

Reflections on the Link between Baroque and Time

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Abstract. The general aim of the present paper is to set out the characteristics of what I call the (or a) baroque time, trying as such to reveal how baroque is linked with this category, in opposition both with the current, «popular» perception of it or with powerful theoretical interpretations, which are permeated by a spatio-visual kind of lecture. I sketchily present then three significant analyses (of Benjamin, Maravall and Bal) where we find an attempt, more or less vigorous, to establish a link of this sort, in counterflow to this mainstream spatio-visual conception of baroque. Trying to reveal the specificity of the temporality for baroque, inside modernity as a whole, we will see that these analyses failed in offering a positive starting point, but for different reasons.

Keywords: baroque; time; space; Walter Benjamin; Jose Antonio Maravall; Mieke Bal.

[es] Reflexiones sobre el vínculo entre Barroco y tiempo

Resumen: El objetivo principal de este trabajo es exponer las características de lo que llamo el (o un) tiempo barroco, tratando de poner de relieve cómo el barroco se vincula con esta categoría en oposición tanto a su percepción actual y «popular» como a sus interpretaciones teóricas más relevantes, permeadas por una especie de lectura espacio-visual del mismo. Por ello, se presentan esquemáticamente tres análisis significativos (de Benjamin, Maravall y Bal) en los que cabe encontrar un intento, más o menos sólido, de establecer un vínculo de este tipo, a contracorriente de la concepción espacio-visual dominante del barroco. Con el objetivo de mostrar la especificidad de la temporalidad del barroco en el seno de la modernidad en su conjunto, se incidirá en que estos análisis no lograron, por diferentes razones, ofrecer un punto de partida positivo para abordar esta cuestión.

Palabras clave: barroco; tiempo; espacio; Walter Benjamin; José Antonio Maravall; Mieke Bal.

Summary: Preliminary remarks. The (inauthentic) temporalization of the Baroque in Benjamin's interpretation of *Trauerspiel*. Maravall's derivative (and spatialized) «baroque time». Some very brief conclusions. Bibliography.

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Preliminary remarks

It is not at all surprising to assert that the baroque seems to be intimately defined through the category of *space*, from the outset of the designation / delimitation of this cultural epoch – only in the 20th century fully developed as a concept – and until its revival, in our times, mainly in the form of what is called *neo-baroque*. Of course, this does not mean that *time* (or history) has no importance at all for the baroque, especially if we observe the way in which it is recov-

ered and used for analysing and describing nowadays new media culture, where powerful visual aspects are inextricably linked to diverse temporal narratives / strategies².

However, we must admit that it is obvious that we put time – even in most contemporary analyses – in a *derivative* or *secondary* position; at best, relative to space or to (strictly) spatialized visual representation.

The very fact that the baroque is most commonly understood as deriving from baroque *art*, more precisely, from a 17th Century art focused mainly on *ar-*

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² By the way, it is worth noting that the example of this powerful conceptual resurgence of baroque in which time has a significant role to play also arguably raises the important question of the identity – or, at least, partial identity – of the inner structure of this cultural category (but not only, of course) for the two distinct and so far removed historical instances. How much compatible or how much are indeed overlapping the two senses? Of course, this is not particular only to baroque, it happens also with Renaissance or even with Middle Age, but those are not mainly stylistic categories, but historical. For a quint-essential presentation of neo-baroque, see O. CALABRESE, *Neo-Baroque: A Sign of the Times*, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1992; for some other examples of it in contemporary art and aesthetics, see among many works A. NDALIANIS, *Neo-Baroque Aesthetics and Contemporary Entertainment*, Cambridge, Massachusetts / London, The MIT Press, 2004, and M. KAUP, *Neobaroque in the Americas: Alternative Modernities in Literature, Visual Art, and Film*, Charlottesville and London, University of Virginia Press, 2012.

chitecture and *painting*, is a decisive sign of the force of this common interpretation – even though the expression «baroque music» is a canonical one for the history of music and very widespread among people.

In what follows, I don't mean, of course, to equate *visuality* as such with (simple) *spatiality*, which would be not only erroneous, but also impossible. It is not the place (nor the time...) to develop here an extended theoretical examination of this topic, but I want to emphasize that there are, in what we call more or less ordinarily a visual entity, certain (significant) temporal elements which define it almost inasmuch as those purely spatial do. In fact, when we consider a visual experience, the spatial aspects are not only closely, but also indissolubly linked with the temporal ones.

