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Davide Messina

Neobaroque *Festino*: Modern Italy and Latin American Postmodernity.

Abstract. This essay argues that the idea of postmodernity has undergone a cultural shift that bears strong analogies to the history of the word «metaphysics»: what was initially an empty term of textual classification has been progressively turned into a cultural concept by way of theoretical saturation. The metaphysics of modernity that underpins this shift is traced back to the logic of the Italian Baroque, and it is deconstructed through the history of the Neobaroque in Latin American culture. Moving beyond the recursive definitions of postmodernity and its conflation with postmodernism, the essay puts forward a description of its cultural logic as a Neobaroque *festino*, while inviting new possibilities of interpretation from the visual arts and music.

Keywords. Baroque, Logic, Metaphysics, Neobaroque, Opera, Postmodernity.

In the seventeenth century a dissociation of sensibility set in, from which we have never recovered¹.

1. *Metaphysics and metalanguage*

Towards the end of a long, diverse, and creative period of engagement with postmodern theory, *postmodernity* may distinctly appear as «something between a word without etymology and a word without a meaning, though it is not without history», as Brigid Brophy sharply glossed the word «metaphysics» in her essay *Baroque-'n'-Roll*². Long before becoming the branch of philosophy concerning the first principles, in fact, *Metaphysics* was simply the name that the early editors of Aristotle's works chose to classify a variety of texts collected «after» (*meta*) his writings on nature or «Physics». It is my contention that the very idea of postmodernity has undergone a cultural shift that bears strong analogies to the history of metaphysics, namely that

¹ Th.S. Eliot, «The Metaphysical Poets» (1921), in *Selected Essays*, Faber and Faber, London 1980, pp. 281-91 (p. 287).

² B. Brophy, «Baroque-'n'-Roll» (1986), in *Baroque-'n'-Roll and Other Essays*, Hamish, London 1987, pp. 137-172 (p. 146).

an empty category of *textual* classification has been progressively turned into a cultural concept by way of theoretical saturation³.

The question of the Baroque enters strongly into this picture because, as we can further observe with Brophy, the postmodern interplay of textuality and technology «should by now have instructed us all over again in the taste for the 17th-century poetry bizarrely called metaphysical»⁴ – and again, it is a question that hinges on the very definition of the word itself. On the one hand, we know that «Baroque» was a signifier used retrospectively to characterize the dominant Italian style of the 17th century, probably with reference to the Latin code name for an obscure form of syllogism, which is irregular and eccentric yet reducible to a perfect logical form: *Baroco*, code name of the fourth «mood» (*modus*) of the second figure in the late Scholastic classification of syllogisms⁵. This *mood* may provide a key to understanding the logical basis of Baroque metaphysics and, in «a genuinely dialectical attempt to think our present of time in History», as argued by Fredric Jameson, also to investigating postmodernism as a «cultural logic», rather than as an «(optional) style» of postmodernity⁶, with its «profound shift in the *structure of feeling*»⁷. On the other hand, the logical etymology of the word is not consistent with its history outside modern Italy, and this history is non-linear: «while this syllogistic derivation may be true for Italy», as Gregg Lambert explains in *The Return of the Baroque in Modern Culture*, «the term *barroco* probably reaches the rest of the world from a Portuguese jeweler's term, *perrola barroca*, which refers to a flawed and imperfect pearl»⁸.

Arguably, the *difference* inscribed in the history of the Baroque signifier is entangled with the cultural logic of its metaphysics as it reaches and remodels postmodernity. Assuming with Erwin Panofsky that the Baroque was «an *Italian* phenomenon»⁹, the Italian Baroque is associated with a metaphysics that frames the discourses about modernity and, accordingly, configures the relationship between postmodernity and the Neobaroque. As Peter Nicholls

³ See R.H. Brown, «Rhetoric, textuality, and the postmodern turn in sociological theory», in S. Seidman (ed.), *The Postmodern Turn. New Perspectives on Social Theory*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1994, pp. 229-241.

⁴ B. Brophy, «Baroque-'n'-Roll», p. 144. Cfr. R. Tuve, *Elizabethan and Metaphysical Imagery. Renaissance Poetics and Twentieth-Century Critics*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1957.

⁵ *Ibi*, p. 168.

⁶ F. Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Duke University Press, Durham (NC) 1991, p. 46.

⁷ See D. Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*, Blackwell, Oxford 1990, p. 39.

⁸ G. Lambert, *The Return of the Baroque in Modern Culture*, Continuum, New York 2004, p. 1.

⁹ E. Panofsky, «What is Baroque?» (1934), in *Three Essays on Style*, MIT Press, Cambridge (MA) 1995, pp. 17-89 (p. 36).

discusses the «metaphysics of modernity» in a chapter devoted to Italian Futurism¹⁰, for example, at the end of this essay I will suggest that this Italian avant-garde movement can be linked to some aspects of the postmodern discourse within the framework of the Neobaroque, yet outside Italy and beyond its historical meaning. Whilst national narratives may provide some strategic pointers when language is considered in the fold of history and logic, more in general, the textual definition of the Baroque unfailingly challenges their essentialism: the Baroque «fold» (*pli*), to use Gilles Deleuze's terminology, is not to be understood as an *essence*, but rather as an «operative function»¹¹.

In the Italian context, we could locate a theoretical turning point in Giambattista Vico's *Scienza nuova* (1744), which contains, according to Karl Marx, «the germ of the foundations of comparative linguistics, and also heaps of genius»¹². Vico redefined metaphysics as a history of the «modifications of our own human mind», a history refracted through the nations as if by a «convex jewel»: its principles of «poetic logic» shine through the linguistic forms in which things can be «signified»¹³. The history of the human mind is here represented as a cycle that evolves through the three ages of sense, fantasy, and reason, each one dominated by a fundamental rhetorical «mode» (*modo*): metaphor, metonymy, and irony; the mode of the third age leads to «barbarism of reflection»¹⁴, which the Italian philosopher sees as the distinctive cultural logic of the 18th century, and which articulates the transition to a new age of sense and metaphor that we now call Romanticism. This theory can be combined with Panofsky's characterization of the Italian Baroque as «the beginning of a fourth era, which may be called “Modern” with a capital “M”»¹⁵, so that the Neobaroque can be described as the process that distances the metaphysics of modernity from its own time and connects its poetic logic with its history outside Italy.

