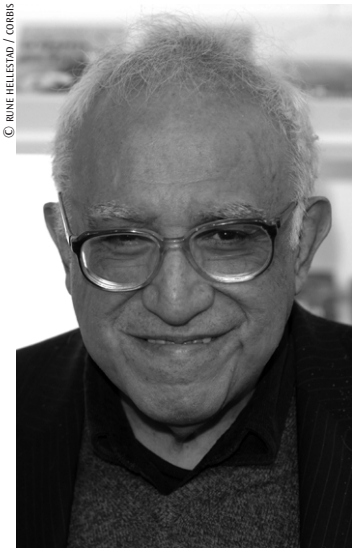
criticism in translation

The Neobaroque and Popular Culture

CARLOS MONSIVÁIS



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Rosa Beltrán's introduction is translated by Lois Parkinson Zamora.

Biographical notes about Rosa Beltrán and James Ramey appear on page 182.

Introduction: Omnimodal Monsiváis

CARLOS MONSIVÁIS IS HARD TO PIN DOWN. HE IS A CHRONICLER OF EVERY ASPECT OF MEXICAN REALITY PAST AND PRESENT; A CULTURAL critic focusing on poetry, film, art, and music; and an erudite essayist committed to the connections between elite and popular cultures. His style is both acerbic and festive in ways that epitomize the Mexican character, and nothing escapes his incisive curiosity: the cult of national heroes that finds its twin in the society of spectacle, the cultural migrations between television talk and devotional discourse, the mass movements that advance and recede in a welter of democratic projects. As an intellectual, Carlos Monsiváis is unique in (and to) Mexico. You cannot walk in this country without seeing or hearing him on every street corner, nor can you open a book without sensing his influence. His presence is so *omnímoda*—so omnimodal—that we no longer know which came first: Mexican culture as Monsiváis observes it, or Monsiváis observing Mexican culture.

A student of social movements, rituals, and aesthetics, Carlos Monsiváis is dedicated to the impossible task of laying out our multiple cultures and making sense of them by capturing norms and customs that escape the orthodox eye. His voice operates in multiple registers because his style reflects his subject matter, combining oral forms with literary genres, fusing expressive modes to the point of oxymoron. His work mirrors the volatility of change in a country that is also deeply anchored in tradition; it traces systems and signs that identify lost identities and represent invisibilities. His work is itself "the art of the plethoric," a term he applies to Mexican popular culture in the essay that follows.

Monsiváis's importance as a chronicler of mentalities is based in ancient Mexican cultural practice. Our "homemade" genres, as Alfonso Reyes called them, are the chronicle and missionary theater, but it is the former that records (and has sometimes produced) our most persistent and dynamic movements. The possibility of dissent originates subtly but distinctly in the chronicles of the European colonizers and a little later in the murals painted by indigenous artists on the walls of churches in New Spain as backdrops for the missionaries' evangelizing plays. Thus, words and images besieging the

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imperial edifice entered under the door unnoticed, like water. From the beginning, says Monsiváis, the chronicle was largely a celebratory art, but in certain cases it also presented a critical vision of the conquest and colonization that it appeared to celebrate. The thrill of beholding marvels, as well as the horror of witnessing the catastrophe of colliding cultures that came to be called the New World, was recorded in these epic accounts. Together with mural painting and later with popular graphics, these media have roots so deeply entwined across centuries that it is impossible to speak of dissent today without finding their traces. From newspapers to blogs and from engravings to graffiti to Chicano murals, there is no form of expression in our culture that does not register the originary tensions inherent in chronicle and mural. From these homemade media, we learned to say no.

In his own chronicles, Carlos Monsiváis has defined contemporary popular culture and shown how people without money or education—*el pueblo*—are represented where they do not seem to exist. He locates them by oblique observation of what is *not* represented, what is *not* said. Where do *los del pueblo* sit at the banquet of civilization, to which, according to Alfonso Reyes, we have arrived so belatedly? Mexican cultural critics have routinely discussed *types*—*typical* behaviors and personae, clothing, dances, and food—but what is this "typical," and who are these "types"? What are their signs, and how do they signify? In *Días de guardar*, *Amor perdido*, *Escenas de pudor y lividandad*, and above all *Aires de familia* and his writings about poetry and the golden era of Mexican film, Carlos Monsiváis recovers subjects who have been depreciated and marginalized. In nineteenth-century publications, *los del pueblo* are nothing more than an anonymous social stratum characterized by bad luck—without agency, invisible subjects requiring instruction and emitting unsalvageable smells and sounds. But Monsiváis reads the past in its phantasmagoric signs, and his great achievement is to have tracked the presence of the not said and given it descriptive continuity.