Some various examples, even forcefully scanty, might help. For instance, when we observe a deeply static landscape, we strongly feel a total lack of changes *in time* – it is as if the time itself is frozen, but the time, as such, is present. Also, when theorists (like David Harvey, Anthony Giddens, Doreen Massey, Paul Virilio, etc.) define globalization through this kind of aspects, they speak about – to use Harvey's concept – «time-space compression» (although they don't include references to what is usually called early modernity or baroque in their analysis)³. Even in theoretical physics, it is easy to observe that the acceleration that expresses a key (revolutionary) notion in configuring the early modern mathematized science of nature implies time, but also space: $a = s / t^2$. But, to sum up this point, in each of these cases, and in many others as well, what is important is *how much* we stress *one* of the aspects at the expense of the other. In the vast majority of explorations of the baroque, and in its common perception too, space plays an overwhelming role. The baroque *space* has such a strong presence to the extent that *time*, its correlate dimension, seems to fade into absence, both theoretically, as a cognitive category, and practically, as a lived experience.

But, as we will see further on, we have nonetheless to attentively scrutinize the peculiar possibility of what we might call a baroque way of temporalization, even where we find a vigorous refutation of the aforementioned spatializing preeminence – it is the case, among others, of Maravall.

Coming back to my initial assertion, it would be common and foreseeable then, as Sherwin put it, to hold that the baroque culture «was essentially a visual culture, as is our own»⁴. In addition, there are several ways in which the visual element is described in a spatial key so as to capture the essence of baroque: «The baroque has a mood and mindset of its own; it is made up of recurring visual tropes and storylines.

The characteristic markers of the baroque include: the mirror, the labyrinth, the proliferation of fragments, the field of ruins, the spectacle, the dream»⁵. If these are the dominant *tropes of the baroque*, there are also what might be called its *cultural markers*, which are of a visual nature too. For the same Sherwin, the latter are quite «unmistakable»: «destabilization, fragmentation, and disorientation – amid a proliferation of forms, images, signs, appearances, coming and going without surcease»⁶. In almost all the instances mentioned by Sherwin, the identification of the visual with the (mere) spatial is very easy to spot, and the «coming and going» means almost entirely an incessant change of the spatial forms, thus an accelerated and protean process of spatialization, and not at all a capture of a kind of temporal authenticity, with its own sense or reality.

The opportunities for instrumentalization of a baroque «essence» are quite clear in this moment. To push further these preliminary remarks towards a political lecture, would be not a curious extension of our discussion, but a way to highlight a very strong reason for favouring space against time in many analyses of the baroque.

In other words, the visual aspects mentioned above decisively open the possibility for giving a strong *political* significance to the baroque, which, of course, could be even truer for nowadays society. This political significance was identified mainly with the ability to achieve what was called «engineering consent» (Sherwin) or, in Maravall's own words, «lyrical engineering of the human world». Sherwin, following Maravall in this point, asserts that

baroque culture during the seventeenth century heavily relied on the efficacy of visual elements to seize dramatically and hold the public's attention. Mass culture thrives on the sensible image for its power to capture, amaze, and stupefy. Baroque culture resorted to broadly disseminated visual spectacles (emphasizing painting and theatre over poetry and prose) as its main instruments of shaping and controlling public sentiment and belief⁷.

Once again, Sherwin spatializes the baroque, this time by alienating from its cultural practices the artistic areas where an inner time (life) is imposed, and coherence of space is blurred (poetry), or where the narrativity plays a dominant role (prose). There is an extremely *political efficiency* of the spatial in baroque that would entirely justify its cultivation and success. Moreover, and paradoxically enough, even in its dynamic dimension, baroque served then to a static, conservative and finally reactionary stabilization of things in society. This equates to the (again

³ See D. HARVEY, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*, Cambridge, Blackwell, 1990.

⁴ R. K. SHERWIN, *Visualizing Law in the Age of the Digital Baroque: Arabesques and Entanglements*, London and New York, Routledge, 2011, 106.

⁵ *ibid.*, 84.

⁶ *ibid.*, 85.

⁷ *ibid.*, 106.

paradoxically) use of the movement against movement itself – more precisely, the movement of the spatial images against the concrete movement; the movement of power against that of the individuals; the movement of the spectacles against the real movement of the people, politically revolutionary or economically driven. A regulated (and spatialized) movement against an unpredictable (and very temporal) one – the latter would finally impose a space that is too fluid and chaotic –, a «temporal space», one might call it: a space that would jeopardize the society as such.

In this sense, Maravall places the baroque in a general (and characteristic) political practice of the seventeenth century, a reactionary one, directed against the modern, revolutionary experience of the previous century, which was characterized by a strong individualism. Baroque is developed and put to put into practice in a social context in which

[i]nstruments of greater efficacy would have to be used, instruments capable of influencing individuals who recognized their freedom; a complex regime of social control, organized in the shadow of the absolute monarchy, strove to maintain these individuals actively integrated in a conservative society of traditional privileges.

