada que ver* is that the continuous and insistent linguistic mix-ups not only strike a comedic note, but also make evident, as Terry Eagleton affirms of Pirandello's absurdist plays, that "a world without shared meanings is a violent one" (239). The threat of torture, abuse of power, and unjust execution progressively looms over the dialogues and the characters' misapprehensions in *Nada que ver* and other of Gambaro's plays such as *Las paredes* (1966), *Información para extranjeros* (1973), and *El campo* (1967). In the Argentine's theatre therefore, miscommunication is both a way of dialoguing with theatrical traditions and a form of engagement with political events. The overall effect of the intertextual relations I have highlighted thus far also demonstrates how Gambaro uses diverse traditions to shake the spectator's or the reader's confidence in the familiar and the customary.

### Visual practices

I would like now to delve into the complex operations of seeing that are explored in *Nada que ver* and *Nada que ver con otra historia*. Both texts make use of theatrical descriptions or narration to portray the body of Toni as an amalgam of animal and human parts, with visible stitches and grafts, describing him as extremely tall and clumsy, with difficulties moving and walking. They also highlight his other physical features such as bristle-like hair and the strange nylon lump on his head, protruding silver teeth, rosy cheeks, and his eerie smile. He is, indeed, a bizarre version of a human and a comedic counterpart to Frankenstein's monster. The depiction of Toni arrests our attention for, as Geoffrey Harpham writes about the grotesque in other works, his features are "neither so regular" to "settle easily into our categories, nor so unprecedented that we do not recognise them at all" (3). For the spectator and reader, there is something meaningful to be learnt about Toni through the contrasting drive set in motion by the grotesque: humanoid and parodic, this character destabilises mimetic representation and biological congruity, forging new modes of visual perception necessarily linked to multiplicity.

Both of the Gambaro texts studied here also stage several events which foreground the centrality of the gaze whilst relating to the grotesque. Seeing, or its impossibility, like intertextuality, is a function that these texts seek to multiply. For instance, the description of Brigita María's killing highlights the simultaneous annulment of her ability to see, as she is shot by a bullet that empties her eye socket: "Le habían vaciado un ojo a Brigita María" (56). In the novel, on hearing this appalling news, Toni exclaims "¡Bizca!" (56), before immediately finding out that she was in fact dead. Visuality in relation to the political is highlighted once again in another significant instance in the novel when, at the end of Toni's and Manolo's first outing together, several characters find their sight hampered by the use of tear gas, as the police dish out indiscriminate beatings. Despite the seriousness of the affair, the narrative as related by Toni is clearly humorous and coloured by ludicrous imagery such as Toni smelling excessively of paint, housewives being surprised by the size of Toni's leg and his male member, and the colourful sight of smashed vegetables covering the floor after the police beating. These scenes, which rely on both seeing and being seen, recall Frances S. Connelly's observation that "what the grotesque does best is to play or, rather, to put things into play. As visual forms, grotesques are images in flux: they can be aberrant, combinatory, and metamorphic", while fusing ethical, political and aesthetic questions (2).

In Toni's account of the beating, it becomes especially noticeable that the only description provided of the police is both extremely succinct but also very sketchy: "unos tipos grandes, taciturnos, con unos palos enormes en las manos" (12). By giving the forces of repression such a nondescript nature, Gambaro situates them in direct opposition to Toni's distinctly large and mishappen body and his very visual account of events. As well as the police beatings, further references to the operations of the state in the novel, specifically when Toni is imprisoned and tortured, are characterized by their effects on Toni, but their root cause seems immaterial and undefined. In this context, the use of the grotesque seems to compel the reader to maintain a safe distance while trying to identify what, paraphrasing both titles, *no es fácil de ver*. Gambaro's portrayal of the forces of repression finds an echo in Michel Foucault's observations about the invisibility of modern disciplinary power, which is exacerbated in the dictatorial state: "Disciplinary power [...] is exercised through its invisibility; at the same time it imposes on those whom it subjects a principle of compulsory visibility" (187). Thus, a striking contrast is established between Toni and the repressive state in that the former, by its very being and substance, is highly visible, not only as an object of disciplinary power, but also as a monster, a figure which, as Mabel Moraña notes, "se construye sobre la base irrefragable de la corporeidad: la primacía de lo material" (35).

