

*Dada Poetics in Griselda Gambaro's Works:  
toward a De(con)struction of the Argentinian State  
of Terror*

JORGE CORREA LONDONO<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** This paper tries to show the connections between the poetics of Dadaism, the theatre of the absurd and Griselda Gambaro's works. Gambaro (born in 1928) is one of the most prolific and renowned Argentinian writer (both novelist and playwright) from the last decades. Since her first plays she stood out as one of the most innovative artists of her country. Her dramatic style, far from following the Argentinian hegemonic realistic tone of the works of the time, is a personalization of less common foreign and local ones. Of the foreign ones, dada and the absurd were arguably the most important and the one most in tune with the socio-political context in which her plays were inserted. However, with the pass of time Gambaro made a transition into a more transparent and realistic style which reflected a less illogical sociopolitical context without excluding elements from the absurd theater.

**Keywords:** Griselda Gambaro, Dada, absurd theatre, language.

*The Dadaist loves the extraordinary and the absurd...  
He therefore welcomes any kind of mask.  
Any game of hide-and-seek,  
with its inherent power to deceive*  
Hugo Ball

DaDa or Dadaism was (once consolidated) an anti-art movement rebelling against the traditional and bourgeois social, political and cultural values of the time. One note of caution, however, must be stated before continuing: as John Elderfield correctly points out, "to treat Zurich dada as one coherent event would be an even greater mistake [since] over the four

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<sup>1</sup> Arizona State University, USA, jecorrea@asu.edu

years of its existence (1916-19) there were important modifications and reassessments of position and changes in the kind of activity produced" (Elderfield, xxii). The critique has agreed in 1916 as its beginning year during the soirées offered in Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich by the founding members of the movement. The "essentially eclectic affair" (Elderfield, xxiii) included music, poetry, dance, performance and reading of manifestos. One of the key members due to his educational and professional background gathered before the rest of the group joining him was Hugo Ball, born in Pirmasens (Germany) in 1886 and deceased in 1927. The other founding members were the Romanians Tristan Tzara, born Sami Rosenstock (1896-1963) and Marcel Janco (1895-1984), the German Richard Huelsenbeck (1892-1974), the French-German Jean Arp (1887-1966), the Swiss Sophie Taeuber (1889-1943), and the German Emmy Hennings (1885-1948).

As we will explore later in more detail, the desire for rebelling against society's values is also shared by the Argentinian playwright and novelist Griselda Gambaro<sup>2</sup> (1928). The talent and sharp vision of this artist was recognized soon after she staged her first plays in the 60s by a considerable number of people. The authoritarian regime that by then was governing the country and that eventually led to the more repressive dictatorship self-named the National Reorganization Process (the Dirty War), however, forced her to be very mindful about her playwriting. She had to use language in a manner that criticized without criticizing in order to avoid both censorship and persecution. Critics, therefore, initiated a debate on whether Gambaro's early plays should be considered examples of the Theater of the Absurd or, on the other hand, of the Argentine grotesque. I intend to show that Gambaro's plays shift from incorporating more elements from the Theater of the Absurd to a reduction of their presence. It is also my purpose to analyze to what degree the Argentine social and political context correlates with that

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<sup>2</sup> Born in a family of Italian immigrants, her childhood was difficult due to the economic situation of her parents. She began writing narrative at an early age, genre that later she combined with drama. Susana Tarantuviez mentions that Gambaro "[is part] of the '60s Generation', formed by those playwrights that began their creative journey in the 1960" (13) and "[were] under tension between Samuel Beckett's and Eugene Ionesco's absurd, Arthur Miller's dramas and Italian and North American cinematographic realism" (qtd. in Tarantuviez 13). More importantly and similarly to DaDa's intentions, "[her] affiliation to this generation is due not only to chronological considerations but mainly to the fact of being a protagonist in the second modernization of Argentine theater which took place precisely in the 60s" (Tarantuviez 13). In addition to the works considered for this study Griselda wrote, among others, *Madrigal en ciudad* (1963), *Una felicidad con menos pena* (novel, 1967), *Nada que ver con otra historia* (novel, 1972), *Dios no nos quiere contentos* (novel, 1979), *Lo impenetrable* (novel, 1988), *Las paredes* (play, 1963).

shift. Accordingly, I will study three of her early plays and short stories (*El desatino*, *El campo* and *Los siameses*) and one of her more recent plays (*La señora Macbeth*). Before providing an insight into the critique around the mentioned debate, I would like to devote a moment to introducing the plot of the plays to be analyzed in this study.