In this way, the society of the seventeenth century – biting its own tail – revealed the grounds of its own crisis: a process of modernization that was contradictorily set in place to preserve inherited structures⁸.

For summing up this point, the political driven lectures will favour once more a spatial understanding of the baroque.

I wish to recall now, in the end of these introductory remarks, some well-known facts, or rather truisms. One states that baroque (be it considered concept or period of time) is an expression / moment of modernity (takes part in it). The second holds that modernity itself is etymologically derived from considering time at the core of our way of having an experience and also of – consciously or unconsciously – conceptualizing reality through the category of time. Referring to the earliest known use of the word *modernus*, which dates to the 490s, Hans Robert Jauss states that «[m]odernus is derived from *modo* (...), and *modo*, at this time, meant something more than “merely” or “only” or “just this moment”. In all probability, it already meant “now”»⁹.

So, unlike the baroque, at least from the perspective of «common sense» I previously evoked, modernity appears to be from the outset a profoundly *temporalized* attitude of the modern human being: a

way of developing a relation to reality by «judging» it through the effects of its changing nature (in time), while this change is more and more accelerated. It is an «époque» and / or a concept of a positive valuation of accelerating time not only in itself as such, but also as an expression of our possibility of shaping and mastering reality (more and more efficiently). Of course, there are multiple ways of understanding modernity, but the temporal one seems to be quite essential. Why, then, does it seem so difficult to develop a straight temporal reading of the baroque? Should we, as a consequence (which I will not develop here), dig more profoundly – and critically – in order to find out the place or role of the baroque inside modernity as a whole? Is there a *tension* – or, why not, a *dialectics*? – between modernity (at least in some of its forms) and baroque, as Maravall’s view might suggest?

Providing complete answers to these questions would be a too difficult task for an exploratory endeavour undertaken in the form of an article, which has its well-known (but freely accepted) restrictions from the outset. Nevertheless, I will try in the following sections to set a possible starting point for a preliminary analysis of how the baroque could be linked with the question of time and temporalization. And I will do this while having as a point of reference the – let’s say – negative, but very instructive, perspective opened by some approaches that, although trying to restore the importance of time for the baroque (i.e. to inscribe time in the baroque paradigm / mentality), ultimately failed in their mission.

The (inauthentic) temporalization of the Baroque in Benjamin’s interpretation of *Trauerspiel*

Analysing the way in which the temporalization occurs in the framework of baroque according to Walter Benjamin, I will refer mainly to his well-known approach of German baroque drama –«mourning-play» (*Trauerspiel*)–, using predominantly the analysis of Peter Osborne¹⁰. Of course, I cannot, nor try to offer here a comprehensive or minute understanding of history and time itself in Benjamin’s entire work.

The first significant idea in the context of my conceptual exploration is the following: for Benjamin the *Trauerspiel* has as its content and «true object» not the myth, as was the case with classical tragedy, but «the historical life, as it was conceived at that time»¹¹. Moreover, with this occasion «history – as a narrative of the human march towards redemption on the Day of Judgement – loses the eschatological certainty of its redemptive conclusion, and becomes secularized into a mere natural setting for the profane struggle over political power»¹². The immediacy of

⁸ J. A. MARAVALL, *Culture of the Baroque: Analysis of a Historical Structure*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1986, 263.

⁹ H. R. JAUSS, «Modernity and Literary Tradition», *Critical Inquiry*, 31, 2 (2005), 333.

¹⁰ P. OSBORNE and M. CHARLES, «Walter Benjamin», *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2015 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2015/entries/benjamin/>>.

¹¹ W. BENJAMIN, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, London / New York, Verso, 1998, 62.

¹² Osborne and Charles, «Walter Benjamin».

effects, the efficiency / concreteness of human (political) actions in this kind of «mourning-plays» are palpable signs of the new character of temporalization that defines modernity as such, and consequently the baroque. History proves to be here nothing but the «setting (*Schauplatz*)» (scene) of the narrative, it becomes «natural history», in which everything takes (its) place.

It is interesting to note that this baroque time (history) is an inauthentic one, and from Benjamin's perspective the cause for this fact is exactly the process of «spatialization of time». *Trauerspiel* is only an instantiation for this process that characterizes not only the baroque, but also the modernity as a whole¹³. Benjamin explicitly states that «[h]ere, as in other spheres of baroque life, what is vital is the transposition of the originally temporal data into a spatial inauthenticity and simultaneity (*in eine räumliche Uneigentlichkeit und Simultaneität*)»¹⁴. It is important to notice this transposition, because, as we will see, it seems to be re-appropriated by some theorists (Mieke Bal for instance) of the neo-baroque in a quite *positive* way, giving a key to an understanding of baroque temporality.