In Gambaro's texts it becomes clear that state surveillance and the grotesque generate opposed regimes of vision, the former being aligned with guile, mastery and control while the latter relies on conspicuousness, incompleteness and disarray. In this way, the relationship between Toni and the state seems governed by the strand

of etymology linking the word 'monster' to the verb *monere* (to admonish) and the noun *monstrum* (a portent or warning), since Toni's story, in both novel and play, strikes an admonitory note concerning the sly actions of the dictatorial regime. In other words, Gambaro uses the monster in these texts not simply to transfer monstrosity from Toni to the state, but to warn of, and be contrasted with, the stealthy nature of the regime. Thus, the meanings offered by the monster, and the grotesque, in relation to the state differ from simple disclosure or analogy. As a highly visible monster, Toni encapsulates both the benefits and drawbacks of visibility described by Peggy Phelan: "visibility is a trap, it summons surveillance and the law, it provokes voyeurism [...] yet it retains a certain political appeal," which she points out can lead to enhanced political agency (7). This arises in relation to Toni in Gambaro's works because he calls into question the adequacy of our ways of conceiving and visualising the repressive state. Likewise, the figure of Toni as a composite monster makes us renounce the possibility of simple appropriation or understanding it through a passive gaze, which in turn can be seen as an awakening of more active ways of seeing.

In Argentina, the insidiousness of disciplinary power acquired a new, stronger accent during Onganía's rule. This regime is traditionally considered to be the initiator of a new type of authoritarian repression, reaching its zenith with the disastrous and bloody state-sponsored terrorism campaign carried out by the Junta between 1976 and 1983, which, as is well known, cost more than 30,000 lives. As María Matilde Ollier highlights, several factors define the 'experimento autoritario iniciado en 1966' by Onganía's coup (11), such as the imposition of strict censorship, a fierce pro-Catholic and anti-communist discourse, the consolidation of oppositional guerrilla groups and the increased use of violence by all parties. This situation in which the state combined overt and covert use of force also heightened the population's fear of the regime. David Rock notes that by 1967, the nation had realised that "Onganía's was a hard-line regime prepared to make immediate resort to force to quell all competing institutions and any real or imaginary adversaries" (347). The regime's anti-communist measures for instance, were combined with a continuous discourse that addressed an alleged lack of spiritual values among the young and the moral dangers posed by communist infiltration. Rock further notes that, in their own narrative, "the state would be employed in the pursuit of normative objectives like "social peace" or "true democracy", however, achieving their goals meant "rejecting the integration of interest groups with the state, and in postulating a largely isolated state power", from which any differing ideologies or associations were to be excluded (347).

Questions concerning what type of body politic could exist during Onganía's military regime seem to be what Gambaro is addressing in the later parts of the novel, specifically in the wake of Brigita María's death when, out of bitterness, Manolo decides to start calling people to give anonymous and false death reports (in the play this occurs whilst Brigita María is still alive). Manolo delivers his reports in a dry, authoritarian language, replete with militaristic

jargon and designed to create sadness and upheaval. Indeed, his favourite opening for these conversations are battle cries such as "¡Subordinación y valor!" (74) and "¡Viva la Patria!" (75). When people discover the falsity of Manolo's statements, and that their loved ones are in fact alive, this generates a new sense of community, camaraderie and freedom: "los muchachos aprovechaban el tumulto para escribir leyendas en las paredes, amontonarse y caminar libres por la calle, detrás de las barricadas que habían armado frágilmente, sentir el sonido de la propia voz, enmudecida demasiado" (76). Toni is quick to point out, however, that this rekindled community feeling is only a passing phenomenon and must be contrasted with the effects of the real and pointless killings: "yacentes en un lugar donde la resurrección era imposible" (76). Of course, the military do not announce these "real" deaths, hence Toni is also highlighting a paralectical effect in the plot. Moreover, the strengthening of social bonds as a result of the shared experience of falling for Manolo's anonymous death reports suggests that fear and victimization are at the root of the advent of this enhanced community feeling. In the face of the exclusionary and isolated state power promoted by Onganía's authoritarian regime, social bonds seemed transient and fragile. In the dictatorship, there is no coming together of society under a single sovereign, hence there is no body politic, but rather exclusion and disintegration. Toni, the monster, contrasts with this disintegration since he is an amalgam, brought into being by the artificial union of many different bodies and as a result he seems to direct the reader and spectator to question how the state should be formed and visualised. Thus, in this use of the monstrous, we are reminded of Jacques Rancière's claim in *The Emancipated Spectator* that "what is required is a theatre [...] where those in attendance learn from as opposed to being seduced by images; where they become active participants as opposed to passive voyeurs" (4).

