

Introduction: The Baroque as a Problem of Thought

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

Aide to George W. Bush, quoted by Ronald Suskind¹

Why the Baroque? Why now? As many have argued, the general aesthetic trend of the late twentieth to early twenty-first centuries, often called postmodern, can perhaps more usefully, more substantively, be labeled as neobaroque.² But why? Is the neobaroque turn of the twentieth century something akin to the Neoclassicism of the sixteenth century, or the Neo-Gothicism of the nineteenth? Or, on an even more condensed scale, is it similar to the rapid returns of previously dismissed fashion decades, as evidenced by the proliferation in the early years of this century of those beads and bellbottoms associated with flower children and the age of Aquarius?

The Baroque's return, if it is a return at all, has nothing to do with the recycling of culture that these examples represent. Instead, the Baroque must be understood as the aesthetic counterpart to a problem of thought that is coterminous with that time in the West we have learned to call modernity, stretching from the sixteenth century to the present.³ A problem of thought, however, is not yet a philosophical problem. A problem of thought is a problem that affects or unsettles an entire culture in the largest possible sense, that permeates its very foundations and finds expression in its plastic art, in its stories and performances, in its philosophy as well as in its social organization and politics. Western culture since the sixteenth century has been entangled in a particular problem of thought, and if the

baroque aesthetics of the seventeenth century are the sign of its inception, the neobaroque aesthetics of the present and recent times are the sign, if not of its demise, then of the exhaustion of all previous attempts to solve, undo, or otherwise remove this problem.

The problem is in some sense ideal. It is the principle of organization of a culture and age, but it only exists in the expressions it engenders. For without its terms, without its forms, the problem itself is nothing. In the case of modernity, to begin our task of putting it into terms, the problem of thought concerns the relation of appearances to the world they ostensibly represent. The philosophical paradigm that emerges slowly out of centuries of wrestling with this problem is modern epistemology, as epitomized in the works of Immanuel Kant. But the problem is not exclusively philosophical; as I have argued elsewhere, it imbued the skills and practices of generations of people who learned to express this problem in the way they enacted spectacle, read literature, viewed art, organized political power, and thought of space.⁴ Let us stipulate, then, a definition: modernity's fundamental problem of thought is that the subject of knowledge can only approach the world through a veil of appearances; truth is defined as the adequation of our knowledge to the world thus veiled; hence, inquiry of any kind must be guided by the reduction of whatever difference exists between the appearances and the world as it is. The problem, or why the problem remains a problem, is that the subject of knowledge only ever obtains knowledge via his or her senses, via how things appear, and hence the truth thus sought will itself always be corrupted by appearances.⁵ It is precisely in this sense that the title of this book, *the theater of truth*, emerges as the paradoxical name for the baroque as a problem of thought: the Baroque puts the incorruptible truth of the world that underlies all ephemeral and deceptive appearances on center stage, making it the ultimate goal of all inquiry; in the same vein, however, the Baroque makes a theater out of truth, by incessantly demonstrating that truth can only ever be an effect of the appearances from which we seek to free it.

The philosophical language I am using here is borrowed from Immanuel Kant. In his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781, 1789) and later works, Kant institutionalized the distinction between appearances and the things they represent, and claimed that a philosophy that does not make this distinction must ultimately fall into error. While he argues, on the one hand, that this distinction means that certain domains will remain eternally veiled to human knowledge, on the other hand he shows with intricate precision how

maintaining this difference allows us to have an exact science of appearances and thus be able to say things with certainty about how appearances interact with one another in time and space. Furthermore, the maintenance of a realm that is out of bounds for human knowledge allows Kant, as he famously states in his introduction, to “make room for faith” (Kant 115) and to allow for human freedom—faith and freedom being concepts that would otherwise have no place in a world in which the human mind could plumb the depths of how things are in themselves.