Other, equally important contributions to our understanding of Mexican culture are his studies of cultural movements beginning in the second half of the twentieth century. Monsiváis pursues their course from the formation of our national identity through its subsequent contestations: from the (frozen) images of the revolution to film; television; the events of '68; the gay, lesbian, and feminist movements; educational reforms; poetry; prose; the press. He provides readings in which there are no clear boundaries between phenomena, contexts, and protagonists, and certainly not between expressive genres. Monsiváis makes us see that every genre (essay, novel, popular lyric, chronicle) is a falsification of the forms (the "rituals") according to which cultures actually operate. By analyzing how expressive forms impose themselves on the fluidity of lived experience, Monsiváis gives us a more complete reading of what exists. He has taught us to see that literature not only participates in the real but also transforms it, sometimes for the better and sometimes not. His gift is to excavate the transformations, assess them, and insist that we do the same.

Monsiváis is a necessary writer, but his *obra*, which totals sixty-four titles and counting, is little translated and, outside Mexico, little read except by specialists.[1] Perhaps this is because of his biting humor and refined irony, or because his allusions require a knowledge of the Mexican cultural context, or because he recklessly crosses generic and disciplinary boundaries, or because his rhetorical innovations make him a neobaroque writer in the extreme. Whatever the reasons, it is hard to believe that only two of his books are in English: *Mexican Postcards* (1997), translated by John Kraniauskas, and *A New Catechism for Recalcitrant Indians* (2007), translated by Jeffrey Browitt and Nidia Esperanza Castrillón. This section of *PMLA*, Criticism in Translation, is to be applauded and should serve as an example to academic associations and cultural institutions in the United States, as well as to universities and publishers there. I hardly need to tell the readers of this journal that literature and its interpretations constitute a cultural continuum that transcends geographic, political, and linguistic borders. Only by increasing our collective commitment to translation—from and into all

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languages—can this cultural continuum be identified, engaged, and affirmed.

Note

1. Monsiváis's essays include *Días de guardar* (1970), *Amor perdido* (1977), *Entrada libre. Crónicas de la sociedad que se organiza* (1987), *Escenas de pudor y liviandad* (1988), *Rostros del cine mexicano* (1993), *Los rituales del caos* (1995), *Aires de familia. Cultura y sociedad en América Latina* (2000), *Las tradiciones de la imagen: notas sobre poesía mexicana* (2001), *Las herencias ocultas de la Reforma Liberal del Siglo XIX* (2006), *Las alusiones perdidas* (2007), and *El estado laico y sus malquerientes* (2008). *Nuevo catecismo para indios remisos* (1982; *A New Catechism for Recalcitrant Indians* [2007]) is a collection of his fables, and his work is also contained in the anthologies *La poesía mexicana en el siglo XX* (1966), *A ustedes les consta. Antología de la crónica en México* (1980), and *Lo fugitivo permanence. 21 cuentos mexicanos* (1984).

Biographical Notes

ROSA BELTRÁN is a writer, translator, and professor of comparative literature at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM). Author of novels including *La corte de los ilusos* (Planeta, 1995), *El paraíso que fuimos* (Seix Barral, 2002), and *Alta infidelidad* (Alfaguara, 2007) and of a collection of essays on comparative American cultures titled *América sin americanismos* (UNAM, 1996), she is director of literature at the UNAM's Center for Cultural Dissemination (Difusión Cultural).

JAMES RAMEY is professor of expression and representation at the Metropolitan Autonomous University, Cuajimalpa. He has published an essay in *Comparative Literature Studies* on camouflage and puzzles in Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, an essay in *James Joyce Quarterly* on disguise and intertextuality in *Ulysses*, and an essay in *Comparative Literature* on synecdoche in Borges and Joyce. His current book project, "Micro-modernism: Hosts and Parasites in the Life of Narrative," examines intertextuality as a form of "parasitism" and shows that several major modernists figure ideas as parasitic entities that proliferate through brains and texts.