In *El desatino* (1965) the audience witnesses a family: Viola (the mother), Alfonso (Viola's son), Lily (Alfonso's wife) and Luis (Alfonso's "friend" and, later, Viola's lover). Early in the play Alfonso finds a bulky iron object attached to one of his feet. All the play revolves around Alfonso's situation with this object and the treatment received by his family and by Luis. *Los siameses* (1965), on the other hand, presents two brothers, Lorenzo and Ignacio, in a codependent and sadomasochistic relationship. Lorenzo abuses physically and psychologically of the latter finally causing his imprisonment and his death. The third, *El campo* (1967), is a play exploring abusive relationships between a manager of a camp (Franco), the recently hired accountant (Martín), and a prisoner (Emma). Even though there are no direct allusions to it, the text strongly suggests Franco to be the guard of the camp. On the other hand, the play soon becomes a charade in which Emma shifts her personality into that of a concert pianist. Finally, *La señora Macbeth* (2003) is an adaptation of Shakespeare's work with modifications in some of its character's personalities: in Gambaro's play Macbeth carries all the blame for Duncan's assassination and Lady Macbeth functions as his scapegoat.

Angela Blanco Amores de Pagella states that "several Argentine authors, Eduardo Pavlovsky, Griselda Gambaro, Julio Ardiel Gray, Carlos Traffic, among others, have produced works that can be connected to this [the Theater of the Absurd] theatrical manifestation." (Blanco Amores de Pagella, 22). Four years before, Tamara Holzapfel had introduced the topic pointing out that "Gámbaro's dramas have many other elements in common with the Theater of the Absurd, such as the division of the plays into two acts, a simple plan, characters lacking in individuality, sparse action subordinated to the spirit of the play, and a sense of metaphysical anguish at the absurdity of the human condition" (Holzapfel, 6).

Not all critics, however, agreed with Blanco Amores and Holzapfel. Nora Mazziotti, for instant, argues that "critics have repeatedly pointed out the relation between Griselda Gambaro's theatre and the absurd. She, nevertheless, has insisted in pointing out grotesque 'nuances' which tie her with Discépolo and with Defilippis Novoa" (Mazziotti, 77). Peter Roster also emphasizes a tendency by North American critics to apply a formula when

analyzing Gambaro's plays. As a result, "[they conclude] stating that the playwright's works represents an extension of [a specific] European or American literary movement" (Roster, 55-6). He reminds us of Griselda's statements that discard her plays as having any relation to Theater of the Absurd<sup>3</sup>. Fernando de Toro states that "this critic [the one that hasn't understood Griselda's language manipulation] has focused, generally, in establishing comparisons, not very fertile, between Gambaro's theater and Artaud's Theater of the Cruelty, or the Theater of the Absurd" (Toro, 42). He argues, in contrast, that "the articulation and manipulation of the language in [Griselda's] texts have little to do with European *isms*, but they do with an Argentinian, a Latin-American reality, in which the discourse's ambiguity and its manipulation is not determined only by an pseudo-philosophical estheticism or by a false avant-garde spirit but by the very reality that a social context imposes" (Toro, 42). It is a fact that reality (despite the degree to which the writer modifies it according to his/her subjectivity) is, in the majority of the cases, the main material which writers use in their praxis. This is why expecting to read the same social background in Ionesco's and in Griselda's plays will lead to a potentially erroneous interpretation of them. Another element that one should keep in mind when analyzing Gambaro's theater production is the political context under which she had to write her plays. The 60s were turbulent political years that led to the authoritarian state of general Onganía. One of his measures as the new Argentine head of state was to repress all avant-garde cultural expressions. Consequently, Gambaro needed to disguise her criticism of not only the military, but also of the Argentine society as a collectivity. In fact, the majority of the critics note the ambiguity in regard to the time and place of the actions in Griselda's *El campo*. Such ambiguity, in any case, does not prevent the audience from relating the content of the play to the Argentine context since the playwright alludes to an extratextual referent. Both its stage directions and "plot" fail to provide the audience with hints of a specific time and place. In *Los siameses*, by contrast, those elements are less ambiguous since there are more direct allusions to the Argentine social and political situation at that time.