Beginning in the late sixteenth century, some two hundred years before Kant systematized this distinction, European culture developed a general strategy for expressing the problem we have just touched on in its philosophical form. This strategy, which I call the *major strategy* of the baroque, assumes the existence of a veil of appearances, and then suggests the possibility of a space opening just beyond those appearances where truth resides.⁶ In painting and architecture this strategy corresponds to the well-known baroque techniques of *trompe l’oeil*, anamorphosis, and what Heinrich Wölfflin referred to as the painterly style (Wölfflin 30), in which the borders between bodies are blurred and spaces in the painting are left unclear.⁷ By way of these techniques, along with other versions of what José Antonio Maravall designated as the trope of incompleteness (Maravall, *Culture* 212), the recipient is drawn in by a promise of fulfillment beyond the surface, his or her desire ignited by an illusory depth, always just beyond grasp. It is this strategy that accounts for Maravall’s seemingly exaggerated claim that the Baroque corresponds to an enormous apparatus of propaganda deployed by an alliance of entrenched interests in early modern Europe and the colonial world, dedicated to entrancing the minds of a newly mobile populace with the promise of a spiritual fulfillment to be had in another life for the small price of identifying with the interests of powerful elites in this one. It is insofar as I take up this argument about the political effect of baroque aesthetics that this book can be properly understood as concerning the ideological value of those aesthetics. Nevertheless, and as I will go into in greater detail below, it is crucial to differentiate between the strategies, major and minor, with which baroque aesthetics are deployed. For just as the historical Baroque was not a monolithic organ of state propaganda, it would be hopelessly naïve to believe that neobaroque expression is exclusively dedicated to the liberation from such centralizing discourses.

Given this account of the culture of the historical Baroque, born of one

global empire, one can certainly see grounds for comparison with the politics of representation practiced by a contemporary political class with its own aspirations to empire. The epigraph for this introduction comes from a *New York Times Magazine* exposé of some of the key advisors to the administration of George W. Bush, and it is clear that their attitude toward “reality” had profound similarities to that underlying the Baroque. The use of the media to rally support behind policies that would founder without that support is a clear case of a baroque manipulation of appearances for the purpose of political gain, for the potential voters and taxpayers who lent their support to “the war on terror” and the war in Iraq in the early years of the twenty-first century did so largely and often because of their belief in a certain reality projected beyond the appearances. The Bush representation apparatus, for example, was successful in convincing vast swaths of voters that behind the necessary and lamentable apparatus of representation—the poles, the concocted photo ops, the faked newscasts and staged “town hall” meetings—president Bush was a man of “character.” Indeed, as was widely reported and fretted about, many Americans cited issues of character and value as the reason they voted for him in 2004. The paradox is that no one is (or very few are) actually taken in by the performance, in the sense of not realizing that it is a performance; the Baroque becomes pertinent when, in the very midst of the performance, and in full knowledge of its artifice, the viewer becomes convinced that the artifice in fact refers to some truth just beyond the camera’s glare.

This effect is not limited to outright political representation such as campaign programming or the manipulation of the news media that was so prevalent during the lead-up to the Iraq war. The entertainment industry in general can be counted on to produce contents for television and film that cohere with the overall message coming from the centers of political power. As Slavoj Žižek wrote in an article in *The Guardian*, for instance, the wildly successful Fox series *24*, in which Kiefer Sutherland plays a government anti-terrorism agent, abetted in certain, very specific ways the administration’s efforts to minimize criticism of its handling of terror suspects (Žižek, “Depraved”). The show’s hook is that it plays in “real” time and that each of the season’s 24 hour-long episodes corresponds to an hour of one continuous day in the life of agent Jack Bauer. While the show is obviously fiction, and no one among its producers or probably anyone watching it would argue the opposite, nevertheless, precisely in its function as artifice it refers implicitly to a reality that is “out there,” beyond representation, inde-

pendent of its fictitious message. Because everyone can comfortably agree that this is the case, we the viewers end up being force-fed a “neutral” and “independent” reality that is in fact a very specific political version of reality. In the case of *24*, the “real time” of the narrative (which, as Žižek points out, is augmented by the fact that even the time for commercial breaks is counted among the 60 minutes) contributes to the sense of urgency that, for instance, if Jack and his well-meaning colleagues don’t get the answers they need, by whatever means necessary, millions of innocent people will die in a catastrophic terrorist event. In such circumstances we obviously have to have some flexibility around issues like the torture of detainees.

