Melodrama and Reality in the Plays of Mario Vargas Llosa

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> When the moral shell is fragmented and removed, an aggressive, erotic, even fetishistic force is released--an energy that we could well call the soul of melodrama. (James Leverett)

Melodrama and melodramatic are terms charged with pejorative overtones. Throughout much of the 20th century, literary critics have used them to indicate supercilious effects such as exaggeration, sentimentality, pretense and hysterics; and the belief "that melodrama as a coherent dramatic category never existed" was widely held (Merrit 28). It was not until the 1960s, when sociologists, anthropologists and linguists began studying modern versions of popular culture and artists themselves turned to popular and commercial forms, that critics began to take seriously both the historic genre and melodrama's pertinence as "an important and abiding mode in the modern imagination" (Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination* ix).

Melodrama has deep cultural roots in Latin America, especially in the form of popular songs, operettas, movies, and radio and television soap operas, but also in literature and theatre. María de la Luz Hurtado reports that in Chile, for example, "A comienzos de la década del '50 en este siglo, el melodrama es el género más trabajado autoralmente y el más representado en nuestro país" (122). She mentions a number of contemporary dramatists --Sergio Vodanović, Egon Wolff, Luis Heiremans, Isidora Aguirre, Gustavo Meza e Imagen--who have incorporated melodramatic structures in plays that are otherwise read as psychological realism and as Brechtian and socio-historical drama.

Among contemporary Spanish American authors, Mario Vargas Llosa stands out for his espousal of the melodramatic mode in literature. His 1977 novel, *La tía Julia y el escribidor*, is his first self-consciously melodramatic work. It develops a thematic interplay between "real" life situations and melodrama, establishing a tainted relationship between an autobiographical narrative focus (the life of the young writer Vargas Llosa) and Pedro Camacho's cheap and banal soap operas. In sentimental fiction, as Vargas Llosa states in his essay *The Perpetual Orgy, Flaubert and Madame Bovary*:

> Reality is only melodramatic, there is only bad taste in life: the exclusion of everything else creates a sense of unreality. This strong propensity of mine, I grant, is no doubt symptomatic of my basic realist fixation: the melodramatic element moves me because melodrama is closer to the real than drama, as tragicomedy is closer to the real than either pure comedy or pure tragedy. (19)

Furthermore, he cites the fundamental narrative elements that he believes make literature enticing for the beholder--rebellion, violence, sex, and melodrama--and explains his satisfaction with a novel when it arouses:

> my admiration for this or that revolt against the established order, my anger at some stupidity or injustice, my fascination for melodramatic situations, for excessive displays of emotions that romanticism seemed to have invented since it both used and abused them, though they have always existed in literature, as they have doubtless always existed in reality and in my secret desire. (12)

Providing an important--even cathartic--impact for Vargas Llosa, melodrama is the one ingredient that heightens human sentiment, subverts the dominant aesthetic models of a particular historic moment, and dismantles the social mechanization of emotion. Through it, comic elements are injected into the purely serious side of life, a little of the grotesque dilutes tragedy, the impure seduces the pure, the absurd contaminates sinless logic, the ugly tarnishes the beautiful, and so on. In other words, melodrama puts a mirror up to life, reflecting pathos (and by extension bathos), parody, repugnance, stupidity and alienation.

In his three plays published to date, Mario Vargas Llosa combines in an intricate pattern these elements of melodrama and converts certain typical melodramatic conventions to fresh use. In *La señorita de Tacna* (1981), published soon after *La tía Julia y el escribidor*, the principal character struggles to create a story from recollected fragments told to him by a great aunt in his childhood. Elements of family melodrama are plainly recognizable, even if they do not add up to a traditional formula. *Kathie y el hipopótamo* (1983) uses innovatively a "thwarted escape" plot as a basis for an absurdist play about the crisis of the capitalist family and modern escapism. *La Chunga* (1986), its plot turning on what Frye has called the "dark hints of interesting sins" (40), makes dynamic use of a secret, one of the commonest conventions of melodrama. All three plays use both the melodrama of events and the melodrama of presentation to obtain unusual aesthetic effects and a specific intellectual message. Collectively, the plays sustain a progression from a veiled allegory of national ruin, set in the reconstructed family history of *La señorita de Tacna*; to a more direct treatment of bourgeois conduct in *Kathie y el*

hipopótamo; and, finally, to the universal myth of capitalism in *La Chunga*. These are not conventional melodramas, but all use melodramatic forms to entertain and enliven subject matter that has strong social implications.[1]