In addition, and what explains in part this transposition, in his *Origin of the German Tragic Drama*, Benjamin draws a parallel between the structure of temporalization induced through baroque's *Trauerspiel* and the peculiar spatialization proper to the mathematical analysis and thus to the mathematized natural sciences: «If history is secularized in the setting, this is an expression of the same metaphysical tendency which simultaneously led, in the exact sciences, to the infinitesimal method. In both cases chronological movement is grasped and analysed in a spatial image»¹⁵.

The specific and decisive baroque insertion of (an inauthentic) time in *Trauerspiele* is once more revealed when we analyse the difference between the (theological) symbol and the allegorical representation – only this conceptual tool offers Benjamin the possibility to grasp the real form of these baroque works. As Osborne remarks on this topic, «[t]he fundamental distinction between theological concepts of symbol and the allegory will (...) be seen as concerning not their differing objects (Idea vs. abstract concept), but the differing ways in which they signify, express or represent this object. Benjamin will conclude that *this difference is, specifically, a tempo-*

ral one [underlined by me – V.V.]». If, for Benjamin, «the measure of time of symbolic experience [*Symbolerfahrung*] is the mystical instant [*das mystische Nu*]»¹⁶, then, «[w]e must understand the temporality of the allegorical, in contrast, as *something dynamic, mobile, and fluid*»¹⁷. Obviously, these are features which define the active presence of the modern subject in setting new relations with reality. It will be then not surprising at all to understand why Benjamin sees in the wide spreading uses of the allegorical representation «the triumph of subjectivity and the onset of an arbitrary rule over things»¹⁸.

Later on, in the *Arcades Project*, he will stress again the congruence between the baroque spatialization of time and the development of modern natural sciences: «Pursue the question of whether a connection exists between the secularization of time in space and the allegorical mode of perception. The former, at any rate (...), is hidden in the “worldview of the natural sciences” of the second half of the century»¹⁹.

As a consequence, it can be argued that the presence of time in Benjamin's way of conceiving the baroque is not only a presence as such, but also an *absence* – it is *a presence in an inauthentic form*, one covered by spatiality, i.e. profoundly affected by the mechanisms of spatialization that are peculiar to modern mentality.

Maravall's derivative (and spatialized) «baroque time»

For Maravall, at least in his influential *Culture of the Baroque*, the baroque idea of time stems from 1) a deep perception of the essentially transitory condition of the human being, of the movement in general that characterizes all nature, and also from 2) a positive valuation of the inner continuous diversity of reality. The idea of time, as Maravall – somehow rhetorically – underlines, «has no less prominence in the baroque world» than the idea of movement²⁰.

The first dimension is very well captured by this ample statement:

Mobility, change, inconstancy: all things are mobile and transitory; everything escapes and changes; everything moves, rises or declines, is transferred, gets whirled around. There is no element of which one can be sure that one instant later it will not have changed

¹³ Of course, there is an interplay between baroque and modernity (as a whole, not only as what is called «early modern» and overlaps more or less the baroque itself.). As Osborne aptly remarks, «modernity both reveals and is revealed in the baroque».

¹⁴ Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 81; W. BENJAMIN, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Band I, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1991, 260 (translation modified).

¹⁵ *ibid.*, 92.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, 165; Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Band I, 342.

¹⁷ Osborne and Charles, «Walter Benjamin». Osborne and Charles refer here in fact to a passage from Görres quoted by Benjamin, who acquiesces and develop further the way in which the former describes the allegory as «a successively progressing, dramatically mobile, dynamic representation of ideas which has acquired the very fluidity of time» (Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 165).

¹⁸ Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 233.

¹⁹ W. BENJAMIN, *The Arcades Project*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999, 472.

²⁰ Maravall, *Culture of the Baroque*, 185.

places or been transformed. *Inconstancy* is a universal and insuperable factor²¹.

In fact, it is not just movement as such or in an abstract sense, but a movement that implies either a qualitative evolution, or a cyclical shifting, given that birth and death are immediately observed in all things.

With regard to the second aspect, Maravall doesn't appeal to a mere direct (one might say even naïve) evaluation of reality, but asserts the existence in the baroque of a veritable "principle of variety" governs it²². Moreover, the baroque «turned variety into perhaps the foremost of the values comprising the world»²³.

Anyway, in a synthetic and unitary image of the two components, Maravall reminds us that «[v]ariety presupposes variation, and what moves varies»²⁴. Arguing through quotations from Juan de Arguijo and Montaigne among others, he describes the world corresponding to a baroque mentality as one to be understood as «a dynamic and changing world [which] is inevitably a varied world». So, we do not just happen to link the two ingredients; by the means of the contingent experience of the recurrence of their relation, but we *must* do it: «*variety* is a condition of reality inasmuch as reality changes in itself. In such a case, variety is a radical condition of reality»²⁵.

