

## ART CORNER

# The colour of light\*

JM Mascaró

For me sunlight is something that intimately impregnates every instant, every life experience, every memory. And, just like film sequences, they are accompanied by a sound, a murmur or a melody, intensely linked to them.

Habitually, light is not only white nor is it neutral. It has ranges of changing colours and tones. It varies with time, the month, the geographical location. This has been known for centuries and, thus, light has been reproduced, with skill or talent, by painters of all the schools, who have captured it in variety of hues. My eye retains the memory of the yellow tone, with reddish glints radiated in *The Spinners* by Velazquez, the coppery sparks of *Susanna and the Elders* by Rembrandt, the rosy tones reflected in Rubens nudes—as in *The Three Graces*—and the cold grays of *The Lamentation over the Dead Christ* by Andrea Mantegna.

But now, I no longer want to refer to paintings but rather to the colour of the light at certain moments. Of its influence on memories and, perhaps also—although this would be going much further—on the way events develop.

There are incidents, that one remembers or reads about, in which this light plays an important role. Light, scarce and cold, barely white amongst the grays and leaden blues, of the dawns when, a century and a half ago, duels were played out: one man mortally wounded another over a futile quarrel or disputed love. This same light soon cooled the blood which, more scarlet than red and soon to turn black, sprang from the wound and settled the quarrel (duels to the death or to first blood, where blood-letting cleared the affront). But was the time chosen because of the light? A duel in full sunlight is unimaginable, that vague resplendence was needed, that mist. Sunlight also played a leading role when Menelaus confronted Paris to take his revenge for the abduction of Helen. Here, the sun set swiftly, allowing the handsome abductor to escape with his life.

Light is blinding and wounding, molten silver, when the sun reflects on sea or snow. Sharp with cobalt blue reflections on glaciers. Warm, like honey and molten toffee, on sunny summer evenings. And at the end of the day, just before it hides away overnight, there are explosions of fire amongst leaden archipelagos, while the clouds shift from orange to white, to grey, to pewter hues, and dark black, in a repeated sundown ritual that I never tire of watching.

Some situations require a certain light. Love, troubles, secrets which have to be whispered, which cannot be voiced, in the light of near dawn, of dusk, or even in the shadow of the night. Haven't you noticed that a flavoursome soup or broth tastes better in the half light? Probably our sense of taste can better appreciate the aroma when the eye is not clamorously assaulted by luminous stimuli that dilute everything else. A smell is also more penetrating in the dark. Doesn't the perfume of the jasmine travel further in the fresh and damp atmosphere of the night than in the morning?

The same thing happens for me with events and memories: each one has its light, its color, and even its sounds. In my memories, the warm tones of mid morning and early evening light predominate. Warm light with soft shades of yellow and pink, ripe peach skin, fine earthy dust. This is the tint I see in my memories. Was the light really like that or is my memory playing tricks? Do I add this to it? Are these the times of day—dawn, the beginning of the evening—when my experiences have been most intense, when I have been most myself, when I have best been able to express what I feel?

Or is it that I relive the past adding the background to heighten the enjoyment of the memory?



**Figure 1.** This work by René Magritte (1898-1967), painted in 1954, is known as *The Empire of Lights*. The house contrasts with trees in half shadow, under a sky that is still clear. The name can seem paradoxical for a work which contains more shadow than light. But, is not a tenuous sparkle more visible in the dark than a brilliant flash in broad daylight? It thus shows how a subtle internal glow emanating from a person or home, can become a dazzling protagonist.

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\*Excerpt from a speech made in response to a day of homage following his retirement from his academic position (November 15, 2002).



**Figure 2.** In his later years (in 1964), René Magritte painted a new version of this painting (the most well-known version dates from 1958 and hangs in the Chicago Institute of Art). Like most of his works, it has a peculiar title: *The banquet* (Banquet of light? Feast for the senses?). The painting's singularity lies in the fact that the sun rising above the horizon is clearly seen through the trees which hide it. That is how it happens in dreams or in the imagination. We can see the sun hidden, or whatever we want, simply by closing our eyes. This dawn scene could also relate to the title if we interpret it as symbolic of the daybreak which follows the long soiree of dialogue in Plato's *Banquet*. But the painter himself said his pictures must be interpreted according to what they actually show, without looking for any hidden meaning. Look at what is there without trying to delve into underlying intention. Thus, these commentaries are more an expression of my understanding rather than Magritte's own thoughts when he painted the works; an intellectual game which combines perceptual and analytical pleasure, like when someone considers an apple and how it relates to them (which may well not be the same as for the next person).

But it is not only these times of day and types of light that count. Half light, shadow, the night, are also important. Opaque shadow, of satin and velvet. Shadow that is cool and damp, but not cold. Shadow where sounds and perfumes accompany the memory. And, if my eyes are closed, I prefer to leave them so, for this gives me the impression that when I lift my eyelids I will still be there, in that present now so long ago.

Sometimes when the sun is setting, or now, at such a moving event, I think my whole life can be seen as a single day. I had my dawn, the morning and afternoon passed by, the day was coming to an end. I find myself now at that moment when the full splendor of the sunset has passed, when the sky is still tinged with pink and the clouds are turning from white to grey. I still want to fill myself with

light, breathe it, feel it, hear its sound. Live intensely and serenely, in work and at leisure, along with those I call my own (my family and friends). And to prepare myself to increasingly perceive the perfume which precedes the darkness. The opaque darkness of a night with no promise of a new dawn.

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## Oratory

*“Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves,  
For the rights of all who are destitute.  
Speak up and judge fairly;  
Defend the rights of the poor and needy.”*  
Proverbs, 31: 8-9

The best way to use words confidently is to have a dictionary to hand. There, words acquire a certain birth certificate, identity document, personality, and, very nearly, a life of their own. With this conviction, and following my own preference and advice, I looked up “oratory” and I found the following definition: “the art of talking eloquently, of delighting, persuading and moving through the spoken word.” And this seems to me a perfectly fitting term for the art of José María Mascaró Ballester, chair of Dermatology and Honorary President of the Spanish Academy of Dermatology and Venereology (AEDV).

I remember an international congress on pediatric dermatology held in Milan many years ago now. Mascaró opened the event, and I was in the audience. He made a beautiful presentation full of anecdotes, inspiration and thanks...in Italian, Spanish, English and French! The content was beautiful. It moved and persuaded the audience. It was a beautiful exercise in verbal literature, showing him to be a great speaker, a great writer, a great artist.

I don't know if he would have had teachers like Lisias, clear and simple, or like Isocrates, with elaborate and complex arguments, or like Demosthenes, willful and persevering. But what is clear is that his speeches are full of poetry, intimacy, and freshness.

Lope de Vega said: “I don't know if there are in this world, words as effective, nor orators as eloquent, as tears.”

Well, “The colour of light” by José María Mascaró Ballester reduced me to tears. How about you?

A GUERRA TAPIA