La señorita de Tacna is about the trials and tribulations of a forty-year-old author who struggles to create a romantic love story based on the life of his great aunt Mamaé (mamá Elvira). In his childhood Belisario had listened to the stories told in the third person by Mamaé about her youth: the Señorita's privileged life in the Peruvian-Chilean border town of Tacna following the War of the Pacific (1879-83), her courtship by a dashing Chilean army officer, her thwarted marriage and, finally, her acceptance of a spinster's life in the household of Belisario's grandparents. The creative process of writing is used to construct relationships between two stories or, more accurately, between two points of view, for the child's perspective present in Belisario's ruminations about the past is juxtaposed to and combined with the adult writer's intimate acquaintance with the family situation of the present time.

Belisario's efforts to compose his story and his desire to uncover certain truths about himself, his family and his country are imbued with melodramatic elements that set the overall tone and give prominence to the play's major themes. Throughout, the protagonist's monologues are punctuated with questions and exclamations, accentuating their melodramatic content: "¡Qué rica era la familia entonces! ¡Cómo fue decayendo y mediocrizándose hasta llegar a ti [Mamaé]!" (35). An early allusion to melodrama occurs when Mamaé listens intently to one of Pedro Camacho's soap operas on the radio. This intertextual relationship, referring to the soap opera script writer in *La tía Julia y el escribidor* has ironic implications and works to establish a highly emotional tone and to prepare the audience for the theatrical events that follow.

The protagonist of the play is Belisario, but he is also a self-reflexive narrator who comments on the action in imagined and retrospective scenes. He appears as an actor in his own drama and is the only "real" stage character playing out the melodrama of his personal life. Belisario's centrality is reflected in the stage arrangements: his fortress-like desk occupies stage center, while the imagined scenes occur at different locations around it. The scene thus suggests a centrifugal spinning outward of recreated past moments from the pen of an anguished writer and at the same time underscores his position of detachment vis-à-vis the latent emotionalism of the plot; for, ultimately, the melodramatic elements work to involve the audience actively in a cognitive and perceptual play.

The process of composition from two points of view confronts Belisario with two sets of characters: fairy tale beings in Mamaé's stories; and ordinary human beings of his extended family, whose past and present lives are accentuated with melodramatic events. Belisario's father committed suicide playing Russian roulette soon after he married, leaving his wife to worry about

being poor, to panic over her son's future, and to fret over her aging parent and Mamaé, for whom she is responsible. Belisario's uncles carry on endlessly over the possibility of putting Mamaé in a state institution rife with promiscuity and pestilence. They recriminate each other as to which of them must pay for the upkeep of their sister's household and Belisario's education. Belisario, who is pockmarked and considers himself ugly, poor and disorganized, is seen regretting the cynicism of his youth.

In contrast, the characters in Mamaé's stories function, as in melodrama, as psychic signs. The Señorita is the virtuous heroine. An orphan, she shares the same lot with the heroines of classical melodrama who "vivent en marge des structures familiales et sociales et ne sauraient pleinement s'intégrer a la communauté" (Przybos 87). She is also typically the victim of betrayal. The Chilean army officer is "le traître." His status as an enemy of Peru under military occupation and his betrayal of the Señorita cast him and his accomplice--the "wicked woman"--in the adversarial role. In French melodrama the villain commonly had either a noble title or went by the title of his public or his honorific office, including military designation of rank. When he went by a first or last name it was frequently a German or Anglo-Saxon name to remind the audience of the recent occupation of Paris (Przybos 89-90). The other stock characters of melodrama are the *généreux* (the generous man) and the child (the sign of innocence). The Señorita's cousin and her husband Pedro (called "el caballero") are her protectors and guardians, while their grandchild Belisario acts as her confidant. In a symbolic scene the child becomes a priest who hears the Señorita's confessions.

Other specific topoi belonging to French melodrama are invoked in the play: the space of innocence, most commonly a garden, and the interrupted fête. During her courtship by the officer the Señorita appears behind a window grating. This is an acceptable substitution for the garden and it is in keeping with Hispanic tradition for the presentation of innocence. The interrupted fête is in this instance the cancelled wedding, an event that in melodrama sets in motion the expulsion of virtue from its natural terrain. The Señorita's fortune declines over the years as she adjusts to spinsterhood and assumes the care of her cousin's children.