If the Baroque was the name of a cultural logic associated with a certain metaphysics of modernity, a Neobaroque reading of postmodernity can be critically developed as an investigation into its modes of being *signified*. The essential question is not about meaning as such, but about the «language-games» through which certain descriptions are made

¹⁰ P. Nicholls, *Modernisms. A Literary Guide*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles 1995, pp. 84-111.

¹¹ G. Deleuze, *Le pli. Leibniz et le baroque* (1988), trans. T. Conley, *The Fold. Leibniz and the Baroque*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1993, p. 3.

¹² K. Marx, Letter to F. Lassalle (28 April 1862), in *The Letters of Karl Marx*, ed. S.K. Padover, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs (NJ) 1979, p. 464.

¹³ G.B. Vico, *La scienza nuova* (1744), trans. T. Goddard Bergin and M. Frisch, *The New Science*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 1948, pp. 5, 85, and 114.

¹⁴ *Ibi*, p. 381.

¹⁵ E. Panofsky, «What is Baroque?», p. 88.

meaningful, as explained by Jean-François Lyotard in his methodological introduction to *La condition postmoderne*: the «incredulity toward metanarratives» is one of the fundamental language-games of postmodernity because it reflects the crisis of «metaphysical philosophy» with ironic distance¹⁶. Irony may well be the mode in which the indirect reduction of a syllogism in *Baroco*, as we shall see, can also be used as an operational model to reframe the language of Baroque metaphysics in relation to postmodernity.

An initial account of the difference between the logic and the history of the Baroque can be given with reference to Claude Lévi-Strauss's notion of a «floating signifier» (*signifiant flottant*), which functions «somewhat like algebraic symbols», being «in itself devoid of meaning and thus susceptible of receiving any meaning at all»¹⁷. This notion is key to the textual practices of postmodernism and it subverts linguistic theory with a paradoxical semiology of time and causality, by positing that the signified can be projected *retrospectively* and even *negatively* onto the signifier. Like «metaphysics» and «Baroque», accordingly, «postmodernity» could be described as a floating signifier that inhabits the historical difference of the signified.

As the sense of historical progression conveyed by the Latin prefix «post» falls back into the reflexive meaning encompassed by the Greek prefix «meta», postmodernity calls for its *metalanguage*. Like other terminological alternatives to the «syntactically correct but semantically meaningless term post-postmodernism», however, the theory of «metamodernism»¹⁸ elaborates on a prefix what appears to be a substantially unchallenged notion of modernism and, ultimately, a metaphysical understanding of modernity. «Hypermodernity»¹⁹ and «supermodernity»²⁰ perform a similar function. Breaking away from this recursive model, I will adopt the Neobaroque as a metalanguage of postmodernity.

In fact, the Neobaroque description of postmodernity in terms of Baroque metaphysics highlights a confusion of language and metalanguage that underpins the postmodern discourse

¹⁶ J.-F. Lyotard, *La condition postmoderne: rapport sur le savoir* (1979), trans. G. Bennington and B. Massumi, *The Postmodern Condition. A Report on Knowledge*, Manchester University Press, Manchester 1984, p. XXIV. Cfr. J. Mazzeo, «A Critique of Some Modern Theories of Metaphysical Poetry», *Modern Philology*, 50 (1952), pp. 88-96 (p. 91).

¹⁷ C. Lévi-Strauss, «Introduction à l'œuvre de Marcel Mauss» (1950), trans. F. Baker, *Introduction to the Work of Marcel Mauss*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1987, p. 55. Cfr. J. Mehlman, «The "Floating Signifier": From Lévi-Strauss to Lacan», *Yale French Studies*, 48 (1972), pp. 10-37.

¹⁸ T. Vermeulen and R. Van den Akker, «Notes on Metamodernism», *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture*, 2 (2010). Cfr. R. Van Den Akker, A. Gibbons, and T. Vermeulen, *Metamodernism. Historicity, Affect, Depth*, Rowman & Littlefield, London 2017.

¹⁹ See R. Donnarumma, *Ipermodernità. Dove va la narrativa contemporanea*, il Mulino, Bologna 2014.

²⁰ M. Augé, *Introduction à une anthropologie de la surmodernité* (1992), trans. J. Howe, *Non-Places. Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, Verso, London and New York 1995.

while undermining its definition. Linda Hutcheon's critique of the «confusion of definition» around the usage of postmodernism and its conflation with postmodernity may be recast in this framework, precisely because the relationship between these terms must be *assumed* but their difference can only be *argued*²¹. The Neobaroque expresses the theoretical and historical awareness that we cannot define but only «narrate» postmodernity²², i.e. we can only put forward contingent descriptions in lieu of an unattainable consistent and conclusive definition.

2. *Trans-Latin American Baroque*

It is important to acknowledge, with Perry Anderson, that the words «postmodernism» (*postmodernismo*) and its logical antecedent «modernism» (*modernismo*) «come not from Europe or the United States, but from Hispanic America»²³. Likewise, before representing the return of the Baroque in European and Northern American theory, as explained by Irlemar Chiampi, the Neobaroque articulated the historical process of «Americanization of the Baroque» through the Latin American arts²⁴. The genealogy of the Neobaroque and its relevance to describe the cultural logic of our times, rather than one of its styles, must thus be linked to the definition of what Panofsky called «Baroque *in partibus infidelium*»: it is the European Baroque that «fits the customary categories of wildness, obscurity, etc., much better and more consistently than does the original, Italian version of the style»²⁵. Theoretical and historical entanglements grant semantic viability to the Neobaroque as a *sign* of postcolonial cultural hybridity.

