theories and methodologies

The Baroque as a Problem of Thought

WILLIAM EGGINTON

We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality—judiciously, if you will—we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors . . . and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do.
—Aide to George W. Bush, quoted by Ronald Suskind[1]

WHY THE BAROQUE? WHY NOW? AS MANY HAVE ARGUED, THE GENERAL AESTHETIC TREND OF THE LATE TWENTIETH TO EARLY TWENTY-FIRST centuries, often called postmodern, can perhaps more usefully be labeled neobaroque.[2] Is the neobaroque turn of the twentieth century something akin to the neoclassicism of the sixteenth century, or the neo-Gothicism of the nineteenth? Or, on an even more condensed scale, is it similar to the rapid returns of previously dismissed fashion decades, as evidenced by the proliferation in the early years of this century of those beads and bellbottoms associated with flower children and the age of Aquarius?

The baroque's return, if it is a return at all, has nothing to do with the recycling of culture that these examples represent. Instead, the baroque must be understood as the aesthetic counterpart to a problem of thought that is coterminous with that time in the West we have learned to call modernity, stretching from the sixteenth century to the present:[3] the problem of appearances and the reality they purport to represent. A problem of thought, however, is not yet a philosophical problem. A problem of thought affects or unsettles an entire culture in the largest possible sense, permeates its very foundations, and finds expression in its plastic art, stories, performances, and philosophy as well as its social organization and politics. Western culture since the sixteenth century has been entangled in a particular problem of thought, and if the baroque aesthetics of the seventeenth century are a sign of its inception, the neobaroque aesthetics of the present are a sign, if not of its demise, then of the exhaustion of all previous attempts to solve, undo, or otherwise remove this problem.

The problem is in some sense ideal. It is the principle of organization of a culture and age, but it only exists in the expressions it

WILLIAM EGGINTON, professor of German and Romance languages and literatures at the Johns Hopkins University, is the author of *How the World Became a Stage* (State U of New York P, 2003), *Perversity and Ethics* (Stanford UP, 2006), *A Wrinkle in History* (Davies Group, 2007), and *The Philosopher's Desire* (Stanford UP, 2007).

© 2009 BY THE MODERN LANGUAGE ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2009.124.1.143 Published online by Cambridge University Press

engenders. For without its terms and forms, the problem itself is nothing. In the case of modernity, the problem of thought concerns the relation of appearances to the world they ostensibly represent. The philosophical paradigm that emerges slowly out of centuries of wrestling with this problem is modern epistemology, as epitomized in the works of Immanuel Kant. But this problem is not exclusively philosophical; as I have argued elsewhere, it imbued the skills and practices of generations of people who learned to express an anxiety about appearance's relation to reality in the way they enacted spectacle, read literature, viewed art, organized political power, and thought of space.[4] Let us stipulate a definition: modernity's fundamental problem of thought is that the subject of knowledge can only approach the world through a veil of appearances; truth is defined as the adequation of our knowledge to the world thus veiled; hence, inquiry of any kind must be guided by the reduction of whatever difference exists between the appearances and the world as it is. The problem (or why it remains a problem) is that subjects of knowledge only obtain knowledge via their senses, via how things appear; thus, the truth sought will always be corrupted by appearances.

The philosophical language I am using is borrowed from Kant. In his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781, 1789) and later works, Kant institutionalized the distinction between appearances and the things they represent, and claimed that a philosophy that does not make this distinction must ultimately fall into error. While he argues that this distinction requires that certain domains will remain eternally veiled to human knowledge, he also shows with intricate precision how maintaining this difference allows us to have an exact science of appearances and thus be able to say with certainty how appearances interact with one another in time and space. Furthermore, the maintenance of a realm that is out of bounds for human knowledge permits Kant to "make room for faith" (115) and to allow for human freedom—faith and freedom being concepts that would have no place in a world in which the human mind could plumb the depths of how things were in themselves.