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<sup>3</sup> I take the statements of any author with some prudent distance since the critique has detected some contradictions between what Borges (to mention one example) said in some of the interviews and the conclusions drawn from the analysis of his texts. Some of the Latin-American Boom writers were also very eager to receive interviews in which they used the language masterfully sometimes for ambiguity purposes.

I argue, however, that this debate has its roots in some assumptions from the Theater of the Absurd and its avant-garde predecessors. The prominent role that language plays in Ionesco's theater, to mention one playwright, and its manipulation can lead one to conceive of those works as content-empty in the so-called theater of the form that distances itself from the social context.

Mazziotti herself mentions that "the grotesque manifests itself as a matrix in which converge simultaneously authors influenced by North American realism – Arthur Miller mainly – and those ones that seem closer to the European avant-garde theater, the absurd or the cruelty" (Mazziotti, 80). Moreover, language is at the center of the analysis of Roster, Toro, Stella Maris Martini, Nelly Schnaith and Mazziotti. Since the relation between the Argentine grotesque and Gambaro's praxis has been the subject of extensive research, my purpose is to analyze some of Griselda's plays vis-à-vis some of Ionesco's, expanding on Blanco Amores's and Holzapfel's conclusions. Before analyzing some of Gambaro's works, therefore, it is important to revisit the theoretical foundations of the Theater of the Absurd.

Martin Esslin characterizes the works of this theater as plays with "no story or plot to speak of", which "are often without recognizable characters... often have neither a beginning nor an end..., seem often to be reflections of dreams and nightmares... [and] often consist of incoherent babblings." (Esslin, 3-4). More importantly, and its hallmark for Esslin, "the Theater of the Absurd strives to express its sense of the senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought." (Esslin, 6). In other words "[it] has renounced arguing about the absurdity of the human condition; it merely presents it in being – that is, in terms of concrete stage images." (Esslin, 6) Is not it what Griselda does when she introduces a mother who victimizes her son in *El desatino*, or a twin brother who allows two policemen to beat up his brother instead of opening the door for him in *Los siameses*, or a female prisoner who is forced to act a charade to please her oppressor in *El campo*?

### **Gambaro and the DaDa spirit**

In her article Rebecca Loggia takes the reader to a journey in time to the beginnings of Dadaism to which Cabaret Voltaire was a pivotal place. In relation to its artistic meetings, seminal for the spirit of the movement led by Tristan Tzara, Marcel Janco, and others, Loggia mentions

[The meeting on February 5, 1916] contained spoken word, a combination of experimentation interlaced with passion for the poetic life; dance and music...it was unapologetic, often mirroring the society and culture around it in some disorderly way, breaking with the common bourgeois tendencies of the time. Anarchic in nature, it produced results that were sure to challenge public opinion and acceptance that stemmed from the horrors of war, as poet Hugo Ball wrote: "For us, art is not an end in itself, but it is an opportunity for the true perception and criticism of the times we live in" (Loggia, 152-53)

The same desire for experimentation and destruction of bourgeois values that inspired Dada and its practitioners inspired the Argentinian playwright and novelist Griselda Gambaro (1928). Through her works, Gambaro defies the indulgent attitude and behavior of a society (and especially the bourgeoisie) that tolerate the oppression and human rights violations of Argentina's authoritarian regimes of the 60s, 70s and early 80s. Similarly to the intention of Dadá to attack rationalism and order in a devastated Europe during WWI, Griselda used theater to criticize the notion of order and neatness that the military by then in power imposed on Argentine society. It shouldn't surprise us, then, that during the 1976 dictatorship a decree from general Videla (Head of State at that time) banned her novel *Ganarse la muerte* (*Winning Death*, 1976) under the grounds of being contrary to the institution of family and social order (Tarantuviez, 107). The purpose of this study is to show how the playwright used and manipulated language to present communicative situations devoid of any logic and rationality. But, what were the values of the Argentina's bourgeoisie in the 60s, 70s and early 80s?. And more importantly, what was its relation to the military in power? As in Francisco Franco dictatorship in Spain (1939-1975), the fascist military leaders used nationalism as the ideological excuse for its *modus operandi*. Therefore, a sense of order, reason and logic was highly praised by them. These three values allowed them not only to maintain a society under a state of repression, but also to use torture and even assassinations against those civilians that had another mentality and worldview (mostly people aligned with the left). Under this situation, a considerable part of the middle and upper class, in order not to lose its status quo, decided to favor the military in a wide-spread attitude. The reluctance to denounce the crimes committed by the government and its elements, on one hand, and the divulgation of names of leftist enthusiasts, on the other, were something commonly practiced by well-positioned civilians.