In the 1972 essay *El barroco y el neobarroco*, conventionally regarded as a manifesto of the Neobaroque, the Paris-based Cuban poet Severo Sarduy argued that the Baroque signifier was destined «from birth» to ambiguity and «semantic diffusion» (*difusión semántica*), and against the grain of its possible origins he endeavored to establish the Neobaroque as a «meta-

²¹ L. Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, Routledge, New York 2002 (1989), pp. 16 and 25. Cfr. F. Guardiani, «Re-presenting Postmodernity: McLuhan for the Nineties», in W. Anselmi and K. Gouliamos (eds), *Mediating Culture. The Politics of Representation*, Guernica, Toronto 1994, pp. 151-84.

²² See R. Ceserani, *Raccontare il postmoderno*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 1997. Cfr. Id., «Italy and Modernity: Peculiarities and Contradictions», in L. Somigli and M. Moroni (eds), *Italian Modernism. Italian Culture between Decadentism and Avant-Garde*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto 2004, pp. 35-62.

²³ P. Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernity*, Verso, London and New York 1998, p. 3. Cfr. M. Kaup, *Neobaroque in the Americas. Alternative Modernities in Literature, Visual Art, and Film*, University of Virginia Press, Charlottesville 2012.

²⁴ I. Chiampi, *Barroco y Modernidad*, Fondo de Cultura Económica, Mexico City 2000, pp. 21-36. Cfr. M.-P. Malcuzyński, «The (Neo)Baroque Effect: A Critical Inquiry into the Transformation and Application of a Conceptual Field to Comparative American Studies », *Comparative Literature*, 61(2009), pp. 295-315.

²⁵ E. Panofsky, «What is Baroque?», p. 36.

metalanguage» (*metametalenguaje*) of contemporary Latin American arts²⁶. In this context, Sarduy's «confusion» with Mannerism, i.e. the anti-classicist style that came before the Italian Baroque, can be regarded as both irrelevant and critical²⁷. The term «meta-metalanguage» was borrowed from Noam Chomsky, who used it to denote linguistic theory in its relationship to grammar as a metalanguage²⁸, but the idea had already been translated in terms of literary theory by the Brazilian poet Haroldo de Campos in his *Ensaio de meta-metalinguagem*, written in 1971²⁹. Expanding on this contiguity of linguistics and literary theory, Sarduy's Neobaroque operates as a semiological metalanguage to «deconstruct» (*desmontar*) the traditional grammar of the Baroque signifier and translate its «progressive enveloping» of modern history and postmodern theory³⁰.

As much as Sarduy preferred to speak of semiology instead of poetics, in a later essay entitled *Barroco* – published in 1974, with a dedication to Roland Barthes – he used the word «cosmology» instead of metaphysics, with an oblique reference to Georges Lemaître's foundation of Neoscholastic metaphysics. The metaphysical subtext of Sarduy's cosmological discourse becomes clear, for example, when he argues that the Neobaroque was a Baroque without Classicism, because Classicism had only «Physics»³¹. The parallel deconstruction of the semantic history of the Baroque and of the metaphysics of European modernity is crucial to a Neobaroque reading of postmodernity. The Neobaroque critical effort that resulted in a radical new interpretation of Latin American arts, in fact, followed the process of «historical dislocation» of European metaphysics that is also expressed in the structuralist proliferation of the «baroque» (*baroquisme*), as pointed out by Jacques Derrida in a 1963 essay³².

In Italy, the metaphysical assumptions about modernity that underlie the relationship between postmodernity and the Neobaroque were notably captured by two semiologists. Umberto Eco's 1962 book *Opera aperta*, which provided a theoretical basis to the Italian «Neo-avant-garde», envisaged the Baroque «as the first clear manifestation of modern culture

²⁶ S. Sarduy, «El barroco y el neobarroco» (1972), trans. C. Winks, «The Baroque and the Neobaroque», in L. Parkinson Zamora and M. Kaup (eds), *Baroque New Worlds. Representation, Transculturation, Counterconquest*, Duke University Press, Durham (NC) 2009, pp. 270-91 (pp. 271-72).

²⁷ R. Pérez, *Severo Sarduy and the Neo-Baroque Image of Thought in the Visual Arts*, Purdue University Press, West Lafayette (IN) 2012, pp. 11-12.

²⁸ N. Chomsky, *Syntactic Structures*, Mouton, The Hague 1957, p. 54, n. 4.

²⁹ See H. de Campos, «Ensaio de meta-metalinguagem» (1971), *Revista USP*, 2 (1989), pp. 55-70.

³⁰ S. Sarduy, «The Baroque and the Neobaroque», p. 272.

³¹ S. Sarduy, *Barroco* (1974), in *Obra completa*, ed. G. Guerrero and F. Wahl, Galaxia Gutenberg/Círculo de Lectores, Madrid 1999, vol. II, pp. 1195-1262 (p. 1241, n. 1).

³² J. Derrida, *L'écriture et la différence* (1967), trans. A. Bass, *Writing and Difference*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London 1978, p. 5.

and sensitivity»³³. At the cultural climax of postmodernity, in 1986, Omar Calabrese developed the first organic theory of what he called *L'età neobarocca*, arguing that the term «postmodern» had «lost its original meaning» and was «simultaneously equivocal and generic»³⁴. Whereas the semiology of the Neobaroque as a «sign of the times» – as the English translation of Calabrese's title reads, using William Tyndale's phrase (Matthew 16:3) – shows that postmodernism established itself as the cultural logic of a floating signifier, a comparative analysis of the Baroque outside Italy helps to understand that the loss or even the lack of «original meaning» is part of its logic and is not without history.