Beginning in the late sixteenth century, two hundred years before Kant systematized this distinction, European culture developed a general strategy for expressing the problem we have just touched on in its philosophical form. This strategy, which I call the major strategy of the baroque, assumes the existence of a veil of appearances and then suggests the possibility of a space opening just beyond those appearances where truth resides.[5] In painting and architecture, this strategy corresponds to the well-known baroque techniques of trompe l'oeil, anamorphosis, and what Heinrich Wölfflin referred to as the painterly style (30), in which the borders between bodies are blurred and spaces in the painting are left unclear. By way of these techniques, along with other versions of what José Antonio Maravall designated as the trope of incompleteness (*Culture* 212), recipients are drawn in by a promise of fulfillment beyond the surface, their desire ignited by an illusory depth, always just beyond grasp. This strategy accounts for Maravall's seemingly exaggerated claim that the baroque corresponds to an enormous apparatus of propaganda deployed by an alliance of entrenched interests in early modern Europe and the colonial world, dedicated to entrancing the minds of a newly mobile populace with the promise of a spiritual fulfillment to be had in another life for the small price of identifying with the interests of powerful elites in this one.[6]

While the major strategy has dominated how Western culture grapples with the baroque problem of thought, it is not the only way. The other strategy that emerged at the time, what I have called the minor strategy, borrowing the term from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's theorization of a minor literature, was—and is perhaps still—less common. Minor literature "deterritorializes" ordinary language use, following the "lines of flight"

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2009.124.1.143 Published online by Cambridge University Press

from the normal structures of sense that inhabit such major language (21). Against the major strategy, which affirms the reality behind appearances by either negating the world or emphasizing its nature as mere appearance, the minor strategy follows its lines of flight to show that the supposed purity behind the wall of appearances is already corrupted by the distinction that created it.

Given my account of historical baroque born of one global empire and its major strategy, one can see grounds for comparison with the politics of representation practiced by a present-day political class with its own aspirations to empire. The epigraph for this essay comes from a *New York Times Magazine* exposé of some of the key advisers to the administration of George W. Bush, and their attitude toward "reality" has profound similarities to that underlying the baroque. The use of the media to rally support behind policies that would founder without that support is a clear case of a baroque manipulation of appearances for the purpose of political gain. The potential voters and taxpayers who have lent their support to "the war on terror" and the war in Iraq have done so largely and often because of their belief in a certain reality projected beyond the appearances. The Bush representation apparatus, for example, has been successful in convincing vast swaths of voters that behind the necessary and lamentable apparatus of representation—the polls, the concocted photo ops, the faked newscasts and staged "town hall" meetings—President Bush is a man of "character." Indeed, as was widely reported, many Americans cited issues of character and value as the reason they voted for him in 2004. The paradox is that no one is (or very few are) actually taken in by the performance, in the sense of not realizing that it is a performance; the baroque comes in when, in the midst of the performance, and in full knowledge of its artifice, the viewer becomes convinced that the artifice in fact refers to some truth, just beyond the camera's glare.

This effect is not limited to outright political representation such as campaign programming or the manipulation of the news media that was so prevalent during the lead-up to the Iraq war. The entertainment industry can be counted on to produce content for television and film that coheres with the overall message coming from the centers of political power. As Slavoj Žižek wrote in an article in the *Guardian*, the wildly successful Fox series *24*, in which Kiefer Sutherland plays a government antiterrorism agent, abets the administration's efforts to minimize criticism of its handling of terror suspects. The show's hook is that it plays in "real" time and that each of the season's twenty-four hour-long episodes corresponds to an hour of one continuous day in the life of the agent, Jack Bauer. The show is obviously fiction, and no one among its producers or audience would argue the opposite. Nevertheless, precisely in its function as artifice it refers implicitly to a reality that is "out there," beyond representation, independent of its fictitious message. Because everyone can comfortably agree that this is the case, we the viewers can end up being force-fed a seemingly neutral and independent reality that is in fact a specific political version of reality. In the case of *24*, the "real time" of the narrative (which, as Žižek points out, is augmented by the fact that even the time for commercial breaks is counted among the sixty minutes) contributes to the sense of urgency that if Jack and his well-meaning colleagues don't get the answers they need, by whatever means necessary, millions of innocent people will die in a catastrophic terrorist event. In such circumstances we obviously have to have some flexibility around issues like the torture of detainees.

Of course, the show is fiction. Still, our knowledge of that in no way stops us from importing the plot structure—urgency of threat requires unscrupulous means—into the neutral and independent reality beyond our television screens. This is precisely how major

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2009.124.1.143 Published online by Cambridge University Press

baroque strategies function: viewers are faced with a screen that is apparently separated from a reality veiled by it; the images on the screen suggest a certain vision of that reality; and the viewers believe they go on to occupy that real space, a space independent of the screen, when in fact they are merely operating in another version of the original representation.

