

UNIVERSAL BAROQUE: CONTRADICTIONS AND POSSIBILITIES

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Abstraction today is no longer the map, the double, the mirror, or the concept. Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map. Henceforth it is the map that precedes the territory... it is the map that engenders the territory¹.

Perhaps no other term in the history of arts has more scope for polysemy than Baroque. And perhaps no other term has had its referents so blurred that it lends to easy adaptability in anachronic conditions, the blurring itself becoming a recognizable sign. The Baroque has come a long way since its earliest usages by the likes of Wofflin, Quatremere de Quincy and Helmut Hatzfeld at the crossroads of 19th and 20th century critical appraisals.

Our intention here however, is not exactly revisiting this travel but trying to locate and situate the historic/universal binary associated with it. Curiously both terms i.e. the Historic Baroque and the Universal Baroque presuppose and complement each other, acting like accomplices in a pact of mutual existential referentiality. The question however is that of looking at historicity in the larger framework of the baroque paradigm. Is historicity being compro-

¹ Kellner, 1994, p. 50.

mised when we talk of universal baroque or can we historicize the universality of baroque?

Before we go into these questions it would be pertinent to look at some critical positions on the subject. The name that first and foremost comes to mind on the question of historicity is quite easily Jose Antonio Maravall who in his celebrated work *La Cultura del Barroco* makes out a case for considering Baroque specifically for a culture springing out of a historic structure. As Maravall says

Barroco es, pues, para nosotros un concepto histórico. Comprende, aproximadamente, los tres primeros cuartos del siglo XVII centrándose con mayor intensidad, con más plena significación de 1605 a 1650 [...] Esto quiere decir que renunciamos a servirnos del término «barroco» para designar conceptos morfológicos o estilísticos, receptibles en culturas cronológicamente y geográficamente apartadas².

He does not advocate the tendency of indiscriminately finding parallels of a historical construct like the baroque. As he reiterates:

Todo ello se orienta a no descubrir barrocos desde el antiguo Egipto a la presente America, sino a complementar el panorama de conexiones entre hechos de múltiple naturaleza que nos hagan conocer mejor lo que fue el Barroco, en tanto que periodo único de la cultura europea, desarrollado en los decenios que hemos dicho del siglo XVII³.

So we can see that Maravall is clearly critical of the applicability of Baroque to others spaces and times.

Another critic, Hardin Craig in his work «Literary Study and the Scholarly Profession» has discussed the problem of drawing parallels and states that «the best phase of recent scholarship is the «avoidance of anachronistic thinking»⁴. Appreciating the rise of 19th century historicism he exclaims:

The last generation has rather unexpectedly decided that it will discover the meaning and values of old authors themselves and has pinned

² Maravall, 1980, pp. 24-25.

³ Maravall, 1980, p. 26.

⁴ Citado en Wellek y Warren, 1985, p. 41.

its faith to the idea, for example, that Shakespeare's own meaning is the greatest of Shakespearean meanings⁵.

The disapproval of both Maravall and Craig of too much overt reading of a specific cultural practice tied to a particular time and space into other times and spaces or vice versa i.e reading other times and spaces into a particular historical cultural practice is clear. But if we take the process of cultural production in its entirety, then we also need to look at the final shaping up of the cultural product itself. We need to look at the interface of the product and its users, contemporary or otherwise, in the larger framework of aesthetic autonomy. If the manifestation of a particular cultural practice has a referential paradigm as broad as that of the Baroque then perhaps it would be appropriate to transgress the time/space requirement of historicity. Whereas it is of utmost importance to foreground the historical context from which art springs, it would also be worthwhile to recognize the specific limitations of the phenomenon of language itself which is crucial in the making of the literary or related product. Further the historicity of the context itself would have a paradigm which may manifest elsewhere and produce similar art, especially literature and related fields which rely heavily on that shifty and elusive tool called language.

It is at the altar of linguistic processes where all historical specificities of the context come to roost and get shape during the literary creation. Alejo Carpentier in his article «The Baroque and the Marvelous Real» talks about the dichotomy of “Spirit” and “historical style”. He says mentioning Eugenio D’Ors:

D’Ors establishes the difference between a human constant such as the Baroque and what he calls Historical Style. The Baroque Spirit can reappear at any moment and does; in fact, reappear in many of the creations of today’s most modern architects because it is a spirit and not a style. Going back to what we were saying about seeing the Baroque as a human constant that absolutely cannot be limited to an architectural, aesthetic and pictorial movement originating in the 17th century we discover that Baroque has flourished in all ages, sporadically at times and at times as main characteristic of a culture⁶.