Annabelle Henkin Melzer mentions the shock that the dada-surrealists attempted to perpetrate on a usually placid audience (Henkin Melzer, xvi) or "the path of deliberate provocation" (Henkin Melzer, 11), aimed especially to the bourgeoisie. Huelsenbeck, for instance, "would often recite the poem 'Rivers' because it contained extremely daring images and always brought out the audiences' antagonism." (Henkin Melzer, 43) The intention in Gambaro's plays is very similar to Tzara's, Ball's, Janco's, Arp's and the rest of the group, and as an example one can mention the end of Griselda's *El campo* and the codification of one of its characters using a hot iron. Moreover, Nazi images are a constant referent in this play. The subtle difference may be, however, that Griselda places the illness of Argentine society not only in the middle and upper classes but in each citizen. For Gambaro being tolerant of the wrongdoings of the military in power is as questionable as perpetrating them in one's own hands. One can say, therefore, that the Argentine playwright shared the spirit and motivation of DaDa despite the fact of using a different approach to achieve the same goal. Whereas DaDa performances were about "mere provocation" (Henkin Melzer, 182), Gambaro's plays seek to shock the spectator/reader at first and then induce awareness and consciousness for his/her part.

### **Dadaist plays/performances vis-à-vis Griselda Gambaro's playwriting**

By studying Dadaist performances and Gambaro's theatrical production, one can readily notice a different approach to shocking the audience/reader. For starters, Tzara, Ball, Janco, Arp, and the rest of the group rely more on the performative potential of poetry, speeches (manifestos) and music than in the mise-en-scène of plays. According to Henkin Melzer, it was just until the last period of Dada (in Paris) that the performances included more elaborated plays (including some written by Tzara and the surrealists). This however, doesn't prevent us from detecting ephemeral connections between Dadaism or its texts/performances and Gambaro's artistic praxis.

Henkin characterizes Hugo Ball as the theater person of the Zurich-Dada. Moreover, "Hugo Ball, born in Pirmasens, Germany on February 22, 1886, was attracted to theater in his youth, and by the age of 18 had written two plays: an imitation of Shakespeare's *Caesar and Cleopatra*, and an original script, *The Hangman of Brescia*" (Henkin Melzer, 14). What is interesting and relevant for this study, however, is that "in his plays, Ball resorted to grotesque caricatures to launch a strong polemical attack against the evils of the world as he saw them." (Henkin Melzer, 14) As we will explore later, the Argentine grotesque constitutes an intrinsic dimension of Gambaro's plays.

Kandinsky, on the other hand, became an important influence in Ball's theatrical theory. "[The violent attack of the former to] the dramatic arts of the nineteenth century (drama, opera, ballet) which had become so orthodox that any tiny change in them appeared revolutionary" (Henkin Melzer, 17) was of great influence for Ball. In the theatrical arena of Argentine 60s a similar change was happening. The two dominating theatrical styles (social realism and avant-garde) were competing to validate themselves among the audience<sup>4</sup>. Similarly to the reception received by the Dadaist performances, Gambaro's early plays were criticized by many. They saw them as not being rooted enough in the country's reality. Social realism, in contrast, inherited the syntax of nineteenth-literature making those plays more readily comprehensible to the audience.

Now, how did Kandinsky conceive theater and the *mise-en-scène*? Henkin points out that "[for Kandinsky] art would function to express spiritual realities and a stage composition drawing on this source would be based on three elements: [First] the musical sound and its movement. [Second] the physical-psychical sound and its movement, expressed through people and objects. [Finally] the colored tone and its movements." (Henkin Melzer, 17-18). Of especial interest for this study is the second one since as we explore later, Gambaro use this connection in regard to psychological manipulation in her play *El campo* (1967).

