

Ranjan Ghosh

Professor at the Department of English, University of North Bengal, India. His recent work is in the field of plastic theory and philosophy: he is completing a plastic trilogy that has as its first volume *The Plastic Turn* (Cornell University Press, 2022), the second volume in the series is called *Plastic Figures* (forthcoming, from Cornell University Press) and the third is called *Plastic Humanities*. His latest book is called *Plastic Tagore* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024).

To know more: www.ranjanghosh.in

This essay introduces the concept of *Plastic Baroque*. Baroque, both as a concept and as performance, revised its manifestations, limits and socio-cultural capital as it came to find a place in twentieth-century aesthetics. These re-appropriative ways where Baroque is ornate, overwhelming, bizarre, heterodox, fluid, make for its introduction into the compelling domain of the plastic arts, intended as the domain of artworks made of plastics. Baroque's exemplarity is its plasticity. It exceeds the historical specificity, the periodic signature and the designative stamp into an expression that through an experimental and appropriative course marks its transition from the Neo-Baroque to what I call the Plastic Baroque. It is about bringing into play the idea of the Baroque in its plasticity – the fluidity of borders, the dynamicity of representation and the transgressions of traditions – and the extent to which contemporary plastic art, in turn, can be qualified as Baroque.

15

Baroque's plasticity beyond historicity

Baroque, I claim, is a plastic term: it refuses to set itself within a certain period and historical context; it is ambiguous and calls for a variety of interpretations – loaded, ambiguous, and probative. The Cuban poet and critic Severo Sarduy points to an ambiguity and semantic diffusion in the word. Baroque, Sarduy notes, «was the thick irregular pearl – in Spanish *barrueco* or *berrueco*, in Portuguese *barrocco* – the rocky, the knotted, the agglutinated density of the stone – *barrueco* or *berrueco* or perhaps the excrescence, the cyst, something that proliferates, at once free and lithic, tumorous, warty» (Sarduy 2010, 270). For me this holds both as an orientation and attitude in art and life-view, an «uncontrolled proliferation of signifiers» and «dexeterous transmission of thought» (270). However, historically speaking, «the term “Baroque” initially had, in the seventeenth century, a pejorative connotation. In late nineteenth-century German art history, “Baroque” became a neutral adjective referring to the art of the Late Roman Empire and the post-Renaissance, and was subsequently used, coupled with the word “classic”, in various attempts to construct a *Kunstwissenschaft*, a general and trans-historical aesthetics» (Mignot 2014, 77). Baroque, both as a concept and as performance, revised its manifestations, limits and socio-cultural capital as it came to find a place in twentieth-century aesthetics. And

16

during the last two decades of the twentieth century, “Baroque” tended to become, like “Romanesque” or “Gothic”, a simple chronological adjective designating the seventeenth century, dislodging the term “classic” in French culture. A floating signifier, a portmanteau word, “Baroque” is thus – depending on the context, the domain, the period, or even the speaker – an antonym or a synonym of “classic”, just as it can contain or succeed “mannerism” or “rococo”. (Mignot 2014, 77)

These re-appropriative ways where Baroque is ornate, overwhelming, bizarre, heterodox, fluid, make for its introduction into the compelling domain of the plastic arts, intended as the domain of artworks made of plastic material.

Baroque is plastic for it presents itself, observes Sarduy, «as a network of connections, of successive filigrees whose graphic expression would not be linear, two-dimensional, flat, but instead voluminous, spatial, and dynamic» (Sarduy 2010, 280-281). The plasticity of its usage and status over the years inspire me to see it appropriated beyond its conventional and well agreed-upon understanding of extravagance and ornateness, its restrictive stylistic orientation that claims a particular aesthetic tradition (High Baroque) and classification within the traditions of art history. The plasticity of Baroque makes it push its own frontiers of meaning and understanding. It is potentially, as Greg Lambert argues, an «empty category» playing «havoc with the empirical assumptions as the basis of historical narration» (Lambert 2004, 7). Lambert finds that «the term “Baroque” has gradually come to designate, rather than a particular historical period in European art history, an effect that results from the composition of specific traits around the adjectival terms *baroque*, *barroco* and *neo-barroco*. In other words, it designates less a particular historical duration than a manner or style of composition» (9). He connects his

observations with Gerard Genette's emphasis on how the genius of the Baroque «is syncretism, its order is its very openness, its signature is its very anonymity and pushes to an absurd degree its characteristic traits which are, erratically, found in all places and in all times» (9). Baroque's exemplarity is its plasticity. It exceeds the historical specificity, the periodic signature and the designative stamp into an expression that through an experimental and appropriative course marks its transition from the Neo-Baroque to what I call the Plastic Baroque.