Of course, as I have just said, the show is fiction. Still, our knowledge of that in no way stops us from importing the plot structure—urgency of threat requires unscrupulous means—into the neutral and independent reality beyond our television screens. This is precisely how major baroque strategies function: the viewer is faced with a screen that is apparently separated from a reality veiled by it; the images on the screen suggest a certain vision of that reality; and the viewer believes he or she goes on to occupy that real space, a space independent of the screen, when in fact he or she is merely operating within another version of the original representation.

To take a classic example from the seventeenth-century theater, an audience of commoners for a performance of Lope de Vega’s *Fuenteovejuna* in Hapsburg Madrid would go to the theater to witness the story of a popular uprising against an abusive nobleman. When the normally cowering villagers rise up against the nobleman they do so in the name of their honor: “You lot have honor?” he asks them in shock, and the plot of the play clearly requires that the audience be unified in saying, yes, these men have honor (Lope, *Fuenteovejuna* 146).⁸ The viewers certainly know they are watching a play, but it cannot escape them that they too are commoners, and if the commoners in the play have honor, then why not they themselves? Thus the reality hiding behind the play, supposedly independent, gets colored by a very specific set of presuppositions that, in this case, help the commoners leaving the theater to feel more invested in a system that taxes them in order to maintain a landed elite and gives them very few rights, privileges, or protections against that elite.

This, then, is the basic structure of baroque representation. But this is not the entire story. Once the fundamental architecture of baroque representation has been established, we see that another strategy becomes possible. This second, minor strategy does not take the obvious path of denying

the reality behind the veil. This would be a lot like the reporter who is the target of the Bush advisor's ridicule in the above epigraph answering that he doesn't buy any of that reality stuff either. Instead, what the Baroque's minor strategy does is take the major strategy too seriously; it nestles into the representation and refuses to refer it to some other reality, but instead affirms it, albeit ironically, as its only reality. This strategy, then, rather than accepting the presupposition of two opposing levels—a representation and a reality independent of that representation—undermines our ability to make this distinction in the first place. Not, however, in order to lead us further astray from “reality itself,” but rather to make us aware, to remind us that we are always, at any level, involved with mediation.⁹

In Miguel de Cervantes's interlude *The Stage of Wonders*, two traveling confidence artists set up an empty stage in a village and invite the villagers to come witness their marvelous magical theater (Cervantes, *Entremeses* 86–100). As the townspeople gather around, the lead conman Chanfalla explains to them that the stage of wonders works according to certain simple rules. Only those of pure blood and unstained honor will be able to see the marvelous visions playing on its boards. With this, the musician begins to play and Chanfalla starts to narrate an extraordinary spectacle that, of course, no one present can see. Each and every one of the spectators, however, makes sure that *everyone else* believes he or she is seeing something, and they all thus contribute to their own fleecing. Toward the end of the performance, they are joined by an officer who demands, as is his legal right, that the commoners give up their homes for the king's troupes. At this point, as he does not acknowledge seeing anything on the stage, the villagers try to accuse him of being a *converso* (a converted Jew), and the play ends with them being beaten by the soldiers.¹⁰

By comparing this interlude with Lope's classic drama, we get a clear sense of how the minor strategy works within and against the major strategy. The major strategy posits a separation between a representation and the reality hidden behind it in order to smuggle certain presuppositions into yet another representation that it will try to sell as reality itself. The minor strategy, in contrast, takes a representation of the major strategy as a starting point: in this case the very claim to honor among commoners that Lope's play smuggled into the representation of reality. Next, it lets that represented reality play itself out according to its own rules. What the villagers in the interlude as well as any commoners watching the interlude are forced to confront is that the reality of their honor is nothing but a play

they are putting on for one another, in other words, itself a representation referring to no other reality than itself. This last revelation occurs when the villagers try to import the honor and purity they are representing to one another into the “real” world of the soldiers’ demands on their homes, at which point their honor gets treated like the fantasy scenario it really is.