La señorita de Tacna is on one level a parable of the creative process; on another, it is an allegory of the decline of a family and a country. But the structure of the play is based on the archetypal love triangle as it functions in fairy tales (Golluscio de Montoya 39). While the stories told to the child Belisario could be said to be similar to fairy tales, the versions Belisario created are laden with the mood of melodrama to entertain modern audiences. He fills his stories with overt scatology, scandalous sex and implicit violence, and he gives the triangle an unexpected twist in the process.

Melodrama is closely allied with prose fiction because of its origins and because it frequently takes its subject from the novel. Brooks notes that melodrama "generally operates in the mode of romance, though with its own

specific structures and characters" (*The Melodramatic Imagination* 30). Vargas Llosa's procedure is analogous in the sense that he combines a narrative structure with melodramatic elements to exploit the genre's theatricality.

There are two sets of triangular relationships in *La señorita de Tacna*, corresponding to the two acts of the play. In the first act, the triangle is constituted by the Señorita (the heroine), the Chilean army officer (her suitor/betrayer), and Carlota (the "wicked woman"). But before the wicked woman disrupts the idyll, sexual desire and aggression make their appearance in the form of a black man in disguise who dances with the Señorita at a masquerade ball during Carnival. He is discovered and brutally beaten for having dared to mix with upper society. This *paliza* (a caning), prefigures another *paliza* in the second act, where its metaphorical significance becomes apparent. In Mamaé's version the disguised black man is an attractive figure; he is graceful and manly, but he is also identified with the devil and, hence, is an archetype of the evil tempter. This ambivalent attitude toward him alerts the audience to an important contrast between an insipid Señorita with her conventional modesty and the vitality of the man from the black district of La Mar, which is also the rendez-vous point for the officer and Carlota when they become lovers. In fact, throughout the play this place functions as an aesthetic leitmotif of robust sexuality that complements the romantic theme of the Señorita's fan, on which a poet had dedicated a verse to her.

The author Belisario is self-conscious of the melodramatic elements in his story. He recognizes that the wicked woman belongs to a genre of sentimental literature, i.e. stories and romantic tales, but decides that she will be an interesting addition to his story: "Que la historia se llene de mujeres malas, son siempre más interesantes" (58). And foreshadowing developments in the second act, he remembers another wicked woman in Mamaé's stories, an Indian servant who received a beating for enigmatic reasons.

If the standard ritual of melodrama "involves the confrontation of clearly identified antagonists and the expulsion of one of them" (*The Melodramatic Imagination* 17), this situation becomes more complex in *La señorita de Tacna* with the introduction of the Indian woman. While Carlota plays the counterpart of the Señorita's "la niña de mírame y no me toques," the Indian woman adds social and mythic significance to the play. The twist is that Carlota, a married woman, has her affair with the officer openly and defiantly; she is an appealing fictional heroine (like Emma Bovary) and her sexual exploits add zest to the drama. As Belisario comes to recognize in his ruminations about the past, Mamaé's stories lacked entirely the explicitness (literary verisimilitude?) so important to contemporary aesthetic sensibility. The myth of the virtuous maiden who is morally superior to the woman seeking sexual fulfillment may have satisfied nineteenth century audiences, but modern theatre goers would not be convinced.

In the second act, a second triangular love relationship takes shape as Belisario disentangles confusing and often contradictory details gleaned from

Mamaé's stories. To begin, Mamaé did not link the Caballero (Pedro, the husband of the Señorita's cousin) and the Indian woman romantically. The latter, identified as a servant on the estate that Pedro oversaw in southern Peru, was also confused with Carlota and the Señorita: "A veces se llamaba Carlota. A veces era una india de Camaná, que, en los años veinte, por una razón muy enigmática, había sido azotada por un caballero. A menudo se confundían, se enveraban y había también ese abanico de nácar . . . con un verso hermoso garabateado en él por un poeta romántico" (58-59).

The story involving the Caballero and the Indian woman hinges on a letter written by the former referring to a beating he gave the woman. The Señorita read the letter in the privacy of her bathroom and admitted to feelings of shame and guilt: "algo terrible que le pasó a la Señorita sólo una vez en la vida" (129). However, when the incident materializes on stage, the caning of the Indian woman is transmuted into a voyeuristic scene of sexual violence and pleasure.[2]

The caning received by the black man and the Indian woman now become explicitly associated with the sex act, symbolizing the heightened sensuality associated with the dark races as well as their roles as scapegoats and victims of racial discrimination. It is notable that these characters do not have speaking parts, their silence concealing a hidden truth. We perceive in the muteness of the Black and the Indian their defenselessness and their exclusion from Peruvian society. This is the typical dumb show of melodrama, a "text of muteness" that is "pervasive and central to the representation of its most important meanings" (*The Melodramatic Imagination* 62).