The Neobaroque and Popular Culture

Ah, were it only true that at the hour of the bath,
when the motionless landscape and the most
delicate animals
bathe in the same discursive water:
antelopes, serpents with light footsteps,
vaporous footsteps,
appear within dreams, raising on high without
care,
the longest tresses and most cherished water.
Ah, my love, had you only in the pure marble of
farewells
left behind the statue that could accompany us,
since the wind, the jocund wind,
stretches like a cat to let itself be defined.
—José Lezama Lima, "Ah, que tú escapes"

In the 1950s, in the Mexican town of Metepec, the Churrigueresque style made its first appearance in Mexico's popular handcrafts. Earlier attempts had been made, but these were just holdovers from Mexico's viceregal period, nothing like the authentically new forms evident in Metepec's "trees of life." These clay prodigies distinctly recall the Churrigueresque's ultraelaborate church facades and altarpieces; they depict virgins, saints, and demons keeping watch over humanity's genealogical tree and are adorned with the fig leaves of Adam and Eve, postcoital relics of our lost innocence. In Metepec, in their wholesale production, they resonate with the lessons of Tepotzotlán, Tonantzintla, and Santo Domingo in Oaxaca, ornamental vegetation whose symbols are drowned by the whole and whose spirituality is, among other things, an extravagance of the eye.

Metepec's "trees of life" are a product of an increased appreciation for arts and crafts

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that arose with Mexico's cultural nationalism during the 1920s. The "edenic" craft industry in Metepec attracted a mesmerized clientele: tourists from California and Texas, government officials (including Mexican presidents) eager to find gifts that would embody the "heart of the nation," and hoteliers and interior decorators in search of the "Mexican touch." The trees of life were thus appreciated as a manifestation of the primitive: "What strength!" "What marvelous ingenuity!" "What figures!" "What a challenge to the eye!" And if, in spite of such adulation, the quality of the pieces did not diminish, that was largely because of the Metepec craftsmen's healthy indifference to praise.

In the 1960s, in the town of Ocumicho, Michoacán, a style of popular art emerged that is anticlassical and antinormative, intentionally and undeniably grotesque, an odd mixture of tenderness and monstrosity. A young gay man, the only male in a group of female potters in Ocumicho, helped liberate the imaginations of his sister artisans with a new credo: "We must not fear our impulses even if others find our creations strange or hideous." Thus, a new principle of popular art evolved: if one is not able to produce "the beautiful," one can at least produce what one likes. The figures of Ocumicho, exuberant and grotesque, soon came to be increasingly appreciated throughout Mexico, and this legitimized the sensibility of the forbidden, of fantastic and heretical sexuality, of imagination that boldly respects its own discoveries. Ocumicho offers, among other magnificently shocking sights, Last Suppers with demons, beautifully serene orgies in which all intimacy is promiscuity, and delirious representations of the French Revolution (1989) and the Quincentenary or "The Encounter of Two Worlds" (1992).

The popular baroque, or Art of the Plethoric [*Arte de lo Pletórico*], includes the lacquerwork of Olinalá in Guerrero, the yarn paintings of the Huichol Indians, and certain Oaxacan craft traditions. And besides these community-based efforts, individual craftsmen of indigenous background re-create the minute ensembles of the baroque without giving it that name. One of these, the master-craftsman Roberto Ruiz (born in Oaxaca in 1926), creates miniature armies of skeletons carved from real bone, clusters of coral-colored death.

What is, or what might be, the "neobaroque"? In a purely operative definition, we may understand neobaroque as the mise-en-scène of a sensibility composed of a thousand sensibilities, where elements related to the baroque are brought into the present: the fully realized profundity of darkness; horror vacui, or the fear of empty spaces; the explosion of forms that delight in their own display; the re-creation of the human against a backdrop of organic Nature; the point of extreme tension that is synonymous with the creative act. And it is also always chaos, which in relation to this multifarious sensibility serves to reject homogeneity and its false harmonies. As Stanislaw Lem puts it, "One must never be blind from any point of view."