Despite the obvious differences, then, there is much in common in the way culture works between our present time and the time of the Spanish empire. This argument cannot be made via a laundry list of similarities and differences; if that method were followed, the differences would always win. Instead, recognizing these similarities depends on unearthing the ways in which a culture’s most fundamental presuppositions, its problem of thought, inhere in specific cultural products and configurations. The Spanish empire of the seventeenth century had a different principal language, a different belief system, different military possibilities, and different media at its disposal (to tick off only a few differences from a potentially infinite list) than those of the present-day U.S. American empire. Nevertheless, the deployment of available media for the purpose of attracting and shaping compliant subjects relied upon and continues to rely on profoundly analogous means. And just as artists and thinkers developed strategies for undermining those means in the age of the historical Baroque, artists and thinkers are doing the same today, and the aesthetic forms they are producing share in the strategies deployed by their forebears. Still, this Neobaroque is not, as I said before, a return.¹¹

Those who promoted the minor strategy in the seventeenth century were in a tiny minority. The promise of a truth just beyond the veil of appearances proffered by the major strategy was powerful, and it has held western culture in its grasp for four hundred years. This grasp has been weakening throughout the last century, though, and the ascendance of the minor strategy in philosophy, in art, in literature, is a sign that the major strategy may be vulnerable. It is certainly not gone, as can be seen in the chortling rhetoric of Bush’s yes men. However, the minor strategy offers an alternative to those who despair that the control of the media by the few and the powerful ensures that their power cannot fail. Many see this despair as going hand in hand with postmodern cynicism, relativism, and the denial of truth. Is not, then, the very kind of thought and aesthetics I am describing merely the flip side of the political denial of reality exhibited in the epigraph? Does the minor strategy of the Baroque not lead to even further despair, as we give up all anchor holds on the real and are swept

away on a tide of relativism, in which no source is more trustworthy than another, and no way out is to be found?

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

The seven chapters that follow were written as case studies of the major and minor strategies of baroque aesthetics. They are intended to showcase how these aesthetic strategies can work at different times and through different media. To that end I have tried to incorporate examples from a number of different media and genres, including poetry, philosophy, theology, narrative, theater, and cinema. Each of the seven chapters, while often engaging with a number of different authors and works, focuses its attention on one central author. Thus, while chapter one deals with the problem of folds and holes as theorized by Deleuze, it engages in particular some passages from Baltasar Gracián's monumental philosophical rumination *El crítico*. And whereas chapter five analyzes the Latin American Neobaroque as a cultural phenomenon, I ultimately draw back to focus on specific aspects of Sor Juana's analysis of the concept of *fineza* in her *Carta atenagórica*. The reason for this is essentially methodological. As a student of literature, I believe there is value in close rhetorical analysis, and that this value can and should balance the broad historical view necessary for the accurate portrayal of history, or the condensations needed for such a wide-ranging philosophical discussion as is required by this topic.

While these choices must therefore be somewhat arbitrary, I propose them as salvos into the current, important, and fascinating critical debate around baroque and neobaroque culture. I hope that the framework I suggest of distinguishing temporally between baroque and neobaroque, and ideologically between major and minor strategies, will prove useful in ironing out certain terminological confusions that have plagued these discussions. Finally, as this debate has largely taken place in the Hispanic realm, I have focused my analyses in that area as well. This is not to deny the trans-

cultural nature of baroque aesthetics, nor is it meant to deprive Dutch baroque painting, the architecture of Bernini's Rome, or contemporary manifestations of neobaroque art in the United States (to take a few random examples) of their due attention. Nevertheless, the Spanish empire was the world's principle superpower when the historical Baroque flourished, and therefore the dynamic between that center and the colonial periphery that the Hispanic New World became provides the logical framework for a discussion of baroque and neobaroque ideologies.

Ultimately, a book about the Baroque must leave out far more than it includes. So it is my hope that the works I study and the aspects of baroque style I undertake to analyze, while not by any stretch of the imagination exhausting the baroque repertoire, will nonetheless present a coherent thesis about the relation of this aesthetic production to the historical period of modernity, and provide some insight into its essential problem of thought.