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<sup>4</sup> Tarantuviez provides us with an accurate description about this two dominant theatrical styles: "the study of the two theatrical tendencies that rose in our country in the 60s decade is essential to understand Gambaro's textuality, whose playwriting starts one of them, the neo avant-garde for, in a later moment, include some of the elements of the other one, the reflexive realism" (Tarantuviez, 90). The critic explains the two styles with these words: "Neo avant-garde and reflexive realism differentiates, in first place, in the degree of 'referentiality' that they allow: while reflexive realism relates itself without omissions with the historical context in which the works are embedded, the neo avant-garde establish with that context an opaque relation and even seems not to take it into account. Thus, these two styles relate themselves with the extra textual referent in a different way: the reflexive realism alludes directly to the social and political referent, while the 60s neo avant-garde distorts the referent or presents it in an absurd manner." (Tarantuviez, 92). More related to this research, Tarantuviez states that "additionally, these two styles represent different positions in relation to the 'theater' institution: for realistic playwrights, theater should communicate, it should have a thesis to prove. Neo avant-garde, on the other hand, stresses expression" (Tarantuviez, 92).

## The language in the Dadaism, the Theater of the Absurd and in Gambaro's plays

Language is an important vehicle of the writer's worldview in the Theater of the Absurd as well as in Gambaro's plays. Playwrights like Ionesco, Adamov, Beckett and Genet "[tend] toward a radical devaluation of language, toward a poetry that is to emerge from the concrete and objectified images of the stage itself. The element of language still plays an important part in this conception, but what happens on the stage transcends, and often contradicts, the words spoken by the characters." (Esslin, 7). Mazziotti mentions a similar contradiction in *Los siameses*, since "Lorenzo...also explains a desire for a success in the sports domain that is denied by his actions: '(gropes for and claps his calfs) runner muscles! Yes, these are runner muscles, strong, resistant... (while he speaks, he is sliding against the door until he is sitting down in the floor. He is exhausted)'." (Mazziotti, 88). As Maris Martini states, "the ambivalence in [Gambaro's] discourse resides fundamentally in the almost permanent contradiction between the stage directions and the dialogues and in the contrast between language and actions" (Maris Martini, 96). As an example, the critic reminds us of the scene from Act 1, scene 3, in which Emma praises the smell of some artificial flowers given her by Franco, her oppressor. This language experiments, however, weren't strange to Ball who "[in his] novel, *Tenderenda der Phantast* (finished by 1920 and originally published in 1967), explored certain linguistic, rhythmic and vocal devices which later appear in his Zurich work" (Henkin Melzer, 26). Throughout his contribution for the Cabaret Voltaire Ball "continued the experiments with words begun in his novel and furthered them through his correspondence with Marinetti" (Henkin Melzer, 29). This in accordance with his belief, as stated in his writings, that "all living art will be irrational, primitive, and complex; it will speak a secret language and leave behind documents not of edification but of paradox" (qtd. in Henkin Melzer, 29-30). The paradoxes and contradictions inherent to a military authoritarian regime, such as the one in the Argentina 60s, 70s and early 80s, are spread throughout Gambaro's early plays.

The kind of contradiction mentioned by Mazziotti and Maris Martini is only one of those present in Gambaro's plays. Another form of contradiction appears when "the material space, apparently realistic, is in contradiction with the use of the language which is deployed in a sort of referential emptiness, where the language no longer delivers a message" (Toro, 47). When referring to *The Bald Soprano*, on the other hand, Ionesco mentions that "The Smiths, the Martins, can no longer talk because they can no longer think; they can no

longer think because they can no longer be moved, can no longer feel passions." (qtd. in Esslin, 115). Likewise, the insensitivity of Argentine society during the authoritarian military regimes (*juntas militares*) of the 60s, 70s and early 80s as a result of the governmental systematic persecution has been a permanent concern for Gambaro. She expresses this concern in all her plays, but with especial emphasis in the early ones. While *El campo* represents that lack of compassion on an institutional level, *El desatino* and *Los siameses* present it within the microcosmos of the family. In regard to *Los siameses*, Holzapfel states that "Lorenzo devotes himself fully to plotting his brother's downfall in the first three scenes of Act II. He sews some false banknotes into the lining of Ignacio's suitcase and thus succeeds in proving to the police that his brother is a bank robber." (Holzapfel, 8). In *El desatino*, as in *Los siameses*, the common factors in the familiar relationships are the lack of care and compassion and the physical and psychological harm since "[Alfonso's mother] and his friend Luis do not take any notice of his condition" (Holzapfel, 6). Moreover, "a physically aggressive type, Luis soon becomes the mother's lover and terrorizes Alfonso by playing dangerous games with him" (Holzapfel, 6). Similarly to the Dadaists and Ionesco, Gambaro explores the potentiality of language to make a point: Viola is both the name of Alfonso's mother and the conjugation in third person singular in Spanish for the verb "violar" which translates "to rape". In a metaphorical sense, therefore, the psychological abuses committed by her to Alfonso are linked to the character's name. Moreover, rape was a torture practice exerted very often by the military to detainees during the Argentine dictatorships and especially during the National Reorganization Process (Dirty War).