Gambaro's invitation to ascertain what is not immediately visible also fits with the obliqueness of political references in both the dramatic and novelistic version. It is never specified what exactly Manolo and his girlfriend are fighting for, nor the political inclinations followed by the ruling regime. All we know with total certitude is that we are dealing with a regime that indulges in heavy-handed political repression and that, in general, the reasons behind its brutality are spurious. For example, towards the end of the novel Toni is imprisoned, tortured, and forced to make a false confession, just because he was graffitiing messages of peace and love in the streets.

Having said this, the play and the novel do in fact differ in their explicitness of the politics. In the play, specifically, it becomes apparent that both Manolo and his girlfriend are part of a resistance movement, that Manolo puts together fake bombs, that Brigita María tries to escape persecution, and that there are two clear, mutually exclusive, political sides to the confrontations. These more obvious political allusions are not contained as such in the novel, and this feature can be partially explained by Gambaro's own thoughts concerning theatre, specifically, that it "exige como una especie de claridad visual" that the novelistic genre does not neces-

sitate (25). The staging of the play, in itself, also highlights visibility and the nature of the audience as viewers; for as Maaik Bleeker argues, theatre is itself a "practice of staging vision" (16). Indeed, Gambaro seems to be continuously preoccupied with the staging of vision in her drama, not only through the scenic overabundance, as in Manolo's cluttered laboratory, and the use of the grotesque, but also through theatrical devices that highlight the power of the play to both restrict and allow visibility.<sup>4</sup>

In this regard, the room divider used in the first and final acts is a key prop. Drawing back the divider, in both instances, reprises the raising of the stage curtain and affords the audience a further degree of visibility allowing them to observe the newly created beings that before could only be heard. This gradual disclosure of the creatures also foregrounds how theatrical perception involves all the different senses. A similar effect, and awareness of the audience's presence in the play, is achieved at the end when the lights are finally off but the hum of Brigita María's replica is still heard. *Nada que ver* therefore, at various times, playfully puts the spectators in a position where they do not (or cannot) simply see what is on stage, whilst simultaneously making them acknowledge that they too are *in* the theatrical space. This process is summed up in Freedman's observation that "the spectator is never outside of that which she perceives" (30).

The different endings of the novel and the play are also symptomatic of how theatre seems to demand a higher degree of visual clarity, for the final scene of creation of the automaton is omitted in the novel, and a more allusive closing is offered instead. A further distinction is made when, in the novel, after being imprisoned and forced to make a false confession, Toni hints at the possibility of suicide: "Lo único que me queda es su bondad [Manolo's]. Me la guardo hasta la noche. Pobre cosa. Triste fin" (95). Toni's imprisonment, and his intimation of an end charged with suicidal ideation, are absent from the play. Though both endings expressively foreground the dire consequences of the cancellation of freedom of speech and political choices, the creation of the new female being in *Nada que ver* places more emphasis on the physicality of performance, marked, as it is, by the import of the replica's body and its materiality. Furthermore, the apparition of the automaton stands in contrast to Manolo's earlier warning to Brigita María that she shouldn't put herself at risk because "la gente desaparece" (62). The audience would naturally associate Manolo's words with the clandestine political detentions and subsequent "disappearances" of detainees, which although not as frequent a practice during Onganía's regime, did become a common procedure during the military dictatorship of 1973. The "disappearances" were a clear tactic designed to stifle the opposition, by putting them literally out of sight. In this play, Gambaro's reference to the "desaparecidos" not only raises political questions but also involves the spectators in what is not seen, returning us once again to the significance of the drama's title, revealing it as politically paralectical. The different endings of novel and play constitute, in turn, the most significant discrepancy between

both texts, offering another instance of ruptured intertextuality. The play thus stages misrecognition and opposition, not only between the automata, Brigita María, and the “disappearances”, but also in relation to the different ending offered in the novel. Thus, the intertextual relations, like the grotesque, whilst evocative of similarities and differences, here seem to simultaneously dislocate perspective.