To take a classic example from the seventeenth-century theater, an audience of commoners for a performance of Lope de Vega's *Fuenteovejuna* in Hapsburg Madrid would go to the theater to witness the story of a popular uprising against an abusive nobleman. When the normally cowering villagers rise up against the nobleman, they do so in the name of their honor—"Vosotros," he asks them in shock, "¿honor tenéis?" ("You people have honor?"; my trans.)—and the plot of the play clearly requires that the audience be unified in saying, yes, these men have honor (2.989).[7] The viewers certainly know they are watching a play, but it cannot escape them that they too are commoners, and if the commoners in the play have honor, then why not they themselves? Thus, the reality hiding behind the play, supposedly independent, is colored by a specific set of presuppositions that, in this case, help the commoners leaving the theater feel more invested in a system that taxes them to maintain a landed elite and gives them few rights, privileges, or protections against that elite.

This, then, is the basic structure of baroque representation. But this is not the entire story. Once the fundamental architecture of baroque representation has been established, another avenue is created, another strategy becomes possible. This second, minor strategy does not take the obvious path of denying the reality behind the veil. On that path, the reporter who is the target of the Bush adviser's ridicule in the above epigraph might answer that he doesn't buy any of that reality stuff either. Instead, the baroque's minor strategy takes the major strategy at its word, nestling into the representation and affirming it, albeit ironically, not as a reference to a reality but as reality itself. Far from accepting the presupposition of two opposing levels—a representation and a reality independent of that representation— this strategy undermines our ability to make that distinction in the first place. Not, however, to lead us further astray from reality itself but rather to make us aware, to remind us, that we are always, at any level, involved with mediation.[8]

In Miguel de Cervantes's *entremés* (interlude) *El retablo de las maravillas* ("The Stage of Wonders"), two traveling confidence artists set up an empty stage in a village and invite the villagers to come witness their marvelous magical theater. As the townspeople gather around, the lead con man, Chanfalla, explains to them that the stage of wonders works according to a simple rule. Only those of pure blood and unstained honor will be able to see the marvelous visions playing on its boards. With this, the musician begins to play, and Chanfalla starts to narrate an extraordinary spectacle. Each of the spectators pretends to see something onstage, and they all thus contribute to their own fleecing. Toward the end of the performance, they are joined by an officer who demands, as is his legal right, that the commoners give up their homes for the king's troops. Since he does not acknowledge seeing anything on the stage, the villagers accuse him of being a *converso* (a converted Jew), and the play ends with their being beaten by the soldiers.[9]

By comparing this interlude with Lope's classic drama, we get a clear sense of how the minor strategy works within and against the major strategy. The major strategy posits a separation between a representation and the reality hidden behind it in order to smuggle certain presuppositions into another representation that it will try to sell as reality itself. The minor strategy, in contrast, takes a representation of the major strategy as the starting point: in Lope's play, the claim to honor among com-

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2009.124.1.143 Published online by Cambridge University Press

moners that is smuggled into the representation of reality. Next it lets that represented reality play itself out according to its own rules. The villagers in Cervantes's interlude as well as any commoners watching the interlude are forced to confront the reality that their honor is nothing but a play they are putting on for one another—a representation referring to no other reality than itself. This last revelation occurs when the villagers try to import the honor they are representing to one another into the "real" world of the soldiers' demands on their homes, at which point their honor is treated like the fantasy scenario it really is.

Despite the obvious differences, the ways culture works in our present time and in the time of the Spanish empire have much in common. This argument cannot be made through a list of similarities and differences; if that method were followed, the differences would always win. Instead, recognizing the similarities depends on unearthing the ways in which a culture's most fundamental presuppositions, its problem of thought, inhere in specific cultural products and configurations. Compared with the present-day United States empire, the Spanish empire of the seventeenth century had a different principal language, a different belief system, different military possibilities, and different media at its disposal (to tick off only a few differences from a potentially infinite list). Nevertheless, the deployment of available media for the purpose of attracting and shaping compliant subjects relies on profoundly analogous means in the two eras. And just as artists and thinkers developed strategies for undermining those means in the age of the historical baroque, artists and thinkers are doing the same today, and the aesthetic forms they are producing share in the strategies deployed by their forebears. Still, this neobaroque is not, as I said before, a return.[10]

Those who promoted the minor strategy in the seventeenth century were in a tiny minority. The promise of a truth just beyond the veil of appearances proffered by the major strategy was powerful, and it has held Western culture in its grasp for four hundred years. This grasp has been weakening throughout the last century, though, and the ascendance of the minor strategy in philosophy, in art, in literature is a sign that the major strategy may be vulnerable. It is certainly not gone, as can be seen in the chortling rhetoric of Bush's yes-men. However, the minor strategy offers an alternative to those who despair that the control of the media by the few and the powerful perpetuates the existing order. This despair is seen by many as going hand in hand with postmodern cynicism, relativism, and the denial of truth. Is not, then, the kind of thought and aesthetics I am describing merely the flip side of the political denial of reality exhibited in the epigraph? Does not the minor strategy of the baroque lead to further despair, as we give up all anchor holds on the real and are swept away on a tide of relativism, in which no source is more trustworthy than another and no way out is to be found?