El Gangoso (the twangy man), one of the policemen in *Los siameses*, is perhaps one of the best examples of the devaluation of the language and the incoherent babblings mentioned by Esslin: "(the two policemen enter the room. The twangy man walks directly to a chair and collapses on it, whispering something unintelligible)" (Gambaro 1967, 31), or "(...the twangy man has a very pale face and a sleepy expression; he opens his mouth widely to speak, stressing the syllables excessively, but speaks only with a twang, and this only occasionally)" (Gambaro 1967, 31). Even more, Ignacio and Lorenzo have enormous difficulties understanding what this character mumbles and is only his partner, El Sonriente (the smiling man), who can deliver the message the twangy man is trying to convey:

*Twangy Man.* Who is this place's owner?

*Lorenzo.* [obfuscated] What?

*Twangy Man.* [getting exasperated] The boss, who is he?

*Lorenzo and Ignacio.* [with different levels of bewilderment] what is he saying?

*Twangy Man.* [making approaching gestures to Lorenzo, speaks something with a twang quickly].

*Lorenzo.* [rubbinghis hands obfuscated] I don't understand. I don't understand! [Passionately, pointing at Ignacio]. It wasn't me. The stupid... it was him. What a resentful! He hit a kid with a rock! (Gambaro 1967, 33)

Even the names of the two policemen are used by Gambaro to introduce ambiguity and contradiction. In the case of El Sonriente, he "(speaks always with a wide and open smile despite his outbursts of anger or nuisances)" (Gambaro 1967, 30). Griselda's description of the two policemen remind us of DaDa performances given that "the collision impact in performance is not due to the verbal element alone. There was something visual 'going on' on stage as well. At the very least there were the facial expressions of the performers as they moved mouths and focused eyes in their readings of the texts." (Henkin Melzer, 37-38) Ball's list of directives toward a language project written by him in August of 1916 bridges his views on art with Ionesco's and Gambaro's. These directives states that "Language is not the only means of expression. It is not capable of communicating the most profound experiences", "when communications are broken, when all contact ceases, then estrangement and loneliness occur, and people sink back into themselves", and finally, "spit out words: the dreary, lame, empty language of men in society" (qtd. in Henkin Melzer, 41). Emma's moments of silence and the gestures accompanying them, are good examples of the inadequacy of language to communicate certain terrifying experiences. The case of *Los siameses's* El Gangoso (the twangy man), however, has more resemblances with the fact that "the common linguistic denominator of the [Dadaist] group was absolute sound, and when he was ready to transcend sound, the dada poet-performer moved on to noise" (Henkin Melzer, 42).

The language in Tzara's *La Première aventure celeste de M'Antipyrine*, on the other hand, echoes Gambaro's plays (especially the early ones) since "Bleubleu, CriCri, the pregnant woman and Mr. Antipyrine... plus Pipi, exchange ripostes which, on paper, are set up as dialogues, yet are incomprehensible—in themselves as well as in their relationship to one another" (Henkin Melzer, 71). Similarly as some passages of the plays of the Argentine writer, Tzara's "text, at first reading, is a maze of impenetrable phrases" (Henkin Melzer, 70). In the case of Griselda's, this is the result of the absence of intratextual referents and the pervasive ambiguity. Consequently, "the reader has little to hang on to" (Henkin Melzer, 72).