The Baroque – visible and resonant – in modernist art and modernist movements owes to seventeenth century not merely as a continuation but with a generous scopic interest. Ernest C. Hassold observes that «by 1945 this twofold sense of the word Baroque was widely established: 1) as an historic concept, to designate the period or stage in Western culture following the Renaissance roughly equivalent to the seventeenth century; 2) as an abstract psychological concept, to designate a type of expression that may occur in any historic culture and may recur at various stages of development» (Hassold 1946, 5). But how does a form of thought and thinking gets exhumed into an understanding of a tradition and performance – plastic art – three hundred years hence? What can be the character of such affinities? Nietzsche identifies a connection between deficiency and expression in art where the tensional dialectic between the two produces a style called the Baroque. Since Baroque, he believes, arises with the decline of great art, it declares possessing «unique compensatory skills of expression and narration» (2010, 44). Compensation can have unique forms of manifestation; a response to decline can inspire new forms of thought and ideas. There is a power, a tension, an overflow – a distinct plasticity that goes into the expression of Baroque. Nietzsche writes:

The Baroque comprises, first, the choice of material and subjects of the greatest dramatic tension, which make the heart tremble even without art, because heaven and hell are too close to the emotions. Then, the oratory of strong passions and gestures, of the ugly-and-sublime, of great masses, of sheer quantity [...]; the lights of dusk, transfiguration, or conflagration playing on these strongly molded forms; ever new risks in instruments and intentions, strongly accented by artists for artists, while the layperson must fancy that he witnesses a constant and unconscious overflowing of primitive nature – art's horns of plenty. (44)

Nietzsche's plastic understanding of the Baroque – the tremble at the heart of art – does not lose its relevance with Plastic Baroque. This conceptualizes periodic compartments as porous and entropic to a point where Baroque connects with Expressionism, Impressionism and Surrealism to evolve as Neo-Baroque. The overlaps and (in)fusions, I claim, sequels further into what I term the Plastic Baroque.

René Wellek (1946) writes that Baroque has provided an aesthetic term which has helped us to understand the literature of the time and which will help us to break the dependence of most literary history from periodizations derived from political and social history. Whatever the defects of the term "Baroque" may be, it is certainly an expression which prepares for synthesis, draws our minds away from the mere accumulation of observations and facts, and paves the way for a future history of literature as a fine art. There is something that I prefer to call mystique

about the Baroque (Denis Diderot, in his *Encyclopédie*, has called it “bizarre”) – the struggle to determine its historical and cultural periodization and niche, an overflow of thoughts and traditions, of experiments and indulgences. There is a lack of finish in Baroque, a sense of indeterminacy in figure and thought. Baroque representation *speaks* and *suggests* at the same time; they figure, formalize and foreground in various overlaps of understanding. My introduction of the idea of Plastic Baroque is not about exploring the historical-religious tradition of the Baroque, not trying to see Baroque as a stylistic term (as Henrich Wölfflin did in his *Renaissance and Baroque*, first published in 1888), nor to retrace its complicated history, the neglect, the reinstatement, the trajectory and the evolution of the Neo-Baroque. It is about bringing into play the idea of the Baroque in its plasticity – the fluidity of borders, the dynamicity of representation and the transgressions of traditions – and the extent to which contemporary plastic art, in turn, can be qualified as Baroque.

William Egginton observes that «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» (2010, 1). Is Baroque peculiar to seventeenth century only? Or is it a recurrent emergence that through its correspondence with the time and the contexts of cultures keeps the problem of representation, truth, manifestations alive? Baroque, I would like to argue, is a response to a crisis of thought, a rethinking in the negotiations between representation and truth (as has been the character of thinking in every generic understanding of cultural contexts). The problem of thought in our times is our complicated and seriously vexed relationship with Earth and the eco-milieu that we share with the nonhumans, both biotic and non-biotic. The crisis with the material is the crisis of thought today as much as the crisis of representation: the dramatic, figurative and transformative material of plastic. The understanding of Plastic Baroque does not discount the context, time and historicity of the emergence of Baroque art and culture. Drawing on Baroque’s ideational and paradigmatic divergences does not mean that we disclaim the historic period and other religious-political specificities that the seventeenth century brought and introduced. For me, unlike for all the thinkers in this field, Plastic Baroque is both historical and metahistorical. In contrast to Eugene D’Ors’ understanding of Baroque as a historical constant, an eon, a profound reality (D’Ors 1990), it is difficult to ignore history and impossible to see the explosion of Baroque aesthetic in artistic expressions beyond the specificity of age. Contemporary plastic art lives in the liminality of such contradictions and overlaps. But to think Plastic Baroque as a simple throwback to the origin and emergence of the Baroque tradition might not be the right path to take, for the expression I introduce here combines both art through material plastic and the plasticity of baroqueism in an artistic representation. Helen Hills is right to note that there is a risk in «seeing the past only in relation to a certain conception of the present’s concern with the present, not as an opening afforded within that present, but as simply leading in a more teleological sense to its own conventional representation of itself to itself» (Farago *et al.* 2015, n.p.). The Baroque potencies, in their transtemporal impact, in their questioning of historical-contextual