Thus, in Maravall's view, the specific use of temporality of the Baroque has its profound origin (at least from the epistemological perspective derived from the order of aspects that define the baroque mentality in his seminal work), in a kind of (re)discovery of the protean, mobile, lively-but-disruptive character of all reality, either social or natural (and not in the human subjectivity as such or in a kind of dynamic, or dialectical; relation with this changing reality). It is like a result of a conceptual ascertainment (via abstraction) or transfer from an almost exclusive external reality that «informs» us on this essential aspect, although Maravall speaks somewhere about a baroque «*obsession* for modification (my underlining)»²⁶.

Elsewhere, Maravall explicitly describes time as a constitutive category of reality, – of an increasingly moving and changing reality: «From the sphere of economic relations – with the diffusion of the interest loan, speculations regarding merchants' prices, the incipient consideration of conjunctural movements – to the field of science or art, temporality came to be conceived as an element constitutive of reality (my underlining)»²⁷.

But, however, time is not a simple (not even the principal) ingredient of reality, it is the framework itself for this reality. The baroque time Maravall comes to speak of is a deeply visualised one, it is like a (spatial) container. In some extremely suggestive lines from his book, he clearly states that «*Time is the place* where everything is encountered, where everything finds itself deposited. In it, things acquire their form and presence and in it they disappear upon passing away, not remaining longer than time because time is what everybody comes to conceive of as solely continuous, permanent: modifying, passing away, changing, and moving (my underlining)»²⁸.

Even when Maravall tends to «inscribe» time in the being of (all) things, he seems to retain the same picture of time as a (spatial) framework of reality:

If circumstantiality is the mode of things appearing to us in time, the necessarily temporal mode of being in which we encounter things, this means that temporality affects the being of things. With regard to things, their mode of being is their mode of appearing to us, which implies their temporality: the mode varies according to the different situations that take place within time. Things, human beings, are in a circumstance. Their circumstantial presentation affects their mode of being; they are, consequently, time²⁹.

I will not go into further details, but it is worthwhile to mention that the first example of this baroque time consists in a confident remark about the «innovations in the art of clockmaking» which – simplistically – defines for him «an obsession with time and the zeal to measure it»³⁰. Briefly scrutinizing this,

²¹ *ibid.*, 180.

²² *ibid.*, 186.

²³ *ibid.*, 183. To be noticed that Maravall speaks here indistinctly about a principle of reality itself and of a value that (subjectively) «measures» the baroque world. What Maravall does is to observe «the positive aspect of the question»: the diversity stressed by him is not identifiable with a chaotic manifestation, and nor is it simply ordered in a framework of causal uniformity, but is an expression of a harmony invoked, for instance, by Gracián. Moreover, this remark is used by him to underline «the opposition between the baroque spirit and that of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment; for the latter, uniformity would be precisely the inspiring principle of its entire disposition» (*ibid.*, 183). Even when he regards the baroque variety in terms of causation, Maravall emphasizes the fact that we have not here an use of a mere univocal schema, but of a very «complicated», divaricated one: «But the principle of variety, whose dominion, much broader than the world of human beings, extends to all of nature, derives from a law where the following rules: to the unity of cause corresponds a diversity of effects (although the baroque would not debunk the traditional principle that there can be nothing in the effect that is not in the cause, as would be done in contemporary thought, such debunking would have been announced long before)» (*ibid.*, 186).

²⁴ *ibid.*, 186.

²⁵ *ibid.*, 182.

²⁶ *id.*

²⁷ *ibid.*, 186.

²⁸ *ibid.*, 185.

²⁹ *ibid.*, 187.

³⁰ *ibid.*, 185.

measuring time is (or, at least, could be) an expression of visualising (and spatializing) time.

I do not want to oversimplify Maravall's conception about baroque time by way of highlighting these previous aspects. There are passages in which Maravall obviously diversifies the picture of time, moving it from what we might call a container to the (mobile) *structure* of reality, especially that of the human being: «If the human being is a succession of states, it is not the singular state that counts: its nature can be compared, as we are so often told, to transitory dreams. What matters is the structure of succession as such, the ground of the changes that is succession itself – in other words, time». Elsewhere, he speaks about baroque time as «the pure dynamic *process* of transformations (my underlining)»³¹. But the first conception of a baroque temporality that I presented is arguably the one that prevails in his work.