To conclude I would like to go back to Gambaro's 1982 interview mentioned in the introduction, where she points out that theatre can enable audiences, but only if they are “capaces de ver”, to re-perceive and re-connect with reality. She goes on to add that theatre has the potential to de-anaesthetise the spectator to common yet terrible issues such as war and death. For Gambaro, in fact, it is not only theatre, but “el hecho estético” itself, that “nos tiene que despertar” (31). In my analysis, I have demonstrated how *Nada que ver* and *Nada que ver con otra historia* do just this by restoring ownership and consciousness of their seeing to the spectator-reader. The very contradiction between the title of the play, that affirms there is nothing to see, and the staging of the same play, places the spectator in the limelight, making her conscious of her seeing whilst affecting customary positions in the theatrical scene. Likewise, the title of the novel unsettles the relational and intertextual reading that the text seems to invite, highlighting the comparative performativity of the act of reading itself. Moreover, both intertextual relations and the grotesque avoid any risk of flattening differences, on the contrary, they seem to invite us to use the contrasting strategies that underlie them to understand the slyness of the regime

as opposed to the highly visible monster. Thus, Gambaro's ways of inviting comparisons rekindle consciousness of both readership and spectatorship; as Sharon Magnarelli notes, “Gambaro's plays thwart spectator passivity and potential complacency by regularly defying theatrical norms and refusing comfortable closure” (367).

Another aspect of how Gambaro's works raise consciousness while hindering this “comfortable closure” is how they make us laugh. Many of the events related in both the novel and play are no laughing matter, yet Gambaro presents them in such a way that the audience cannot help but laugh. Key to this is the grotesque, which in the words of Philip Thomson covers “perhaps among other things, the co-presence of the laughable and something which is incompatible with the laughable” (19).

In Gambaro's work the grotesque becomes funny because it breaks the integrity of assumed conventions and commonplaces. Going beyond a reliance on simple caricature or exaggeration, Gambaro also makes laughter yield to apprehension and disquiet. Thus, the comic element, a feature *Nada que ver* and *Nada que ver con otra historia* share with *grotesco criollo* plays, is a mechanism through which these pieces are able to get under our skin. Gambaro's use of humour makes us work through dissonance and pushes us to relativise our perspective and look critically at the action before us. Like her use of intertextuality and *paraleipsis*, the comic side of the grotesque in Gambaro's work produces readings that complicate representational forms, because its ways of constructing meaning consistently depend on supplementarity and misrecognition.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> As Wolfgang Kayser notes, “grotesque” derives from the Italian *grottesca* and *grottesco* referring to a *grotto* (cave) “and were coined to designate a certain ornamental style which came to light during late fifteenth-century excavations, first in Rome and then in other parts of Italy as well, and which turned out to constitute a hitherto unknown ancient form of ornamental painting.” During the Renaissance, it was understood as “not only something playfully gay and carelessly fantastic, but also something ominous and sinister in the face of a world totally different from the familiar one – a world in which the realm of inanimate things is no longer separated from those of plants, animals and human beings, and where the laws of statics, symmetry, and proportion are no longer valid.” (19, 21). For a detailed history of the term, see the studies of Kayser, Thomson, and Connelly.

<sup>2</sup> Some of these critics, nevertheless, also establish connections between Gambaro's work and that of European absurdism. For more on this see, Catherine Boyle's 1990; Sharon Magnarelli's 1996 and 2008; Becky Boling's 1998, Peter Roster's 1982, Nora Mazziotti's 1982 studies. Osvaldo Pellettieri, 2001, takes another direction and while he finds commonalities between the *grotesco criollo* and Gambaro's plays, he believes that the work of the Argentine must be read and understood as what he calls *absurdo gambariano* which he sees as being closer to the different European variants of the theatre of the absurd as practiced by Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco and Harold Pinter. Furthermore, Pellettieri claims that despite *grotesco criollo* and *absurdo gambariano* being “afines a nivel semántico” as they establish an order that challenges reality, the *grotesco criollo* is more akin to realism and *problem plays* than the theatre of Gambaro.

<sup>3</sup> A clear contrast is established here with Shelley's text, where the monster pleads with Victor Frankenstein to create a female companion to end his isolation and loneliness. Victor starts to construct the female creature, but when he realises that “a race of devils would be propagated upon earth who might make the very existence of the species of man a condition precarious and full of terror”, he destroys it (Shelley 2008, 166).

<sup>4</sup> Different productions of this play have opted either to follow Gambaro's stage directions very closely or to deviate substantially from them. Examples of the former, presenting a very dense *mise-en-scène*, are Jorge Petraglia's 1972 and Helena Tritek's 2006 adaptations. While the latter approach is exemplified by the minimally decorated stage of Nicholas Dieter's 2016 version, which combines both the novel and the play to de-emphasise spectacle while foregrounding the importance of both texts.

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