The truth, I would claim, is the opposite. The minor strategy offers no comfort to the enemies of reality. The enemies of reality think they determine reality, because they control the media. The minor baroque response is not merely to insist on yet another reality, which we know can only come to us in a mediated form. Instead, the minor strategy focuses on the concrete reality of mediation itself, and hence it produces a thought, an art, a literature, or a politics that does not deny the real but focuses on how the media are real even while they try to make us believe that their reality, the reality in which we live, is always somewhere else.

Notes

1. See Penny 212 for quotation and discussion.

2. See, e.g., Calabrese; Ndalianis; Ortega; and Lambert. As Marina Brownlee, who is an expert in medieval

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2009.124.1.143 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and early modern culture, writes, "[T]he postmodern bears a strong resemblance to the cultural climate of the baroque" (108). John Beverley also cites this connection, in the context of the importance of the Cuban writer Severo Sarduy to a postmodern baroque, in "Going Baroque?" (29). Lois Parkinson Zamora, in contrast, strongly disputes this association (xvi). See as well *Eine barocke Party*, a collection of essays in German that describe current artistic production in the terminology of the baroque (Chapman et al.). The resemblance and possible differences between the two is one of the main topics of this essay, as it is of the book project from which it is drawn, "The Theater of Truth: The Ideology of Baroque and Neobaroque Aesthetics."

3. Francesco Guardiani similarly argues for an understanding of the baroque and neobaroque as sorts of bookends to, or the opening and closing of, modernity.

4. See Egginton, *How the World Became a Stage*.

5. The distinction between illusion and truth in some form or another has always existed. What is modern about the distinction in the form it takes here is that the corruption of appearances is specifically related to sensory perception and based on developments in optics and their application to practices of visual representation. That reality as it really is seems irretrievably lost once the lessons of perspective are widely disseminated corroborates to some extent Walter Benjamin's thesis that modernity is founded on a sense of melancholy for the loss of tradition, the past, and the stability it offers, and that the aesthetic sign and origin of this melancholy is the baroque. See Benjamin 135–36 and Buci-Glucksmann, *La raison* 58. Gregg Lambert lucidly comments on these passages, along with their relation to the problem of the return of the baroque (68–73). Christine Buci-Gluckmann's piece in *Eine barocke Party*, "Von den Allegorien des Barock zu den Allegorien der Indifferenz," is especially interesting in this regard. In it she argues that the new baroque lacks the melancholy sense of loss of the historical baroque, that its allegories are actually "meta-allegories of appearances," and that today's "second-order Baroque plays in an ironic way with the real" (148, 152; my trans.). As I explain elsewhere, I have in part derived the distinction between major and minor from Deleuze and Guattari's *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*. See my "The Baroque House of Reason."

6. The manipulation of masses by elites is not a modern phenomenon; what is specific to baroque ideology is how that manipulation relies on a theatrical separation of social roles and a deeper, stable truth that lies behind them. Baroque subjects know they can play different roles; the purpose of ideology then becomes to make them want to play one rather than another, to make them identify with that role and hence be identified by those around them as in reality being or having what those others desire. The literary examples below are meant to illustrate this idea.

7. See Maravall's reading of these lines in *Teatro* 117.

8. Indeed, in my mind it is the coexistence of the minor with the major strategy that allows scholars who essentially agree with Maravall's thesis of social control and propaganda to simultaneously stress antiestablishmentarian aspects of baroque culture. For instance, Fernando de la Flor writes that the Hispanic baroque tends to "deconstruct and pervert" class interests, at the same time as it upholds them (19). George Mariscal also takes issue with the notion of a monologic baroque culture and argues for "a wide range of discourses and practices" representing various subjective strategies (5). Finally, Fernando Ordóñez, in a piece that draws on both of these scholars' work, argues for similarly contradictory meanings in the works of Gracián and Quevedo (84).

9. See Egginton and Castillo for an extended reading.

10. Although Gregg Lambert titles his study *The Return of the Baroque*, his thesis is not in conflict with this claim. As he writes, the most provocative implication of his hypothesis "is that there is nothing particularly modern about the postmodern, but that it could be understood, in a certain sense, as a 'return of the Baroque'" (2). That said, his hypothesis concerns the existence of "two fundamentally opposing currents of cultural form," which underlie distinctions between the historical baroque and previous forms as well as those between postmodernism and previous forms. In this sense, Lambert's notion of the baroque is compatible with a view that understands it as a concurrent possibility of modernity.