It is not by chance that Eco's and Calabrese's semiological theories find their objective correlative, in particular, in the Latin American arts. In the preface to the Brazilian edition of *Opera aperta*, Eco acknowledged that de Campos had anticipated the main ideas of his work in a 1955 article, precisely entitled *A obra de arte aberta*, where the term «Neobaroque» (*neobarroco*) is also first attested; but he noted that this happened in a singular fold of history, as if the Brazilian poet «had reviewed the book» that the Italian semiologist «had not yet written and later wrote without reading his article»³⁵. A certain sense of entitlement may betray the logic of an old hegemonic culture, which tends to assert European prerogatives in the tradition and progress of theory, but the irony of this statement is about cultural history more than influence. In a foreword to *L'età neobarocca*, in fact, Eco wondered whether Calabrese in the early 1960s «would have produced» a book similar to *Opera aperta*, but he also noted that the reverse – if Eco had to write *Opera aperta* in the late 1980s – would not necessarily be the case, further arguing that this paradoxical question concerns their «cultural climate» and possibly «even the contraposition between modern and postmodern»³⁶.

Such use of the *post hoc* fallacy is useful to draw our attention to the out-of-joint relationship between the Neobaroque and the Baroque, misleadingly implied by the prefix «neo». In other words, Eco's irony highlights a terminological inconsistency at the core of the very definition of the Neobaroque, which reveals the historical shift of its own metaphysics, as summarized by Francesco Guardiani: «Baroque leads to modernity while Neobaroque moves away from

³³ U. Eco, *Opera aperta* (1962), trans. A. Cancogni, *Open Work*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) 1989, p. 7.

³⁴ O. Calabrese, *L'età neobarocca* (1987), trans. C. Lambert, *Neo-Baroque. A Sign of the Times*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1992, p. 12.

³⁵ H. de Campos, «A obra de arte aberta. Diário de São Paulo» (1955), trans. J. Tolman, «The Open Work of Art», in *Novas: Selected Writings*, ed. A.S. Bessa and O. Cisneros, Northwestern University Press, Evanston 2007, pp. 220-22; see *ibi*, p. 369.

³⁶ Calabrese, *L'età neobarocca*, p. VIII, 197 n. 1.

it»³⁷. We find here the «paradox of the future (*post*) anterior (*modo*)» which is characteristic of postmodernity, as Lyotard explained it³⁸. To develop the potential of the paradox for a dialectical reading, Calabrese refers the cultural logic of the Neobaroque to Sarduy's idea of *retombée*, whose definition as «achronic causality» (*causalidad acrónica*) features in the exergue of *Barroco*³⁹. The word can be translated as «relapse» or «repercussion», but its semiological functioning can be fully grasped by recasting the *tree model* of generative grammar into a poststructuralist idea of *writing*: like the «profuse and distinct» fronds of a palm-tree, as Barthes notes, the main feature of writing is the «falling back» (*retombée*)⁴⁰. Accordingly, the Neobaroque does not merely indicate a postmodern repetition or citation, but the falling back of a poststructuralist semiology of writing onto an eccentric Baroque cosmology, dragging with it the metaphysics of «the curious *baroque reason* which has been at work in the twentieth century»⁴¹.

3. A Laokoon complex?

In the Scholastic name «Baroco», each letter had a meaning and their sequence encoded a precise figure and mood of syllogism: the vowel «A» stands for the universal affirmative premise and the «O» for the universal negative proposition of the minor premise and the conclusion; the first consonant denotes the first mood of the first figure, called *Barbara*, to which *Baroco* can be reduced; the consonants «C» and «R» mean that the reduction of *Baroco* can only be achieved indirectly, by conversion or *reductio ad absurdum* – and probably for emphasis, the «C» has been doubled in Italian, the «R» in Portuguese.⁴² Unlike *Barbara*, whose claim to universal reason could be read along the lines of Vico's «barbarism of reflection», the logical signifier «Baroco» had no meaning in Latin, Italian, or any other vernacular language. After the Baroque, however, the association of this signifier with the Portuguese word for an imperfect pearl supplemented formal logic with a poetic history, in which the sequence of sounds also became meaningful.

³⁷ F. Guardiani, «Baroque and Neobaroque», in F. Guardiani (ed.), *Going for Baroque. Cultural Transformations 1550-1650*, Legas, Ottawa 1999, pp. 43-56.

³⁸ J.-F. Lyotard, «Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?», in I. Hassan and S. Hassan (eds), *Innovation/Renovation. New Perspectives on the Humanities*, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison 1983, pp. 329-341 (p. 341).

³⁹ S. Sarduy, *Barroco*, p. 1197.

⁴⁰ R. Barthes, *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* (1975), trans. R. Howard, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, MacMillan, London 1988 (1977), p. 41. Cfr. S. Sarduy, *Nueva inestabilidad* (1987), in *Obra completa*, vol. II, pp. 1345-1382 (p. 1370, n.1).

⁴¹ C. Buci-Glucksmann, *La Raison baroque. De Baudelaire à Benjamin* (1984), trans. P. Camiller, *Baroque Reason. The Aesthetics of Modernity*, Sage, London 1994, p. 138. Cfr. L. Anceschi, *Barocco e Novecento. Con alcune prospettive fenomenologiche*, Rusconi e Paolazzi, Milano 1960.

⁴² B. Brophy, «Baroque-'n'-Roll», pp. 168-172.

The interpretation of *Baroco* in ordinary language makes it possible to imagine and describe a different semantic history of the Baroque outside Italy. In his analysis of «the sign *barroco*», for example, Sarduy underscored some of the many resonances of the vowel succession «A-O-O» and suggested, with leaps of imagination, that the *chiaroscuro* of this sequence captures the passage from the classicist self-centered circle to the double-centered ellipse of Baroque cosmology⁴³. The visual and the acoustic image are thus recombined and made meaningful for the Neobaroque arts without the necessity of a linear narrative. The Neobaroque interpretation of postmodernity may fall back on a similar reading.