Maravall talks about baroque temporalization also linking it with the intense development of a historical dimension of knowledge in general. In fact, he speaks about a «process of historicification» which is specific to the baroque: «In the baroque, preoccupation with history reached an intensity never before known»³². This process, also named by Maravall as «circumstantialization», affects the real core of the knowledge, in a sense that I would also describe more familiarly as «secularized». Instead of the atemporal, transcendental forms or essences, which define the ideal structures that are the aim of all classical knowledge, we now find in the cognitive approaches a historical process that moves the view of the thinker *inside* the continuous processual worldly reality, be it natural or social. The inner, essential sense of reality is a processual one, and there are no norms that trans-historically prevail over human subjectivity. Probably the best example – «with greater validity» in Maravall's own words – is the one of politics: in the baroque, it moved «beyond the boundaries of a perennial moral philosophy to become converted into a historical knowledge»³³.

But even if we can discover powerful considerations about the baroque temporality, as stated above, it still seems that we could explain the baroque in Maravall's conception as a (mainly) spatial counterbalance, with political and manipulating efficiency, to the individualistic forces of modernization. As in Benjamin, the baroque is from this decisive perspective a reactive, centralized power tool to be used with

the aim of annihilating the disruptive forces of individuals. To put it briefly, the baroque is related rather with power, than with individuals. It would be then plausible to think (or, at least, it is a sound hypothesis) that the lack of temporal meaning for the baroque derives from this political reading – it is as if space (and the visual element generally speaking) could / should «freeze» the accelerating, but chaotic, temporality of the moderns.

A very short parenthesis. In this kind of approach, with a pregnant political finality, the baroque seems to designate either an internal intermediary stage of modernity itself, like a social respite³⁴, i.e. a temporary suspension of the acceleration of time (a temporary suspension of temporalization), or a presence / expression of a centripetal-reactionary force that constantly (and necessarily) accompanies the centrifugal-individualistic energies and defines modernity as such right from the outset. In other words, a historical moment of the dialectic process of modernity, or a component of the dialectical opposition that intrinsically (and continuously?) defines modernity. In the last sense, the baroque (and the baroque's – at least apparently – lack of temporalization) is to be understood not as a contingent historical episode, with its own specificity, but as a co-essential component of early modernity (broadly extended to the whole 17th century), if not of the modernity as such, i.e. of our present modernity too³⁵.

As Maravall stressed, the baroque strategies (explicitly those defined by the manipulation of painting's resources, especially of colour, in the context of 17th century) «pointed toward the restoration and preservation of values that came from the seignorial tradition»³⁶. A reactive tool, yes, we could add, but a modern one, in a time of (a general) crisis, against the disseminating forces of modernization itself. A modern counteraction inside modernity itself³⁷.

Of course, this immediately opens up some complex questions about how we could politically interpret the manipulating possibilities of today's «neo-baroque» new media, apart from the correlated simple (and often simplistic) liberating individualistic vision about it. We have, at least, to accept the coexistence of the neo-baroque as a powerful tool of manipulating by a power which itself is not to be regarded in simple political terms, but in conjunction with strong economic and social tendencies, and as

³¹ *ibid.*, 186, 187.

³² *ibid.*, 188.

³³ *id.*

³⁴ Even though Maravall develops an emphatic *concept* of baroque, he captures very well this kind of historical process. For him, «[t]he historian has to be aware that between traditional society and mass society, with its increase in population, there is an intermediate position in which society no longer exhibits the signs of its traditional period and offers others that will make possible the later concentration of manual labor and the modern world's division of labor» (*ibid.*, 14).

³⁵ For Omar Calabrese, who discovers several «“deep forms” or common features between disparate objects», baroque designates an «epochal trait» (Calabrese, *Neo-Baroque*, 10-11). In a somehow similar way, Sherwin speaks about baroque as a «recurring cultural archetype», identifying «a recurring pattern in the originating conditions and themes of baroque culture» (Sherwin, *Visualizing Law in the Age of the Digital Baroque*, 85).

³⁶ Maravall, *Culture of the Baroque*, 263.

³⁷ As Maravall also remarks, «Counterreformation, absolutism, and baroque went together, betokened by their Spanish base, and even the baroque art produced in Protestant countries was found to have a relation to the Hispanic influence» (*ibid.*, 10).

an expression of the (artistically) creative, liberating power of individuals.

Baroque visual temporality in Mieke Bal's perspective

Mieke Bal's starting point is, in essence, similar to the one I made in this paper. She admits from the outset that time is a relevant aspect of baroque art, and of baroque *tout court*, as we will see, but one that is not frequently analysed³⁸.

However, her aim could not be restricted to this aspect alone, since she is also trying to sketch a philosophy of the baroque having art as the main background for her reflection. Even though she holds in view more contemporary works of art defined as (neo)baroque ones, her conclusions aim explicitly to be valid for *the baroque as such*. She considers in this context that temporality offers such an adequate philosophical category for capturing the essence of the baroque.