Franco, the oppressor in *El campo*, embodies another type of contradiction in Gambaro's playwriting. In this case, the words and gestures of a specific character contradict each other in different moments of the play. As it unfolds, the audience/reader will perceive that the courteous and kind words that Franco constantly addresses to Emma and Martín (the recently hired accountant) are only a farce. By contrasting masterfully the stage directions with the parliament, Gambaro reveals the masquerade the oppressor insists in playing. His mood is constantly changing from an oppressive and authoritarian to a cheerful one. To grasp Franco's ambivalence in all its magnitude, therefore, it is necessary to follow the entire play. At the beginning, Franco requests "with an unhurried but authoritarian and threatening voice" that someone "shut up the children" who are making noises outside the room (Gambaro 1967, 10). Once he had given the order, a smile appears in his face. Later, when Franco forces Emma to give a recital to other prisoners, he "brusquely takes a look to the palm of her wounded hand [and] almost tenderly" he says to her "how is this [wound]!" (Gambaro 1967, 55).

In another part of the play, Franco is looking for a whip. After finding it under a desk, he begins to hit the floor with it. Emma says that "he had never hit anyone with it" as "if reciting a lesson". Nevertheless, as the audience/reader witnesses a few moments/lines later, while Franco is laughing she "moves her hands away from her ears and slides them through her face, with her eyes closed. She opens her eyes again and stares forward, while Martín looks at her motionless and Franco stops laughing little by little". The last part of those stage directions reads "motionless scene. Short silence" (Gambaro 1967, 50-51). Even though her guard never hits her with the whip, the aggressive side of Franco's personality is exposed throughout the play. In addition, the fear evidenced in Emma's gestures, leaves no place for doubt that she has been brainwashed to cover his oppressor's conduct. The exploration of language as a manipulation device bridges *El campo* with Ionesco's *The Lesson* since in both plays "language is shown as an instrument of power" (Esslin, 117). In *El campo*, the recital that the prisoner is forced to execute is the climax of that oppressive situation. Throughout the passages one can perceive the power of the sound for Gambaro, Ball and Kandinsky:

*Emma.* [as if reciting a lesson while Franco hits the floor strongly and rhythmically with the whip] He hasn't hit anyone ever. I know it well. We are friends since we were children. [She falls silent].  
*Franco.* [he begs]. A little bit more!

*Emma.* [*idem*] He hasn't hit anyone ever. Kids would run after me, he protected me. One against four, one against five, one... [*Franco hits with the whip. Emma, with a shuddering, fainting*]. I can't stand it!

*Martin.* Then, is it true?

*Franco.* [*hitting, unstable*] Do you have doubts?

*Martin.* [*To Emma, he shouts*] Is it true?

*Emma.* What? [*She doesn't pay attention to him, astonished by the sound of each lash on the floor*] (Gambaro 1967, 50-51)

Emma's reactions to Franco's lashes echoes the synesthesia that Henkin states was so important to Kandinsky and, by his influence, to Ball (Gambaro 1967, 18). Emma's clumsiness while delivering her recital also remind us of the "Flycatching" dance represented in one of Zurich Dada performances where the "only things suitable for [Janco's] mask were clumsy, fumbling steps" (qtd. in Henkin Melzer, 32). Moreover, Ball "speaks of Dada as 'a game in fancy dress'" (33) which is an accurate description of this specific passage of Gambaro's *El campo*. Needless to point out that for the tortured Argentinian citizens the psychological games (rape included) exerted by the militia weren't funny at all.

Emma's recital, however, it's not only important from a dramatic view point. It also represents the collision in a symbolical place of the highly rigid and unquestionable order that the Argentine authoritarian regimes imposed to society and the disorder and wake up call Gambaro was resorting to, expecting that it would eventually lead to a civilian resistance. In a similarly way as Tzara, Harp, Janco and other Dadaists practitioners, Griselda attacked the indulgent attitude of society in regard to the abominations and abuses the military were committing against people with different values.

In *El campo*, Gambaro introduces highly symbolic objects and names that dislocate the audience's attention from Argentina. It is the case of the SS, the Nazi paramilitary organization, and Franco. Even though the Spain's dictator never supported Adolf Hitler openly during WWII, the two of them maintained diplomatic conversations during the Spanish civil war as a joint effort to keep communism away from their countries. Benito Mussolini represented the third vertex of the ideology promoted by the German head of the state. As Federico Finchelstein mentions, the Argentine military leaders that installed the authoritarian regime, in the 60s and half of the 70s, and the more oppressive dictatorship from 1976 until the returning of the democracy in 1983 were profoundly inspired by Hitler's ideology<sup>5</sup>. As a result, a behavior

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<sup>5</sup> Let's not forget that after WWII a significant number of German fugitives were received by some South American governments, the Argentinian included.

conditioning and indoctrination was strictly executed, not only for civilians, but also to the policemen and low ranked soldiers. Griselda Gambaro, therefore, criticize without criticizing and denounce without denouncing. The ability that the German leader had to psychologically manipulate his audience is embodied by Franco in *El campo*. This is explored in depth by Gambaro through the interaction between Emma and her guard.