With reference to the famous sculptural complex of the so-called Hellenistic Baroque, the *Laokoon*, which played a pivotal role in the passage from the Baroque to Neoclassicism, we could superimpose the logical vowels of *Baroco* on the word «Laokoon», and read the latter as a code name that stands for the retrospective and negative definition of the Baroque. We can consider the relevance of this analogy from the perspective of Irving Babbitt's *New Laokoon*, which resumes Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's 1766 essay and his Aristotelian project of looking at «logic as the foundation of the fine arts»⁴⁴. In Babbitt's pamphlet, the Baroque is only mentioned in a footnote as a relevant period for a comprehensive survey of the «pseudo-classical confusion of the arts»⁴⁵, despite the fact that Lessing directly criticized the «Baroque taste» (*Barockgeschmack*) which will be allegedly reinstated by the Romantics. Can we see the Neobaroque as the sign of a figurative *Laokoon complex*, then, as if the logical definition and the poetic interpretation of modernity were caught up in the serpentine grip of history? After all, the inherent difficulty of reducing the syllogism in *Baroco* is part of the most productively imaginative definitions of the cultural logic of our time.

4. *Open opera in a rock universe*

In the notes for the unfinished parts of his *Laokoon*, Lessing's analysis of modern opera provides an interesting case for reassessing the Baroque confusion of the arts and its Romantic *retombée*. Lessing notes that the correspondence of the «arbitrary, successive, audible signs» of poetry with the «natural, successive, audible signs» of music can only be based on the «awareness of music's unavoidable retarding effect on the one hand, and poetry's unavoidable

⁴³ S. Sarduy, *Barroco*, pp. 1199-1203 and 1246, n. 14.

⁴⁴ I. Babbitt, *The New Laokoon. An Essay on the Confusion of the Arts*, Houghton Mifflin, Boston 1910, pp. 38-39.

⁴⁵ *Ibi*, p. 58, n. 2. Cfr. D. Albright, *Untwisting the Serpent. Modernism in Music, Literature, and Other Arts*, Chicago University Press, Chicago 2000.

accelerating effect on the other»⁴⁶. At the end of postmodernity, the difference in time of the two semiological systems becomes a *sign of the times*: Barthes's idea of «the Novel as Opera»⁴⁷ could also be interpreted as a Neobaroque fantasy.

In early modern Italy, the new relationship between logic and music was compellingly expressed by Torquato Tasso, whose poetics functioned as a metalanguage for poetry in the transition from the Renaissance to the Baroque. Thanks to the new circulation of Aristotle's writings, Tasso subsumed poetry «under logic» (*sotto la logica*) and used a «second-figure syllogism» to argue that poetic logic is «dialectical», rather than sophistic, and poetic history is «metaphysical»⁴⁸. The same argument can be applied to the very definition of the Baroque, but also to the dialectical relationship of the Neobaroque to its supposed logical premises. In addition, Tasso's understanding of poetry as an «artifice» (*artificio*), which is at the same time syllogistic and musical⁴⁹, laid out the conditions for a reflexive definition of the Baroque: music, the art of time *par excellence*, became the ultimate meta-metalanguage of the Italian Baroque age and arts.

The literary historian Francesco De Sanctis famously summarized the transition into the Baroque in the following terms: «Literature was dying, and music was being born»⁵⁰. When the word «Baroque» did not yet denote an age but a style, it had the general negative connotations associated with its derivation from an obscure syllogistic figure but also, particularly in the French context, with Italian music. In his *Dictionnaire de musique* (1768), Jean-Jacques Rousseau furthered this idea by defining Baroque music as confused, dissonant, and most unnatural: «It looks, indeed, as if this term comes from *Baroco* of the Logicians»⁵¹; and in his *Essai sur l'origine des langues* (1781), the word only occurs to describe the drawing of an «imperfect figure» in a chapter «On melody» which is, in fact, dedicated to painting and its relation to writing⁵². Around the same time, the idea of Baroque music was developed into

⁴⁶ G. Flaherty, *Opera in the Development of German Critical Thought*, Princeton University Press, Princeton (NJ) 1978, p. 218. Cfr. G.E. Lessing, *Laokoon, oder über die Grenzen der Malerei und Poesie* (1766), trans. R. Phillimore, *Laocoon*, Routledge, London 1874.

⁴⁷ R. Barthes, *La Préparation du roman* (2003), trans. K. Briggs, *The Preparation of the Novel: Lecture Courses and Seminars at the Collège de France (1978-1979 and 1979-1980)*, Columbia University Press, New York 2001, pp. 19.

⁴⁸ T. Tasso, *Discorsi del poema eroico* (1594), trans. M. Cavalchini and I. Samuel, *Discourses on the Heroic Poem*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1973, pp. 30-31.

⁴⁹ T. Tasso, «La Cavaletta, ovvero de la poesia Toscana» (1584), in *Dialoghi*, ed. E. Raimondi, Sansoni, Firenze 1958, vol. II/2, pp. 611-668 (p. 653).

⁵⁰ F. De Sanctis, *Storia della letteratura italiana* (1870-71), trans. J. Redfern, *History of Italian Literature*, Oxford University Press, London 1930, vol. II, p. 710.

⁵¹ C.V. Palisca, «“Baroque” as a Music-Critical Term», in G. Cowart (ed.), *French Musical Thought 1600-1800*, UMI Research Press, Ann Arbor and London 1989, pp. 7-21 (p. 13).