The specificity of her approach consists in the engagement in a new context of the concept of *heterochrony* – one present at large in evolutionary developmental biology – as a specific baroque alternative to the classical / usual linear, chronological temporal logic. As a consequence, she designates it to be a primary feature of baroque thought and art³⁹.

We should expect then a vigorous insertion of temporality *per se* in baroque – but what we observe instead right from the outset is that the baroque is deciphered in a profoundly *visual manner*, even when Bal speaks about time. Consequently, time ends into a «vision» for Bal: «[t]ime and form, infringing upon one another, constitute the material site of baroque-ness – a baroque vision of vision». In another context Bal states that «the term “baroque” can refer to a vision rather than a style or period»⁴⁰. The visuality overwhelms once more the temporality of the baroque. No wonder then that the philosophical profoundness of the baroque is also visually derived: «Only a superficial vision of baroque would stop at the surface; the surface, after all, is where the “depth” of what baroque means and does is hidden»⁴¹.

Of course, this is not quite surprising for a philosophical analysis that has as its background almost exclusively the visual experience of art. Even in the popular imagination of the baroque, focused on visuality of painting and sculpture, this accent on «notoriously, indeed quintessentially» figures like drapery and fold («emblems of “baroque-ness”» for Bal) could hide the «much greater» philosophical depths of it.

And these depths are to be reached from a triple perspective: ontological, epistemological, and aesthetic⁴². Even though the baroque work of art emanates for Mieke Bal «multi-temporality», it is obvious that this diversity of temporal moments that fold and unfold, that implies surface and depth, are grasped from a strictly spatio-visual framework by questioning the depth of the objects. It derives then from the route followed by sight – certainly, not a linear, but a «complicated» and «unexpected» one, which implies our protean, continual «transformation».

So, in Bal's analysis, the temporality implied by the baroque is received not through an approach of the historical character of the subject (or of the artist, or of his / her experience situated in history), but from a phenomenological reflection about the peculiar relationship between subject and object in baroque art, that is through an observation of perception itself, through a survey of the corporeal dimension of the human subject. The baroque vision is «anchored in the inseparability of mind and body...»⁴³. This is why it might be argued that Bal speaks in her article about an «inner temporality of the look», about a «perceptual historicity».

In the baroque, the historical element of time seems to be merged in an almost total expression of the actual and concrete (material) experience – another way to put time in a radical dependency to the spatial dimension. This inscription of time is for her a «mobilization of *actuality*». More precisely, «[a]ttention and actuality together constitute the temporal side of the materiality at stake» in the contemporary art that is presented by Bal in her works as baroque⁴⁴.

This is exactly the reason for which, in Bal's view, the temporality of the baroque could be understood even in the sense of a subjective deformation, of a *hallucinatory experience*. In her own words, «“[b]aroque” is always-already contemporary with the past, through a “hallucinatory” relationship»⁴⁵. The actuality underlined by Bal could be then – occasionally? frequently? it is hard to say – very, very confusing...

On this assumed basis of an analysis of perception, Bal's approach moves then slightly but firmly towards the historico-political aspects of the baroque:

All these slight shocks, these discrepancies that confront us with the difficulty of seeing, undermines the certainties of the classical subject – if such a subject has ever existed at all, beyond vulgar Cartesianism. Subjectivity and the object become co-dependent, folded into one another, thereby putting the subject at

³⁸ M. BAL, «Baroque matters», in, *Rethinking the Baroque*, Surrey, Ashgate, 2011, 185.

³⁹ *ibid.*, 187.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, 186, 183.

⁴¹ *ibid.*, 200.

⁴² *ibid.*, 184.

⁴³ *ibid.*, 188.

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, 199.

⁴⁵ *ibid.*, 188.

risk. The object whose surface is grazed by the subject of the point of view requires a visual engagement that can only be called microscopic; because of this engagement, *the subject loses his or her mastery over the object*. Due to the multiplication of mirroring, self-reflection is no longer an individualistic, narcissistic experience. (...) As we look longer, the temporality of the looking that is demanded becomes self-conscious, while we also realize that no amount of looking time will ever yield a clear sense of the object's form (my underlining)⁴⁶.

It is instructive to observe here that, same as in Maravall's picture (but not only his), the baroque achieves its philosophical profound sense through a delimitation, if not an opposition, to the (early) modern, let's say Cartesian, *individualistic* experience. Of course, the justification is now a totally different one.

Trying to diachronically position this fundamental structure of human experience of reality based on the co-dependency of subject and object, Bal mixes in a very confusing manner the historical levels, inscribing both classicism (which is foreseeable) and romanticism (!) in the definition of the baroque. More precisely, she states that this is the baroque alternative «for a historical attitude derived from (the romantic response to) classicism, which is based on mastery and reconstruction of the historical object, combined with a reflection on how the subject grasps it»⁴⁷.