In literature it is relatively easy to cite examples of a neobaroque tendency. It is more difficult to situate the phenomenon in Mexico's popular culture, with its Spanish baroque heritage, especially if the term *popular culture* includes such things as devotional rites, religious festivals, altarpieces, silver jewelry, stonework, and woodcarving. Popular culture today (erroneously confused with mass culture) is a highly diverse field in which virtually any aesthetic of excess qualifies as neobaroque but in which, with longer working days and less free time, popular forms have tended to become simpler, less labor-intensive.

What I will now propose is, undoubtedly, an odd or even heretical interpretive whim. I believe there is such a thing as a Churrigueresque style in popular speech, something that exalts the labyrinthine possibilities of language and superabounds with syntactic hallucinations. Here we confront the sheer joy of immoderation, of the verbal exuberance

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that springs from the horror of silence. In the Spanish-speaking world, the most important representative of this tendency in film and theater is Mario Moreno Cantinflas. In the 1930s and 1940s, Cantinflas tapped into a rich vein of linguistic and comic possibilities by mastering the amazing art of saying a lot while saying nothing, of emitting sentence after sentence strung out to the point of syntactic strangulation. Effortlessly, Cantinflas piles up subjects and verbs, forgets predicates, tangles and perplexes his interlocutors, erects cathedrals of nonsense, and winkingly lays bare the hermetic code that a simple *Buenos días* could contain. Here is an example of a sketch from the 1930s, from the *teatro frívolo*:

> Look, you stupid fool. . . . Hold on! Anyway—but no, because that's true, whatever you say. Now since you don't get it, though there's all this vacillation going on, the other day someone got me on the telephone, look how you'll be. . . . Enough! Because anyway, when you find yourself fighting for the unification of the proletariat, there's a need for that, because you and I, well, no, but what you anyway. . . . It's all over! Because later it will turn out that. . . . What's the matter, brother? No, sir, which I, after they show up with their idiocies, and very popular ones at that. . . . Kid, I'm outta here!

Such are the words of Cantinflas: genuine castles in the air.

Kitsch, which is accepted with much less disdain in the United States than in Europe, is given a truly jubilant welcome in Latin America, thus obscuring or obstructing the development of refined taste. The sensationalism of kitsch dazzles those who lack regular aesthetic criteria. Thus, buying power aside, the decorative spirits of the bourgeoisie and of the popular classes are equalized. The supreme model for this is Hollywood cinema, with its captivating movie sets, frenetic situations, and festive energy. Kitsch, the apotheosis of the most false of false baroques, is founded largely on the illusion of living inside a movie set. This explains certain exalted kitsch catastrophes, which grow more appealing as they age. Here are some examples: movie palaces (in Mexico City, the Alameda and China Palace), the set decor of Mother's Day festivals, the paraphernalia of beauty contests, the explosive colors of the visual culture of Mexico's small towns, and, last but not least, the most fearsome proposition: that human beings can themselves be examples of kitsch. Take, for example, the pachucos of the 1940s, whose appearance was as much a challenge to the racists in society as it was to the traditionalists, or the drug traffickers of the 1980s, walking showcases of glitzy finery, certain that if they dressed in golden bracelets, bangles, diamond rings, and watches with innumerable gemstones, at least nobody could insult them by calling them poor. Their appearance was a declaration of their assets.

Such is the strength of kitsch that it often seems to devour the whole space of popular culture. Nevertheless, once in a while, and with a success located halfway between the multitudes and the elites, movies attempt an incursion into stylistic extravagance that we could call neobaroque. I am alluding to certain key examples, such as D. W. Griffith's *Intolerance* (1916) and Josef von Sternberg's *The Scarlet Empress* (1934) and *The Devil Is a Woman* (1935). What visual effects in later films can compare to the sequences of *Intolerance* in which Griffith strives to overcome the past with raw exuberance? Does not the ambition of his set designs become, in and of itself, a sort of self-enclosed historical epoch? What can outdo the representations of *Intolerance*'s Babylonian harem, the reconstruction of Catherine the Great's palace in *The Scarlet Empress*, the portentous carnival in *The Devil Is a Woman*? Von Sternberg's diabolically imperial set designs, with their monstrous beings and demonic sculptures, evoke the constructions of Bomarzo, Italy, and anticipate the hallucinatory architecture of Edward James in Xilitla, Mexico.