Works Cited

Benjamin, Walter. *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama*. Trans. John Osborne. London: Verso, 1977. Print.

Beverley, John. "Going Baroque?" *Boundary 2* 15.3 (1988): 27–39. Print.

Brownlee, Marina S. "Postmodernism and the Baroque in María de Zayas." *Cultural Authority in Golden Age Spain*. Ed. Brownlee and Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1995. 107–30. Print.

Buci-Glucksmann, Christine. *La raison baroque: De Baudelaire à Benjamin*. Paris: Galilée, 1984. Print.

———. "Von den Allegorien des Barock zu den Allegorien der Indifferenz." Chapman et al. 148–53.

Calabrese, Omar. *Neo-Baroque: A Sign of the Times*. Trans. Charles Lambert. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1992. Print.

Cervantes, Miguel de. *El retablo de las maravillas. Ocho comedias y ocho entremeses nuevos, nunca representados*. Madrid, 1615. 243v–48r. Ed. Florencio Sevilla Arroyo. *Biblioteca virtual Miguel de Cervantes*. Web. 22 Aug. 2008.

Chapman, Dinos, et al., eds. *Eine barocke Party. Augenblicke des Welttheaters in der zeitgenössischen Kunst*. Vienna: Kunsthalle, 2001. Print.

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2009.124.1.143 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*. Trans. Dana Polan. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1986. Print.

Egginton, William. "The Baroque House of Reason (Cervantes, Master Architect)." *Reason and Its Others: Italy, Spain, and the New World*. Ed. David Castillo and Massimo Lollini. Nashville: Vanderbilt UP, 2006. 186–203. Print. Hispanic Issues 32.

———. *How the World Became a Stage: Presence, Theatricality, and the Problem of Modernity*. Albany: State U of New York P, 2003. Print.

Egginton, William, and David Castillo. "The Rules of Chanfalla's Game." *Romance Language Annual* (1995): 444–49. Print.

Flor, Fernando R. de la. *Barroco: Representación e ideología en el mundo hispanico (1580–1680)*. Madrid: Cátedra, 2002. Print.

Guardiani, Francesco. "Old and New, Modern and Postmodern: Baroque and Neobaroque." *McLuhan Studies* 4 (n.d.): n. pag. Web. 2 Sept. 2008.

Kant, Immanuel. *The Critique of Pure Reason*. Trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998. Print.

Lambert, Gregg. *The Return of the Baroque in Modern Culture*. New York: Continuum, 2005. Print.

Lope de Vega y Carpio, Félix. *Fuenteovejuna. Diez comedias del Siglo de Oro*. Ed. José Martel and Hymen Alpern. 2nd ed. Prospect Heights: Waveland, 1985. 71–143. Print.

Maravall, José Antonio. *Culture of the Baroque: Analysis of a Historical Structure*. Trans. Terry Cochran. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1986. Print.

———. *Teatro y literatura en la sociedad barroca*. Madrid: Critica, 1972. Print.

Mariscal, George. *Contradictory Subjects: Quevedo, Cervantes, and Seventeenth-Century Spanish Culture*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1991. Print.

Ndalianis, Angela. *(Neo)Baroque Aesthetics and Contemporary Entertainment*. Cambridge: MIT P, 2004. Print.

Ordóñez, Fernando. "Models of Subjectivity in the Spanish Baroque: Quevedo and Gracián." *Hispanic Baroques: Reading Cultures in Context*. Ed. Nicholas Spadaccini and Luis Martín-Estudillo. Nashville: Vanderbilt UP, 2005. 72–86. Print. Hispanic Issues 31.

Ortega, José. *La estética neobarroca en la narrative hispanoamericana*. Madrid: Porrúa, 1984. Print.

Penny, Laura. *Your Call Is Important to Us: The Truth about Bullshit*. New York: Crown, 2005. Print.

Wölfflin, Heinrich. *Renaissance and Baroque*. Trans. Kathrin Simon. London: Collins, 1984. Print.

Zamora, Lois Parkinson. *The Inordinate Eye: New World Baroque and Latin American Fiction*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2006. Print.

Žižek, Slavoj. "The Depraved Heroes of *24* Are the Himmlers of Hollywood." *Guardian.co.uk*. Guardian News and Media, 10 Jan. 2006. Web. 6 Oct. 2008.

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2009.124.1.143 Published online by Cambridge University Press