⁵ Wellek y Warren, 1985, p. 276.

⁶ Zamora y Faris, 2005, p. 95.

What Carpentier is pointing towards is the understanding of the Baroque as something made larger than a mere style pertaining to a particular period. It is here that we can perceive the need of historicizing the universality of Baroque by setting up the assumption that Baroque itself is a “spirit”. This particular elevation or extension of the Baroque to the category of something like a “spirit” has throughout critical history been called by other names also such as historic constant, Eon, *Zeitgeist*, Neo baroque etc. each of which proceed from a particular understanding of the concept.

Cristo Rafael Figueroa Sanchez in his book *Barroco y Neo Barroco en la narrativa hispanoamericana. Categorías literarias de la segunda mitad del siglo XX* says:

A partir de la década del ochenta del siglo XX hasta nuestros días, emergen y se actualizan discursos continuamente interceptados: relecturas del barroco histórico que encuentran puentes subterráneos con el siglo XX; redefiniciones del mismo, ya no tanto como esencia transhistórica, sino como rasgo operativo que permite aprender el carácter polimórfico de la modernidad. A la vez se destacan conceptualizaciones según las cuales modelos cosmológicos nacidos en la segunda mitad del siglo XVI resuenan en el ámbito cultural y explican el descentramiento del barroco histórico y al evolucionar, desembocan en una nueva estabilidad cósmica, cuyo correlato sería el Neo-barroco⁷.

This uncanny characteristic of the Baroque to somehow construct these subterranean bridges with spacio-temporal realities other than its own historical terrain makes it malleable enough to fit the universal category variously called as spirit etc that we just mentioned. We could utilize the views of Rene Wellek to support our arrangement of historicizing the universality of Baroque. Wellek opines that works of art are both eternal and historical and that

The total meaning of a work of art cannot be defined merely in terms of its meaning for the author and his contemporaries. It is rather a process of accretion i.e. the history of its criticism by its many readers in many ages⁸.

⁷ Sánchez, 2008, p. 20.

⁸ Wellek y Warren, 1985, p. 43.

He propounds what he calls «Perspectivism» rather than absolutist attitude in this regard.

The manifestation of the *baroque* therefore is possible in any age. One of the most important planks of the Baroque was the shaking of the assumption about the perceived reality. This particular manifestation of the baroque spirit is particularly abundant. This is perhaps so because it caters to something fundamental to human cognition which has been a site of tremendous instability throughout the ages. As we moved from the Modernity to Post Modernity and now 'after Post Modernity' or 'Post Post Modernity'(or any of the other terms in usage attempting to describe the present times) , we experienced an increasing 'reification' to use Lukacs's terminology, of commodities and decreased referentiality of the sign. As we moved from early capitalism to monopoly capitalism in an increasingly globalized world, consumption became the reigning deity and was taken to ever increasing extremes. Jean Baudrillard, the maverick French sociologist, has some interesting theoretical insights to make, especially with regard to the proliferation of mass media and technology in the contemporary world. His work refers to the Marxist analyses of the production of commodities within the political economy and then builds homologies on it and problematizes it in the post modern setting. He draws a homology between the material and sign production, and saying that in the present world the 'sign' has broken free of all referentiality to the real world. Signs no longer mean anything in the real world. They are their own meaning. The world is at a stage when the commodities are immediately produced as sign and signs as commodities. In his attempt to go beyond Marx and Saussure, he draws attention to a world of hyper-reality where the signs no longer refer to anything but themselves break into the semiotic system. Baudrillard's preoccupation with this 'burning' of the sign and self-referentiality lends itself easily to the post industrial, post modern artistic production, especially the mass media. The historical conditions brought about by such a system where human beings find themselves questioning the very reality of the 'simulacra', a concept close to Baudrillard which he develops, wherein it is explained that the world has come to be dominated by constantly mutating reference-less signs. In such a situation the 'simulacra' itself becomes real, the sign 'burns' and enters the semiotic system as commodity itself.