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In addition to these "eccentricities," there are other examples of neobaroque ebullience that audiences receive with a kind of smirking admiration. I am referring to the cinematic genre of the "extravaganza," spectacular musicals that rely on incessant surprise or wonder for their appeal. The premier practitioner of the extravaganza, a fashioner of marvels on a delirious scale, is Busby Berkeley, director and choreographer, the greatest practitioner of optical sorcery in cinematic history. Chiefly working in the 1930s (though his career continues long after that, extending to the "water ballets" of Esther Williams), Berkeley creates portentous sequences that turn conventional music hall numbers into veritable hallucinations. For example, a choir group bursts energetically into a sentimental scene and transmogrifies it into a battlefield of geometric formations composed of human bodies; or a couple fall asleep in a subway car and descend into a celestial delirium; or a cabaret transforms itself into an apotheosis of tap dancing. In Berkeley's greatest sequences nothing is what it appears to be, no one can imagine what will happen next, and no eye can resist bedazzlement. There are pianos, columns, waterfalls, moving forests, skies in which the constellations are female faces, stars and rhomboids formed by bodies, multitudes reduced or amplified into a single movement, a casual pan along an avenue of legs. The showgirls fan out and come together in perfect combinations, and the camera registers tumultuous choreographies that could never be mounted on a stage.

Von Sternberg and Berkeley are associated with the camp aesthetic, that gleeful perversion of normative sensibility. Susan Sontag has argued that camp is the anarchic enjoyment of what aspires to be serious but fails in the attempt. Wayne Koestenbaum, however, offers a different interpretation, positing in *The Queen's Throat* that it is not the failure of the object or the artist that causes something to be camp but rather our delight in discovering the object or, indeed, our delight at having been *selected* or chosen by the camp object to be its discoverer: "When we experience the camp rush, the delight, the savor, we are making a private airlift of lost cultural matter, fragments held hostage by everyone else's indifference. No one else lived for this gesture, this pattern, this figure, before: only I know that it is sublime" (117).[1]

Closer to a generalized idea of the neobaroque, certain films by Luchino Visconti impulsively strive, in image after sumptuous image, to match the magnificence of a baroque altarpiece or a museum. Consider such films as *Senso* (1954), *The Leopard* (1963), *The Damned* (1969), or *Ludwig* (1972), in which the grand style, the attention to historical detail, the whirling dances, and the gala parties are all part of an unbridled exaltation of the past. Visconti, with a scrupulousness matched only by Erich von Stroheim (*Queen Kelly*, *The Wedding March* [both 1928]), re-creates the Risorgimento, the courtly life of Bavaria, and the aristocracy of Sicily in the throes of its inequitable modernization. Visconti's aesthetic seductions rely on furniture, curtains, silk clothing, Flemish paintings, Sèvres porcelain, and movements of the body watched over by the ritual of generations. In his castles of immense corridors and swan lakes, King Ludwig's madness intensifies as he thinks about the music of Richard Wagner; patriots wait in the Milan opera house for an excuse to defy the Austrians; in the orgy of the Night of the Long Knives, the leaders of the SS experience their virility as a narcissistic vigil in front of a mirror.

And what is one to make of science fiction films? The set designs of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1926) and William Cameron Menzies's *Things to Come* (1936) suggest a genre of anticipation that creates a new sense of allegory, an element fundamental to any neobaroque tendency. The world threatened by destruction should be extraordinary, since it mixes ancient fears, technological grandiosity, and apocalyptic upheavals. If the detective novel and film

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noir are fruits of essentialization (Good and Evil reduced to an ambiguity produced by lighting effects), the science fiction film, for reasons of credibility, relies on the splendid visual saturation characteristic of great dreams and great nightmares. Two such masterpieces by Ridley Scott, *Alien* (1979) and *Blade Runner* (1982), are key works of postmodernism. *Blade Runner* in particular offers a potent visual proposition: this is what the future will look like—row upon row of dark buildings populated with mechanical marvels, public spaces in which one can only be at ease hiding in the shadows, apartment buildings haunted by bleak abandonment. In *Blade Runner* the Los Angeles of 2019 has become a place of Algerian flea markets, massive shopping malls crammed with riffraff, the apogee of chaos in which, at the end of a thousand imprisonings, freedom of movement is finally restored. The novel by Philip K. Dick that inspired the film (*Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*) is typical of the author's work, a fragment of the vast problematic of identity that his books explore: Who am I, and who dreams me? Who invented me, and who guarantees my humanity? Am I an android that imagines he is not one or a real person who is persecuted as a replicant? Central to *Blade Runner* is the landscape of burnished ruins and stupendous sensations neutralized by indifference. Here the popular neobaroque is expressed through alienation, both logical and illogical, from a society that worships technology and waste. And this sensibility can be found in other science fiction films: *Total Recall* (1990), by Paul Verhoeven, for example, in which the future is replete with revelations that hide further revelations.

