

Bradley J. Nelson. *The Persistence of Presence: Emblem and Ritual in Baroque Spain*.

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Bradley J. Nelson's *The Persistence of Presence* investigates the connection between baroque emblems in their numerous cultural and social contexts and transformations in early modern Spanish literature. The theoretical foundation of Nelson's study is the concept of presence. The subject of presence was initially conceptualized in Heidegger's reflections on the "metaphysics of presence," which in turn prompted Derrida's critical assessment of the term. In the introduction, Nelson states that by presence he refers to "the way in which certain encounters or events compel us to transcend our mundane existence and to contemplate what appears to be a higher, more universal — more *real* — experience of meaning and being" (3, his emphasis). However, as the discussion unfolds, it becomes apparent that Nelson's understanding of the term in the context of emblematics mainly relies on the work of Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, whose theory of presence emphasizes the material, tangible, and spatial features of the relationship between the world and its objects including the impact of objects on human bodies (*Production of Presence* [2004], xiii). Applying Gumbrecht's theory, Nelson uses two key concepts for the

study of the baroque emblem: First, that any communicative act implies an actual “production of presence” (4–5, 19). Second, that an aspect of this production manifests itself in the “ritual performance of presence”(4), a theory originally put forward in the context of the Middle Ages that in Nelson’s study becomes appropriate as it resonates with the use of pictures and words in ritual practices during the Renaissance and the baroque.

The materialistic and religious sides of the philosophy of presence mirror the terminology employed in early emblem theory where emblems are described as a composition in which the iconic body and the verbal soul strive to convey an allegorical message. Moreover, the notion of presence represents a conceptual paradigm for Nelson to argue that emblematic constructions including the “dramatic staging of emblematic moments” (24) have a central place in the production of presence in early modern Spain. During the staging of mass spectacles, the manipulation of emblems as spiritual and political metaphors contribute to materialize — literally to make present — the ideals of Counter-Reformation ideology while guiding the audience in the interpretation of symbolic thought.

The Persistence of Presence consists of three main parts: “The Emblem” (chapters 1–2), “Applied Emblematics” (chapters 3–5), and “Bodies and Signs” (chapters 6–7). Part 1 addresses the subject of emblematic reception and theory — or resistance to it — in the context of Spain’s imperial project through a compelling analysis of Juan de Borja’s *Empresas morales* and Juan de Horozco Covarrubias’s *Emblemas morales*. Part 2 builds on the notion that baroque theater and other types of public performances serve as a vehicle to assert collective interpretations of Spanish national identity while at the same time contributes to advance the “construction of modern subjectivities” (24). It contains individual chapters on Lope de Vega’s *El mundo nuevo descubierto por Cristóbal Colón*, Calderón’s *El gran mercado del mundo*, and *El alcalde de Zalamea*. In part 3, Nelson connects the disenchanted world-view of the baroque with the prevailing feeling of emptiness — and by the same token never ending desire for fulfillment — that he describes as crucial for emblematic representations. While considering both Gracián’s disembodied modern subject and Cervantes’ *Persiles* in the light of a complex relationship between language and body, Nelson argues that in a world of ontological and epistemological uncertainty the metaphysical quest for truth has become subjective.

Overall, Nelson’s book presents an ambitious incursion into the production and reception of presence through the use of emblems in literary works. It is worth noting that for him an emblem is a medium — a channel — through which an act of communication between the sender and receiver takes place. Nelson’s emphasis relies not on the study of the literary emblem as a source of meaning — an iconographic enigma that needs to be solved — but rather on the material processes and practices that surround the emblematic form itself. His distinct methodology has the potential to open up alternative interpretations within the field of emblem studies. Nelson’s approach constitutes an original contribution to Spanish

emblematics with its careful analysis and thorough consideration of relevant theories.

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