Some words for briefly summarizing the case. Putting the baroque «affair» in terms of the subject-object relation is somehow comfortable, but also could be pretty embarrassing, due to the modern source of the distinction itself, but also to our involuntary, quite «naturally» (in our times) and almost implacable verbal slipping towards subjectivity.

Bal is no exception here. Apart of the statement of the aforementioned «co-dependency», we find many passages in which subject takes its sovereign place, such as this one, where we find that *a thing cannot exist outside of the subject*:

the «thing» we «see» as a remote historical object is molded within our present being. This is not to say that it did not exist in the past. But, to use a conceptual metaphor, it only comes to life – or rather to light, to visibility – for us through our point of view, which itself is molded by *it*, folded *in* it. «It» cannot exist outside of «us», so we become, to some extent, baroque people as a consequence⁴⁸.

Moreover, the key concept in Bal's works I have discussed here is the concept of «point of view», a concept that imposes by itself both the reign or the rule of *subjectivity*, and a *visual* grid of lecture. As for the latter aspect, the previous quotation seems very relevant, full as it is of visual terms. Even if she later argues for and states that «[t]he primary characteristic of a baroque point of view is that the subject becomes vulnerable to the impact of the object»⁴⁹, the aspects I mentioned are too well stressed in her analyses to be put easily into brackets.

Bal adds that «[b]aroque point of view establishes a relation between subject and object, and *then goes back to the subject again*, a subject that is changed by that movement (underlined by me)». More important, the co-dependency of subject and object, their folding into one another, is not a simple ontological or epistemological relation, but «puts the subject at risk»⁵⁰. We could say then that this co-dependency is not a neutral one, but it is *internal to the subject*, it is *the problem of the subject* and it is *for the sake of the subject*.

Moreover, we could ask if the vulnerability or the putting at risk advanced by Bal, which amends the Cartesian structure of subjectivity, is really an expression of weakness or of a welcoming retreat of the subject. In other words, if it is not actually a sign of *a subtle re-positioning of the subject*, through which it becomes even more *powerful* in its relation to the world / things, despite seeming to pay a better attention to the external world than before⁵¹.

Interestingly, these kinds of considerations also offer – but *only* if we accept Bal's moderate position, of a «fair» co-dependency – a strong reason for why this relation of temporality exposes in her view another figure of the political, or even of the *political* instead of that of the (classical) *politics* as such. To conclude, we do not speak here of a mastering of the object through the insistent and persistent gaze of the subject (who finally imposes his order upon it), but of a (concrete, physical, palpable⁵²) accommodation, or an immersion, a tolerant coexistence. The main problem for Bal could (or should) be in this context that she defines, as we mentioned before, the baroque's relation with the past in terms of an (at least possible) hallucinatory experience.

Anyway, in an essentially aesthetical (and spatio-visual) reading of the baroque experience, it seems that its political effects could be quite the opposite of those underlined by Benjamin.

⁴⁶ *ibid.*, 190.

⁴⁷ *id.*

⁴⁸ M. BAL, *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 27.

⁴⁹ *ibid.*, 28.

⁵⁰ *id.*

⁵¹ Fairly, but sketchily, Bal mentions also the possibility of understanding baroque as expressing – quite surprisingly – the pre-eminence of the *object*, not of the subject, through the view of Octavio Paz, for whom «baroque transgression focuses on the object, not on the subject, as romantic transgression would» (*ibid.*, 28).

⁵² This is also a hint to the political significance of the baroque trying to overcome the (Cartesian) dualistic approach.

Some very brief conclusions

I have briefly presented above three analyses where we find an attempt, more or less vigorous, to link baroque with time, in what might be called a counterflow to the mainstream spatio-visual interpretation of it. While trying to reveal the specificity of the temporality for baroque, inside modernity as a whole, these analyses failed in offering a positive starting point, but for different reasons.

Benjamin accepts that time defines the baroque, but it is an inauthentic one, affected as it is by the modern mechanisms of spatialization. For Maravall, time is a central element of the structure of the baroque, but its position is uncritically derived from the nature of reality itself, or it is seen in spatial terms as

a «container». If baroque time for Maravall is not at all «subjective», for Bal, on the other hand, we could say that it is all too subjective. Moreover, for her time defines the philosophical core of «baroqueness», but it is one which is derived from the specific character of (mainly artistic) spatio-visual reality linked with the baroque. Even though such approaches fail (at least from my point of view) in their aim to offer a positive presentation of a baroque temporality, they still provide us with a good preliminary theoretical stage in order to go further and find a real or a totally *new* understanding of it. Until then, it's a good thing to know those pathways on which an advancement in such an attempt is very difficult, if not, after all, impossible...

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