Through the archetypes of racial difference and class consciousness, an allegory emerges of Peru's failed historical mission. Menelao, the patriarch of the family, is described as the quintessential gentleman who is aloof and above the rest of humanity. His heroic name and his association with gold and silver and with mythological creatures evoke the time of the conquest and Peru's colonial past. The family history proper, however, begins at the conclusion of the War of the Pacific, Peru's initial decline. The story of the Caballero and the Indian servant re-enacts man's archetypal expulsion from paradise. Man and many-faced woman--she is good, evil, instinctual--succumb to sin in a mythical land of agricultural promise, which they eventually lose. Pedro's failure to administer the estate not only ends in the family's dislocation and subsequent decline, but also suggests the misguided efforts of nineteenth century *criollos* to manage their acquired lands.

Betrayal, loss, expulsion and deterioration are the polysemic signs underlying the Señorita's story. Her victimization at the hands of the Chilean army officer and her silent and passive suffering in the lifelong servitude to her benefactors trace the melodramatic structure of virtue placed in peril, apparently fallen, and reduced to silence within the prevailing paternalistic system. What is lacking is the re-establishment of the heroine, who already appears beyond redemption in the opening scene of the play. Mamaé, now old

and decrepit, evokes aquatic images--bubbles, foam, waterfalls, rivers, rainfall, and deluge--in a dream-like, poetic monologue that materializes into a puddle at her feet, the result of the old woman's incontinence. According to Frye, "Water . . . traditionally belongs to the realm of existence below human life, the state of chaos and dissolution which follows ordinary death, or the reduction to the inorganic" (146). The spark of rebellion, however, has not been entirely extinguished; for Mamaé, after having spent her life caring for her cousin's children, proclaims (in her old age) her hatred of children. Her deteriorated condition may be emblematic of modern Peru, but the audience must decide whether and how its reconstitution can be achieved.

In "El teatro como ficción," the preface to his second play, *Kathie y el hipopótamo*, Mario Vargas Llosa alludes to the inherent relationship between fiction and melodrama: "La ficción es la vida que no fue, la que quisiéramos que fuera, que no hubiera sido o que volviera a ser, aquella vida, sin la cual la que tenemos nos resultaría siempre trunca" (9). Eric Bentley defines melodrama as "the Naturalism of the dream life," suggesting that its affective structure is close to dreams. The theatricality of Vargas Llosa's second play derives from self-dramatization rooted in the dream world of make-believe.

Self-indulgence and self-dramatization are the obvious drives behind Kathie Kennety's daily two-hour escape (the duration of the play) from her domestic life. A Lima matron--she is the wife of a banker--Kathie fulfills her desire "for a life that never was" dictating her memoirs of travels in exotic lands to her ghost writer Santiago Zavala. Both characters' names are fictitious in a double sense. Kathie justifies her use of a "nom de plume" because authors with Peruvian names are not taken seriously in Peru. Santiago Zavala is the name of a fictional character from Vargas Llosa's 1969 novel, *Conversación en la Catedral*. The meaning of their lives depends upon a common signifier: bourgeois attitudes. Kathie and her family represent the monied bourgeoisie with ties to North American capitalism, while Santiago is a leftist intellectual--he cites Marx and Sartre--who struggles against poverty and is consumed with rebellion against his social class. From the outset, the names of the characters, their hidden identities, the stage world consisting of a Paris-style loft in Lima and the use of euphemistic and exaggerated language, are signs of the artificiality and alienation of bourgeois life and the melodramatic situations inherent in it.