⁵² J. Derrida, *De la grammatologie* (1967), trans. G. Chakravorty Spivak, *Of Grammatology*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 1997, p. 346.

the «work-concept» of the fine arts, but «successful connections and comparisons of music with other arts were rarely made» and only in order to assert the autonomy of a musical canon, as Ljubica Ilic has pointed out⁵³. In late modernity, then, «Baroque» was mainly a *classificatory* term for «modern» before «classical» music.

It can be argued that the Neobaroque idea of the «open work» belongs to a different tradition of the musical work-concept, one that resonates with the Latinate plural *opera*. In this sense, it is possible to say (paraphrasing Walter Pater) that all postmodern arts aspire to the condition of opera, and that opera is essentially as Baroque as it is, according to Mladen Dolar, «a true postmodern subject par excellence»⁵⁴ – but specific examples need to be examined. De Campos directly referred to Pierre Boulez's conception of «the *open work of art* as a kind of modern Baroque»⁵⁵. Likewise, the musical ideas of Boulez and Luciano Berio feature as eminent examples of a new linguistic code in Eco's *Opera aperta*⁵⁶. Needless to say, «the combination of self-conscious modernism and antiquarianism» of late-modern Italian music, as noted by David Kimbell⁵⁷, would no longer produce Italian opera as we know it, let alone its corresponding aesthetics, but the overarching metaphorical function of music in the cultural elaborations of the Neobaroque can still be traced back to popular forms of the «pseudo-Classical», as Babbitt would call it. If the Baroque finds in music a meta-metalanguage of its cultural logic, its poetics is that of an open and hybrid genre like that of modern opera, where music is part of a complex semiological performance.

Brophy's portmanteau term «Baroque-'n'-Roll» encapsulates a similar understanding of the postmodern relationship with the past. By and large, the new «metaphysical poets» of the Neobaroque have replaced theology with technology, but the same Baroque *cosmology* shifts into the «rock universe» (*universo rock*) of postmodern songwriters, as described by Pier Vittorio Tondelli⁵⁸. It is then unsurprising that a number of scholars have looked at rock music in direct correspondence with Baroque opera. As explained by David Shumway, opera can be seen as the Baroque equivalent of a rock concert above all because «they communicate through a variety of sign systems of which music is only one»⁵⁹; both an opera libretto and the lyrics

⁵³ L. Ilic, *Music and the Modern Condition. Investigating the Boundaries*, Ashgate, Farnham 2010, p. 11.

⁵⁴ M. Dolar, «If Music Be the Food of Love», in S. Žižek and M. Dolar, *Opera's Second Death*, Routledge, New York and London 2002, pp. 1-102 (p. 3).

⁵⁵ H. de Campos, «A obra de arte aberta», p. 222.

⁵⁶ Eco, *Open Work*, p. 245.

⁵⁷ D. Kimbell, *Italian Opera*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1991, p. XIV.

⁵⁸ P.V. Tondelli, «Poesia e Rock (1987-89)», in *Un Weekend Postmoderno. Cronache dagli anni Ottanta*, Bompiani, Milano 2005 (1990), pp. 308-15 (p. 309).

⁵⁹ M.R. Menocal, *Shards of Love. Exile and the Origins of Lyric*, Duke University Press, Durham (NC) 1994, p. 257.

of a rock song are understood in performance despite the fact that musical semantics is irretrievably vague and words may not be discerned at all: words and music belong to the textual continuum of a cultural language-game, where individuals can transform a multiplicity of traditions. In the 1967 article *Commenti al rock*, Berio similarly argued that the evolution of Rock-'n'-Roll towards contemporary rock music was driven by an «impulse to accept and include» a «multiplicity of traditions», albeit with an oversimplified idea of them, and to use studio techniques to create a «sound drama» (*drammaturgia sonora*) of superimposed linguistic fragments which are often difficult to understand⁶⁰.

Like modern opera, Rock-'n'-Roll certainly is one of the popular genres that best represent the cultural logic of the Baroque in postmodern textual practices. As much as with contemporary opera, however, the postmodern classicization of this music may also tend to reiterate a colonial process of *grammatization* of vernacular languages. The elaborations of the «return of the Baroque» in European theory, for instance, parallel the development of rock music against its origins in American popular music, and Berio even writes that rock music «needed an English group, The Beatles, in order to burst into full flower»⁶¹. To the contrary, Alejo Carpentier's novella *Concierto barroco* offers a fresh example of the Neobaroque hybridization model in contemporary culture, performing a Carnavalesque reconstruction of Antonio Vivaldi's long-lost opera *Montezuma* (1733) with final trumpet notes by Louis Armstrong⁶². Compared to the poetics and politics of postmodernism, the metalinguistic discourse of the Neobaroque may thus enable a suspension of the recursive definition of postmodernity and, at the same time, open up new descriptive frameworks.

5. *Before and beyond Baroco*

At the end of her essay, Brophy ingeniously suggested that a Portuguese jeweler who studied logic could have come up with the alternative syllogistic code name *Bocado*, which combines the mode of logical reduction *ad absurdum* that is proper of *Baroco* with the metaphorical qualities of the Baroque as a language, denoting «a style that creates beauty by not conforming to the classically accepted modes»⁶³. In keeping with Brophy's suggestion, I will put forward another syllogistic code name which brings together not only logic with poetry, but also music and the visual arts: *Festino*, third mood of the third figure of syllogism, immediately before

⁶⁰ L. Berio, «Commenti al rock» (1967), trans. S. Oyama, «Comments on Rock», in E. Thomson and D. Gutman (eds), *The Lennon Companion. Twenty-five Years of Comment*, Da Capo Press, Cambridge (MA) 2004, pp. 97-98.

⁶¹ *Ibi*, p. 97.

⁶² See A. Carpentier, *Concierto barroco* (1974), trans. A. Zatz, *Baroque Concert*, Deutsch, London 1991.

⁶³ Brophy, «Baroque-'n'-Roll», p. 172.