In the stage directions, on the other hand, Ionesco specifies that

During the course of the play she [the pupil] progressively loses the lively rhythm of her movement and her carriage, she becomes withdrawn. From gay and smiling she becomes progressively sad and morose; from very lively at the beginning, she becomes more and more fatigued and somnolent. Towards the end of the play her face must clearly express a nervous depression. (Ionesco, 45-46)

It is true that, unlike the change in the pupil, Emma's behavior is more erratic since it is not a progression. Rather, Gambaro's character is forced to play a charade when in reality she is highly frightened by Franco's behavior. The Argentine playwright suggests that at moments Emma remembers traumatic events in the recent past and, consequently, her brain and her behavior switch to another "channel".

For the *The Lesson's* Professor, Ionesco mentions that "from a manner that is inoffensive at the start, the Professor becomes more and more sure of himself, more and more nervous, aggressive, dominating, until he is able to do as he pleases with the Pupil, who has become, in his hands, a pitiful creature" (Ionesco, 46). The changes that occur in the Professor are very similar to those experienced by Franco. Moreover, Emma is Franco's puppet from the very beginning while it takes all the play for Martín to succumb to the oppressive system staged with his codification with a hot iron.

These relationships of power were precisely at the core of the social dynamics that Argentina had to experience during the dictatorships of the 60s, 70s and early 80s. The torture exerted by the military against detainees through physical and psychological violence is a phantom that haunts *El campo's* audience/reader.

In Gambaro's *La señora Macbeth* both the language and the phantom of Banquo represent two very important elements of the play. Several concerns are expressed in this adaptation from Shakespeare's work. One directly related to the manipulation of the language both by Griselda and by Macbeth's wife is how to cope with the guilt of wrongdoings. Macbeth's wife is constantly denying the assassination of Banquo by her husband

*Lady M.* He didn't think of it. My Macbeth would have never thought it...if he stained his hands with blood was because you [witches] blinded him that night taking his good sense. He lost his mind. ¡He even imagined a dagger in the air that lead him to Duncan's bedroom and drives him to stab it in Duncan's chest (Gambaro 2003, 60).

Compared to her early plays, however, Gambaro's *La señora Macbeth* is a more conventional work. Nevertheless, the language in it maintains a central role. In this work, what is said by Macbeth's wife is in contradiction of the fact that her husband murdered his king. The guilt is so overwhelming that, as one of the witches states, "[lady Macbeth's] naivety moves me. She lives in a fish bowl and she thinks it is the world." (Gambaro 2003, 61).

As we confirmed in this research, language plays a profound importance in both Ionesco and Gambaro's praxis. Griselda's early plays reveal a meaningless language since it proves its inadequacy to communicate and, more importantly for both writers, to foster healthy human relationships. Technically, one of the main features of her use of language is the permanent contradictions present in both the characters and the events. The absence of a progressive plot is a common element in both *The Bald Soprano* and in *El campo*. Despite the fact that a number of critics consider Gambaro's first plays to be rooted in the Argentine daily life of the 60s, I argue that in reality most of the events portrayed on them can refer to any country governed by a dictatorial regime. Under politics of repression and persecution, it is only logical language in literary works that is vague and ambiguous. This, however, doesn't imply the impossibility of incorporating the Argentine grotesque in her works, as some of them actually evidence. As we verified throughout this study, the difference between Ionesco's playwriting and Gambaro's may be the one between an existential absurdity and an authoritarian one.

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**JORGE CORREA LONDONO** earned his Master's degree from Florida International University (Miami, Florida, USA). Currently, he is a PhD student at Arizona State University (Tempe, Arizona, USA), specializing in the 20th century Spanish American literature and cultural production. He also serves as a Spanish and Spanish American literature instructor (19th and 20th century) at the same institution where he is doing his doctoral studies.