As the characters give free reign to their fantasies of sexual desire and revenge, melodramatic situations develop naturally. Furthermore, the loft and the escapist theme evoke the common melodramatic structure of the thwarted escape. Kathie's travels in Asia and Africa and her struggle with Johnny over his Donjuanesque behavior are analogous to the journey of the quest and re-enact respectively the "perilous journey" and the "crucial struggle" of the hero which must end with his or her foe's death. In playing out her struggle with her playboy husband, Kathie retaliates against Johnny's many infidelities with stories of her own adulteries; she names his surfing buddies, his friends and

even his brother Abel. In a final climactic scene, melodrama builds to a crescendo when Johnny, drunk and deeply wounded in his machismo, threatens to kill her and himself. In the process, Kathie helps him press the trigger of the gun that he is holding to his head. Johnny thus undergoes a ritual death, for Juan, the banker/husband, does not share this fate.

Frye considers the romance quest as analogous to rituals and dreams: "Translated into dream terms, the quest romance is the search of the libido or desiring self for a fulfillment that will deliver it from the anxieties of reality" (193). Similarly, it is made clear toward the end of the play that Kathie's daily interlude at her loft--where she can act out her desires for sex and adventure, for power and revenge--is a respite from domestic life, not a defection from it.

Santiago's personal melodrama turns on false and inflated self-importance. Purportedly, he is a literature professor, but the reader of Vargas Llosa's novels recognizes that Santiago is the crest-fallen and insignificant character from *Conversación en la Catedral*. His intellectual and sexual role model is the prodigious Victor Hugo, but his life is diametrically opposed to his fantasies. His world is replete with escapades with college coeds (all named Adèle); however, wallowing in self-pity and self-contradiction, he possesses a guilty conscience about his impoverished household and fears his wife's recriminations.

Once again, the love triangle is the basis for the play's overall structure and the characters function as psychic signs. The triangle has many variations, beginning with a sentimental love story (Kathie and her first love, a youth called Victor and Juan before they married) and culminating in the primordial image of mating hippopotamuses when one male triumphs over his rival (presumable a scene taken from one of her travel stories). An intertextual relationship between the real and fictional characters in the two love triangles bears this out: Kathie, Victor and Juan, on the one hand, and Santiago (identified as Victor Hugo), Ana and Adèle, on the other, bring immediately to mind the romantic (and melodramatic) love stories of not only Don Juan and Doña Ana but also Victor Hugo and Adèle Foucher. By intermingling fictional and real worlds, Vargas Llosa is insisting that the relationships among the characters must be understood in terms of their private worlds of desire, imagination and fantasy.

An intrinsic feature of melodrama is the recourse to rhetorical excess. In *Kathie y el hipopótamo*, language is heavily dependent on both hyperbole and sexual euphemisms. Santiago's style is a constant reaching toward sublimity as he "improves" Kathie's dictated travel stories that are already overlaid with melodramatic exaltation. In contrast, crass euphemistic language is used to facilitate talk about love and sex, creating easy humor. Highly rhetorical language and bawdy euphemisms mesh to give recourse to desire as well as to create a deformed bourgeois perspective on society. Robertson Davies explains the expressive language of melodrama in Jungian terms as

arising from the unconscious and the "high-flown language corresponds to the style of the archetypes" (159).

As in traditional melodrama, the language of desire cries aloud in *Kathie y el hipopótamo*, and desire itself prevails. The elaborate game that encompasses the make-believe world of the stage and the real world beyond it may be a banal game; however, as Santiago explains, "Al menos no hemos perdido la imaginación, los deseos. No debemos dejar que nos quiten este juguete porque no tenemos otro" (142). However, Mario Vargas Llosa treats a melodramatic situation ironically. The end of the play reveals the complicity of the characters--which also includes the audience--to expose the false consciousness of the bourgeoisie.

In *La Chunga* a bordello provides an escape from reality for lower class characters living in the provincial town of Piura in northern Peru. Intertextually, the play's setting and characters first appear in Vargas Llosa's 1966 novel *La casa verde*, the bordello of the same name that functions as a leitmotif for the thematic structure of the play. On another level, Vargas Llosa modifies the melodramatic convention of the secret in the process of discovery. In traditional melodrama, the element of secrecy serves to dramatize the contrast between good and evil; here, it works to expose the intricate connection and interplay between the two.

In the play, a new Vargasllosian twist is given to the love triangle through an allusion to a lesbian relationship. The affair (involving La Chunga, the owner of the bordello; the stunning La Meche; and her lover/pimp Josefino) is shrouded in secrecy and mystery for the three bar customers--Lituma, Mono and José--and by extension, for the audience as well. La Meche's disappearance the night Josefino sells her to La Chunga to clear up his gambling debt either resulted in her murder by Josefina and/or La Chunga or, with La Chunga's assistance, led to her escape from Josefino and from becoming a whore in the process. The customer's fascination with this enigma results in a relativistic truth about La Meche's ultimate fate (Einstein's name, in fact, figures in the context of the play). Although the enigma remains unresolved for the characters, the audience understands that the relationship consists of the exploiters (La Chunga and Josefino) versus the exploited (La Meche), and that there is a nexus between sexuality and money.