Baroco in the Scholastic classification⁶⁴. In formal logic, a syllogism in *Baroco* can be reduced to a standard mood of the first figure by retaining the particular and negative conclusion but converting the premises as in *Festino*. As the differential structure of the Baroque signifier may provide a key to understanding the metaphysics of modernity, the *Festino* mood begs the question of the Neobaroque as a metalanguage to describe the cultural logic of postmodernity.

My final proposition is that the Neobaroque, as an operational model of the arts, deconstructs the traditional language of metaphysics and transforms its modes of historical classification. The interpretation of *Festino* in ordinary language proves to be particularly relevant to a critical reading of the postmodern cultural logic. Whereas in Latin the word «festino» stands for a verb meaning «to hasten», in the first person singular of the present indicative, in Italian it can also be a diminutive form of *fiesta*, i.e. «feast». Instead of opposing logic and history, as in a metaphysical definition of the Baroque, the cultural logic of postmodernity could be thus described as a Neobaroque *festino*, encapsulating in the folds of a new floating signifier the features of historical *acceleration* and cultural *entertainment*, towards what Deleuze calls the «unity of the arts» in a «broad and floating world»⁶⁵.

In order to further exemplify and assess this interpretive framework, let us reconsider the connection between the Neobaroque and postmodern culture. Against the «grammar» established by Eugenio D'Ors, who defined the Baroque as «the natural idiom of culture» (*l'idiome naturel de la culture*)⁶⁶, Sarduy described the Baroque precisely as a «feast» (*festín*) of the arts, characterized by the «artificialization» of their language, the «carnivalisation» of their social function, and the «wastefulness» (*despilfarro*) of their cultural logic⁶⁷. Accordingly, the Neobaroque *festino* not only exposes but also endorses the artificial nature of the «postmodern condition». It should be obvious by now, for instance, that the recurrent debates about the death of the novel (and the arts more in general) serve as Carnavalesque festivals⁶⁸.

Sarduy's idea of the Neobaroque *festín* elaborates, in particular, two critical references. The first one is to the seminal essay *La curiosidad barroca*, by the Cuban writer José Lezama Lima,

⁶⁴ D.M. Gabbay, F.J. Pelletier, and J. Woods (eds), *Logic. A History of its Central Concepts*, North-Holland, Amsterdam 2012, pp. 18-19. Cfr. L. Carroll, «The New Belfry of Christ Church, Oxford» (1872), in *The Pamphlets of Lewis Carroll*, ed. E. Giuliano and S. Marx, University Press of Virginia, Charlottesville 1993, pp. 67-79.

⁶⁵ G. Deleuze, *The Fold*, pp. 123-124. Cfr. A. Ndalianis, *Neo-Baroque Aesthetics and Contemporary Entertainment*, MIT Press, Cambridge (MA) 2004, pp. 198-199.

⁶⁶ E. D'Ors, *Lo Barroco* (1930), trans. A. Rouart-Valéry, *Du Baroque*, Gallimard, Paris 1935, p. 132.

⁶⁷ S. Sarduy, «The Baroque and the Neobaroque», pp. 272 and 280.

⁶⁸ See C. Ames, *The Life of the Party: Festive Vision in Modern Fiction*, University of Georgia Press, Athens 1991.

where the Baroque is described as a Dionysian «feast» (*fiesta*) which is «ruled by the desire to possess the world»⁶⁹. If the Latin American Baroque feast expresses a drive for cultural «counterconquest» (*contraconquista*), according to Lezama Lima, we cannot fail to notice that the Neobaroque *festino* represents a reversal of the Counter-Reformation anxiety about transubstantiation, which de Campos effectively interpreted as a metalinguistic «sign of devoration» (*signo da devoração*) in translation theory⁷⁰. Sarduy's second reference is to the «theory of the feast» (*théorie de la fête*) developed in the late 1930s by Roger Caillois, who was instrumental in introducing Latin American writers to France⁷¹. In a French short essay entitled *Le basculement néo-baroque*, Sarduy touched on Caillois's idea of «hypertelism», namely the drive that brings natural mimicry beyond its biological ends and leads to a self-destructive «feast» (*festin*), as it can be observed in some forms of insects⁷² – and correspondingly, at a cultural level, in the production of *castrati* as leading performers of Baroque opera, as argued by Benito Pelegrín⁷³. This is not very different from the framework devised by Gilles Lipovetsky in *Les temps hypermodernes*, in which late postmodernity is described as a system of self-destructive «hyperconsumption»⁷⁴ – but we could also mention William Burroughs's novel *Naked Lunch* (1959), translated into French as *Festin nu*.

The essential mimetic transgression that is performed by the Neobaroque *festino* is something that happens before the logical definition of the Baroque and, at the same time, goes beyond its historical classification. By way of a summary example, tracing back the postmodern *festino* to an early stage of Italian Baroque music, I would like to focus briefly on Luigi Nono's composition for tape and choir entitled *Contrappunto dialettico alla mente* (1968), which cites the madrigal comedy *Festino nella sera di giovedì grasso avanti cena* (1608) by Adriano Banchieri. A comparison of the two works highlights the historical parody and intellectual performance of the early modern paradigm in postmodern culture⁷⁵, and it may

⁶⁹ S. Sarduy, «The Baroque and the Neobaroque», p. 222. Cfr. J. Lezama Lima, «La curiosidad barroca» (1957), trans. M. Pérez and A. Birkenmaier, «Baroque curiosity», in Parkinson Zamora and Kaup, *Baroque New Worlds*, pp. 211-40.

⁷⁰ H. de Campos, «Ensaio de meta-metalinguagem», p. 56. Cfr. E. Ribeiro Pires Vieira, «Liberating Calibans: Readings of Antropofagia and Haroldo de Campos' Poetics of Transcreation», in S. Bassnett and H. Trivedi (eds), *Post-Colonial Translation. Theory and Practice*, Routledge, London 1999, pp. 95-113.