Federico Fellini is the counterpart of Visconti. He learns and surpasses the lessons of kitsch and knows better than anyone how to tinge show business with feelings of guilt and nostalgia. Fellini moves from the neorealism of his youth (*I vitelloni* [1953], *La strada* [1954], *Il bidone* [1955]) to the riotous noise of a popular neobaroque nourished by the Hollywood extravaganza; he juxtaposes Catholic trappings with circus iconography to suggest the overwhelming insanity of urban culture. In *La dolce vita* (1960), *Satyricon* (1969), *Fellini's Roma* (1972), and *E la nave va* (1983), Fellini celebrates the eternal catwalk on which the world parades, a world that exhausts its resources as it is transfigured into a gigantic votive painting [*ex voto*]. In a circus of innumerable rings ordered according to the melancholy music of Nino Rota, a helicopter transports a cement statue of Christ, the garments of priests clamor to be displayed in a fashion show, and the terminus of a bacchanalian party is an appointment with a confessor at eight in the morning. Each sequence is a piece that signifies a whole society. On the beach, at dawn, society leers at its vague likeness in the form of a sea monster washed up moribund on the shore.

In the 1980s the English filmmakers Peter Greenaway and Derek Jarman are strongly influenced by baroque art and by the ambition to develop a new aesthetic. Each in his very different way proposes a cinema of visual enticement and aesthetic shock. Greenaway's *Drowning by Numbers* (1988) pays homage to the painter Arcimboldo; his *The Belly of an Architect* (1987) is a reflection on death in the context of Roman architecture; and his *Prospero's Books* (1991) is a Shakespearean allegory filled with symbols of water, pornography, cosmology, ruins, hell, and so on. In these films Greenaway submerges himself simultaneously in splendor and putrefaction, in perfect compositions and utter chaos. And Jarman achieves something highly unusual as well: a melding of the baroque temperament with a minimalist approach to film production. In *The Last of England* (1988), *War Requiem* (1989), and *Edward II* (1991), Jarman takes his system of comparisons to its logical extreme. Sexual dissidence is a landscape first devastated, then reborn; AIDS is a war that decimates a generation; the lament for the fallen is the rebirth of humanism.

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In contemporary photography Joel-Peter Witkin and Cindy Sherman can be understood to represent a neobaroque trend, and their public is so large that one can reasonably frame their work as part of popular culture. Witkin provokes a shuddering sort of exasperation in those who view his admirable photos. In his work the real and the unreal make no sense in the face of dazzling revelations of fresh horrors and fresh beauties. In the courtroom of phenomenal experience, his freaks are there not to alarm us but to lead us to forbidden altarpieces, unknown saints, lacerated bodies, the horror born from unfamiliar scenarios and our natural resistance to that same horror. The classical eloquence of his images transcends the assimilative capacity of the sensitive spirit defined by the audacities of gore cinema. Witkin takes us to our limits, scorning our vulnerabilities and sensibilities, demolishing good taste, stuffing his visual landscapes with hermaphrodites and mutilated bodies. The neobaroque in his case, as in his extraordinary photograph *Las Meninas* (*Self Portrait*), is an avalanche of devastating images whose spaces instantly reveal their secret harmonies.

Cindy Sherman has transformed self-portraiture, turning it into exploration, metamorphosis, accusation, insult—the victorious emergence of a visage that is one face and also many faces. Thus, in her series *History Portraits*, she re-creates carnivalesque versions of paintings by Caravaggio, Raphael, Ingres, and Botticelli, embodying herself as a pure sexual instinct, as the society of courtesans and the flowering of civilization, as the celebration of form and the flow of mass media. For her, the splendor of the Renaissance is also a party at Mardi Gras or the insane asylum at Charenton.