The melodramatic fascination with the underworld and the affinities of prostitution with industrial capitalism were fully explored by nineteenth-century novelists. Brooks quotes Georg Simmel to the effect that "Prostitution and money are counterparts in terms of the social relation each engenders" ("The Mark of the Beast" 132). In *La Chunga* this melodramatic fascination with the world of prostitution is combined with an exploration of human relationships in contemporary capitalist society.

An affinity between La Chunga and the pimp is clearly established when she admits: "Será que yo y Josefino somos iguales" (103). But when the latter proposes a business deal to run a high class bordello together, La Chunga

refuses without giving a reason. La Chunga's aloofness in the play is necessary to maintain an atmosphere of mystery and menace, but through intertextual inference we are reminded of her aptitude for business; in *La casa verde* she builds and successfully administers her own bar and bordello.

As competitors in exploitation, La Chunga and Josefino would appear to be equals, but of the two the male reveals himself to be the strongest. Though cynical about men and seemingly impervious to male domination, La Chunga is forced to submit to Josefino in an act of fellatio. This scene of forced sexual submission takes on an even more ambiguous tone than the sexual fantasies that Lituma, Mono and José take turns imagining.

The fantasized scenes are entirely in keeping with the melodramatic tone created in Pedro Camacho's soap operas in *La tía Julia y el escribidor*. In *La Chunga*, sentimental Lituma imagines proposing marriage to La Meche to regenerate himself through love. Mono, seeking atonement for having sodomized a young girl, conjures up a vision of lesbian lovers whipping him to the point of orgasm. And José indulges his voyeurism, fantasizing a love scene between La Chunga and La Meche. Also, on the linguistic level, as in Camacho's sentimental and sordid stories, the tawdry nature of low human passions directly opposes another level of moralistic rhetoric and the noble sentiments expressed by La Chunga. The play has been aptly described as "operatic," its style "marked by dramatic and lofty statements" (Berman 282).

In *La Chunga* the narrative sequencing of the bar clientele drinking and gambling away an evening is consistently punctuated with melodrama: speculations about the nature of the relationship between the two women lead to fantasies and revelations of personal obsessions, and obliterate any real concern for La Meche's fate. The unresolved enigma of her destiny wears on the characters and has a negative effect on them. As is proper in melodrama, secrecy signifies a degeneration of human intercourse and of communal life (Nadjer 162). But for the audience the juxtaposition of La Meche's innocence and the barflies' ignorance of her exploiters becomes a distancing device designed to alert us to our own gullibility about capitalistic exploitation.

Mario Vargas Llosa, perhaps Latin America's most versatile and innovative contemporary writer, takes advantage of melodrama's appeal as evinced in popular genres to create affective responses in his audience; at the same time he has recourse to irony, achieved through the distancing devices of self-reflexivity and narrativity. With this synthesizing strategy he deflates the exaggeration of melodrama, as he confronts the audience with real social problems. Moreover, he goes to great lengths to avoid the conventional oppositions and solutions to the conflicts posited in traditional melodrama, which make the audience participate emotionally in seeing justice triumph. All three plays leave it to the audience to debate the social contradictions of the present historical moment.

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Notes

1. Recent studies of Mario Vargas Llosa's plays have dealt with metaliterary themes (see Boschetto), theatre and reality (Dauster), theatre and autobiography (Magnarelli), and structural, temporal and linguistic implications (Gerdes, Rabell, Rivera-Rodas, and Rosser). See also interview (Espinosa Domínguez).

2. This scene and a corresponding one in the first act (which provided a peep show of Carlota and the officer making love) sustain Vargas Llosa's belief that sex, melodrama, rebellion and violence convert literature into a seductive experience: "no novel arouses my fervent enthusiasm, holds me spellbound, fulfills me, unless it acts, if only to a slight degree, as an erotic stimulant. I have noted that my excitement is all the more profound when the sexual element is neither exclusive nor dominant, but instead complemented by other materials, integrated in a complex and diverse context, as happens in real life" (The Perpetual Orgy 25).

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