⁷¹ R. Caillois, «La fête», trans. B. Wing, «Festival», in *The College of Sociology (1937-39)*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1988, pp. 279-303.

⁷² S. Sarduy, «Le basculement néo-baroque», *Magazine littéraire*, 151-152 (1979), pp. 34-35 (p. 35).

⁷³ B. Pelegrín, «Ces merveilleux insectes chantants: les castrats, un cas d'hypertélisme?», *Sud. Hors série: Roger Caillois, ou, La traversée des savoirs* (1981), pp. 159-164.

⁷⁴ G. Lipovetsky, *Les temps hypermodernes* (2004), trans. A. Brown, *Hypermodern Times*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2005, p. 11.

⁷⁵ L. Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, p. 89-96.

be used to show the dialectics between high and popular culture in the Baroque and Neobaroque as opposed to the abstractions and quotations of the «pseudo-Classical» paradigm.

Banchieri's *Festino* represents an important contribution to the operatization of the madrigal and makes a sparing yet significant use of the *basso continuo*, i.e. the thorough or figured bass, which defined Baroque music writing and was a key innovation in the development of modern opera. The Prologue allegorizes the relationship between old and modern music with a dialogue between «Antique Rigour» and «Modern Delight», where the composer seems to side with the modern taste for a witty arrangement of musical theory and social entertainment. The madrigal comedy is set before supper on Fat Thursday, at the beginning of the last week of Carnival: in this festive spirit, a «bestial counterpoint» (*contraponto bestiale*) is improvised on a figured bass line by four barnyard animals, followed by a madrigal sung by some «little brains» (*cervellini*). As Banchieri was notably among the «opponents of Basso Continuo»⁷⁶, his celebration of modern music is clearly double-edged with irony.

In the *Contrappunto dialettico*, Banchieri's «Modern Delight» is recast as a «delightful modern delict» (*diletto delitto moderno*), and his madrigal sung by «little brains» plays on the possible double reading of the technical expression *alla mente* as «improvised» or, literally, «to the mind». Whilst Banchieri composed a *bestial* counterpoint to the modern musical practice, Nono's work may be seen as a *dialectical* counterpoint to postmodern theory, performed by engaging the human voice with technology, mixing fragments by the Italian Neo-avant-garde poet Nanni Balestrini with taped voices from the streets of Venice and electronic sounds. The unmistakable gravity of Nono's approach is also eloquent in comparison with Banchieri's light-hearted composition: «“Theory before pleasure”, once conservative, is now avant-garde», as Stillman Drake perfectly summarized the theoretical saturation of contemporary art music as opposed to the age of the *basso continuo*⁷⁷.

The second edition of Banchieri's *Festino* was released in Rome in 1939, under the auspices of the Fascist regime, and the politics of this actualization are crucial to Nono. In a 1959 lecture entitled *Geschichte und Gegenwart in der Musik von heute*⁷⁸, at Darmstadt, Nono explained that the critical appropriation of historical material is part of a wider musical engagement with the present. Without any doubt, the postmodern resonances of the *Contrappunto* take on a new

⁷⁶ F.T. Arnold, *The Art of Accompaniment from a Thorough-Bass as Practised in the 17th and 18th Centuries*, Dover, New York 1965, vol. I, pp. 80-90.

⁷⁷ S. Drake, «Vincenzo Galilei and Galileo», in *Galileo Studies*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor 1970, pp. 43-62 (p. 53).

⁷⁸ L. Nono, «Geschichte und Gegenwart in der Musik von heute» (1959), trans. «Historical Presence in Music Today», in B.R. Simms (ed.), *Composers on Modern Musical Culture. An Anthology of Readings on Twentieth-Century Music*, Schirmer, New York 1999, pp. 168-174.

meaning when the 1939 edition of the *Festino* is contrasted with the «politics of modernism», and in particular when we consider that «the aspiration to develop language towards the condition of music» was bound to fail in its modernist terms, as Raymond Williams insightfully pointed out, but it would «be taken into music or painting or performance art or, significantly, into film of avant-garde kind»⁷⁹. The «metaphysical domain» of international modernism, as commented by Peter Sloterdijk, was soon «laid bare as a festival ground» for the avant-garde⁸⁰, and Giorgio de Chirico's 1984 retrospective of his «post-metaphysical and baroque paintings» can epitomize this perfectly⁸¹.

Within the context of Italian avant-garde, a Futurist counterpoint to Baroque aesthetics can be found in Luigi Russolo's linguistic emancipation of «noises that are like harmonic and rhythmic modulations above the continuously held bass» (*basso tenuto e continuo*)⁸². Drawing on the same analogy from *music writing*, we could conclude by suggesting that the logical definition of the Baroque works like a figured notation for the thorough-bass of postmodern culture: in the same way that the practice of improvising harmonies on a given bass line accompanied the Baroque emancipation of dissonance and the creation of modern opera, the Neobaroque endorsement of the inconsistency of logic and history allows an engaged but critically distant understanding of postmodernity. The cultural counterpoint of our times to the metaphysics of modernity could be described and performed as a Neobaroque *festino*.

⁷⁹ R. Williams, «Language and the Avant-Garde» (1986), in T. Pinkney (ed.), *The Politics of Modernism. Against the New Conformists*, Verso, London 1989, pp. 65-80 (p. 70).

⁸⁰ P. Nicholls, *Modernisms*, p. 251.

⁸¹ *Giorgio de Chirico: Post-Metaphysical and Baroque Paintings, 1920-1970*, ed. C.B. Sakraischik, R. Pincus-Witten, and R. Miller, New York, Robert Miller Gallery, 1984.

⁸² L. Russolo, *L'arte dei rumori* (1916), trans. B. Brown, *The Art of Noises*, Pendragon, New York 1986, p. 45.