This kind of theoretical interpretation of the present has been popular in contemporary arts producing a baroque like artistic expression. Literary artists, as well as film makers have found this ambivalence about the real world and one's place in it to be very attractive and have used them as themes in their works. Just as the literary works during the historic baroque period like Calderón's *La vida es sueño* where the awareness about the simulation of reality produces deeper questions about the nature of reality itself. Although necessarily the historic baroque sensibility of Calderon and his contemporaries was brought about a spirit of pessimism emanating from the general economic crisis, the artistic response and the theme converges with the artistic response and theme in some of the present day productions. Although in the same spirit we must also acknowledge that the contemporary baroque is due to the conditions brought about by the particular situation of our age dominated by technology and consumption. Baudrillard's elaboration of the 'simulacra' has been a source of inspiration for several contemporary artists reflecting baroque like manifestations especially in the visual media. Baudrillard offers his particular theoretical premise of the sign in a scenario of all pervasive capital which makes the contemporary world an extremely fertile historical ground for the periodic appearance of the Baroque. With the new technologies and the media touching the core of everyday life, we live in an increasingly digital, virtual world, and the baroque is especially manifest in popular culture. Hollywood cinema is a canvas where this tendency has periodically manifested and been popular. We can identify Baroque at play in a trajectory through three Hollywood movies tracing almost three decades of the most recent time in contemporary history, starting from the high period of postmodernity, the iconic film the *Blade runner* (1982, dir. Ridley Scott), the 1999 largely popular *The Matrix* (dir. Wachowski brothers) of which two sequels were also made later, and the very recent 2010 release *Inception* (dir. Christopher Nolan).

In all the three films we can see very clearly the working of the Baroque in the sense of universal spirit, manifest in the cultural production of a certain space and time but replicable everywhere. To be precise one can see the same uncanny subversions of the seemingly unquestionable assumptions of the given reality through an apparently simple but inwardly complex plot having multiple layers trying to subvert the very reality that it wants to portray. The Segismundian

dilemma symbolizing the ultimate nature of reality echoes in each one of the protagonists whether it is Deckard going after the ‘replicants’ in the *Blade runner*, Anderson or Neo unraveling the *Matrix* or Dom Cobb planting *Inception* in another’s mind. To look at these movies as simple science fiction or cyberpunk would perhaps be too simplistic. The simpler outward classification of these films as Science fiction could be a reference point but it ultimately raises deeper questions which threaten to move the very ground under our feet.

In the *Blade runner* the relationship between the ‘replicant’ (extremely advanced robot) Rachael and the protagonist Deckard (who is given the charge of ‘retiring’ the replicants), blurs the limits of reality and makes the characters reflect on how to deal with the reality of the irreality (The replicant). The sign turns into its own referent and breaks loose of any attachment. One of the characters, Officer Gaff and Deckard himself remark about this as the unreal (The replicant Rachael) becomes real:

Gaff: It’s too bad she won’t live. But then again, who does?

[...]

Deckard (Voice over): Gaff had been there and let her live. Four years he figured. He was wrong. Tyrell had told me Rachael was special. No termination date. I didn’t know how long we had together, who does?

Similarly in *The Matrix* the ‘simulacra’ is shown to be operating as real, rendering the debate about the real reality pointless. As Neo, the protagonist hacker expresses doubt about the irreality of what he sees, Morpheus, the rebel (in a reversal of roles from the *Blade runner*) and knower of the ‘matrix’ affirms:

Neo: This... isn’t real.

Morpheus: What is real? How do you define real? If you are talking about what you can feel, what you can smell, what you can taste and see, the real is simply electrical signals interpreted by our brain...

We can see parallels in *Inception* where the baroque mainstay of the irrepressible doubts about what is real and what is not and the possible irrelevance of the question is manifest. The continued spinning of the top of the dream stealer/planter Cobb at the end of the film definitively affirms this ambivalence. Domm Cobb’s wife Mal

also affirms this along with the possible irrelevance of the question. The 'simulacra' becomes real.

Cobb: I know what's real.

Mal: No creeping doubts?... Admit it Domm, you don't believe in one reality any more. So choose. Choose your reality...

All three of the films are a loud example of the validity, universality and versatility of the Baroque as we can completely match the three of them with Calderón's *La vida es sueño*. Like *La vida es sueño* they are cultural products emanating from a specific historic milieu reflecting it, they are characterized by a displacement of reality creating cognitive paradoxes and they offer the ultimate resolution as accepting the paradox itself as the nature of reality. I would like to end with another thought from Roland Barthes about the baroque which perhaps could help us assimilate our Historic/Universal problematic:

For perhaps that's what baroque is; the torment of finality in profusion. Taciturn death is an open system subject at once to a structure and a contestation, to a repetition and a direction; it seems to proliferate on all sides and yet remains imprisoned in a great moral and existential intention. Here again, it is the vegetable image which substantiates the baroque; the deaths correspond, but their symmetry is false. Spread out in time, subject to a movement, like that of sprouts on the same stalk; the regularity is a delusion. Everything is reproduced yet nothing is repeated⁹.

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⁹ Sontag, 1982, p. 166.

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