Is it possible for neobaroque literature to be popular? In principle, no, since one must supposedly be a specialized reader to be capable of understanding the multiple significations of neobaroque writing. Or at least that's what was thought before the extremely impressive sales of books by neobaroque writers who had initially been deemed hermetic and accessible only to an elite few. But suddenly neobaroque editions multiplied and took on unexpected resonances. Among these were works by the Cubans Alejo Carpentier, José Lezama Lima, and Severo Sarduy; the Mexicans Carlos Fuentes and Fernando del Paso; and the Portuguese José Saramago. In the novel that would be Carpentier's crowning achievement, *El siglo de las luces* (translated as *Explosion in a Cathedral*), the author recreates the Caribbean in an extraordinary way by offering a parallel reality, a verbal construct that is an inventory and synthesis of smells, flavors, dissonances, tactile memories, architectural descriptions, and verbal explosions. And Lezama Lima's *Paradiso*, a Platonic banquet in which Fronesis, Cemi, and Focion maintain a cryptic and dazzling dialogue (which can only be appreciated on a second reading), illustrates the thesis the author puts forward in *La expresión americana*: "Only what is difficult is stimulating" (49). In this regard Sarduy writes in *Barroco*, "Neobaroque of disequilibrium, structural desire of a desire that cannot attain its object, a desire for which the logos has given us nothing more than a screen that hides the lack. The gaze is no longer simply infinite; the partial object has become the lost object" (103).

"How long will men continue to perish?" Lezama asks himself, and then he answers, "As long as women continue to bear children" (*Las eras imaginarias* 96).[2] In aporias, for which Lezama has a weakness ("The joy of the centipede is the crossroads" [*Tratados* 145]), he finds the guiding spirit of his tendency toward excess: "The baroque reveals to the commander on the bridge deck the reality of his own voluptuousness" (*La expresión americana* 169).[3] With Lezama the neobaroque achieves a splendor that, despite his hermetic style, transforms an obese and asthmatic quasi-bachelor from Old Havana into a pop icon, as can be seen in *Strawberry and Chocolate*

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(1994), a film by Tomás Gutiérrez Alea and Juan Carlos Tabío. Thus, everything is possible. Lezama sums it up like this:

> The unfolding of forms on a baroque altar has been compared to the tranquil eye of a cyclone. Such an eye grows like a funnel, whose mouth receives all Nativity scenes and frosted constellations reduced to magical tarlatan patches. A cyclone reduced to a schoolchild's ingenuous tarlatan is the first peremptory affirmation of the American baroque. (*Oppiano* 142)

Translator's Notes

I thank Lois Parkinson Zamora for her help with the preparation of this text and Christopher Winks for his suggestions on translating the epigraph and the closing quotation from José Lezama Lima.

1. Page references in the text are provided by the translator.

2. Monsiváis does not give citations in this essay, but four of his five quotations of José Lezama Lima (the exception is "El gozo del ciempiés es la encrucijada") and his quotation of Severo Sarduy appear to be taken from a critical introduction to the 1980 Catedra edition of *Paradiso* written by Eloísa Lezama Lima, the author's younger sister. Monsiváis here takes José Lezama Lima out of context, since the words quoted are not an authorial one-man dialogue but rather the author's reference to an exchange between Salome and Christ in a passage from Clement of Alexandria in the *Gospel of the Egyptians* (see James 10).

3. Lezama Lima's original phrase in *La expresión americana* is "El barroco tazón del soconusco revela al señor en el puente de mando de su voluptuosidad" (169), but when his sister quotes it in her introduction to *Paradiso*, she omits "tazón del soconusco," which refers in Mexico to a cup of hot chocolate with aphrodisiac qualities (see Chiampi's note 5 in *La expresión americana* 81). She introduces the abridged phrase as a "brilliant synthesis" of her brother's concept of the baroque: "Y en síntesis genial aclara: 'El barroco revela al señor en el puente de mando de su voluptuosidad'" (56). Since Monsiváis preserves the omission, it seems that he unwittingly takes Lezama Lima's description of a ship captain's chocolate-induced voluptuousness to be a sweeping pronouncement on the nature of the baroque.

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