rigidity, recognize such plastic art as aesthetic disruptors; Baroque, as Hills argues, «brings discrepancy and rupture, not simply harmony» and «is always already contemporary» (Farago *et al.* 2015, n.p.). Plastic art is Baroque in that sense; and, Baroque or Neo-baroque are plastic by the same logic. Here the Plastic Baroque disorients us and is itself produced in a unity amidst visual and spatial disorientation.

Plastic Baroque then is «open work», which follows on Umberto Eco's seeing Baroque form as dynamic:

it tends to an indeterminacy of effect (in its play of solid and void, light and darkness, with its curvature, its broken surfaces, its widely diversified angles of inclination); it conveys the idea of space being progressively dilated. Its search for kinetic excitement and illusory effect leads to a situation where the plastic mass in the Baroque work of art never allows a privileged, definitive, frontal view; rather, it induces the spectator to shift his position continuously in order to see the work in constantly new aspects, as if it were in a state of perpetual transformation. (Eco 1989, 7)

This plasticity carries over from the Baroque as conflated with the classical in the seventeenth-century to late twentieth-century artworks with the plastic material in what I claim is through a kind of underlying processual unity and force. The plastic force inheres deeply in «the poetic treatises concerning “*maraviglia*”, “*wit*”, “*agudezas*”», and goes beyond «their apparently Byzantine appearance, [seeking] to establish the new man's inventive role» (7). Plasticity in the open work reformulates how we see the rhythm and shadow of Baroque in our times.

19

Plastic art

José Antonio Maravall, in his *La cultura del Barroco* (1975), observes that the Baroque culture emerged from the historical situation and sees its epicenter in the seventeenth century, identifying a host of reasons – social, economic, religious – that contributed to its emergence and prevalence. Baroque constructed a particular “*mentalité*”, which, although kept serving the times and context of its prosperity and dissemination, did not get into a historical hole, a narcotic ending. Interweaving narratives lead us to a separate block of meaning, but the *mentalité* made room for a long Baroque and for reverberations that sounded like revisions into our corridors of contemporary understanding of art and style. Issac Joslin makes us see that «the specific divergences, discords, and dissonances that brought about the breakdown of classical reason and the subsequent Baroque conglomerate consist of an ensemble of economic, political, theological, and epistemological shifts, which engendered the precarious condition of uncertainty or “undecidability” that is hallmark state of the “Baroque human being”» (2020, 43). In this regard, Joslin continues to observe that «the Baroque mind is a reflection of the overall instability and temporality of Baroque being. Thus, the Baroque is only a “transition” or a temporary state in the non-linear sense that, whether for a long or short historical time span, is constantly unfolding and folding under the implicit and contrary notion of a classical stabilizing repression» (2020, 43).

I see late Baroque – transitory, non-linear and disruptive folds – in plastic art. Plastic Baroque speaks about the amazing transformation that an insignificant and unprepossessing material like discarded plastic bags or debris washed ashore on the sea beach can undergo when they come together, or, rather, when they “fold in”. Art here is multi-sensorial, dialecticizing the optic and the haptic, the imaginative and the analytic and the aesthetic and the didactic. The Romantic Gothic in plastic accumulation through uncanny shapes and forms and the discarded plastic through representational art bring the “negative” in heightened intensity, the negative as discharged through anxiety, horror, and the terrible. The aesthetic pleasure is weak in force as plastic arts impact on our psyche with an excitation that makes us see beyond the immediate image. The sublimation achieved therefore holds us in the sway of the negative. Going from the ocean to the gallery involves a “travel”, a separate sense of multi-sensorial rhythm and a transfiguration of the debased, deceased, discarded, decrepit, and downgraded line of objects. It builds its own figuration and rationale of taste. Plastic evolves through art with another vein of fascination, as a dazzling product of Baroque imagination, but not without its settlement in a moral and psychological torpor – it fuses interest, drive, excitement, and enjoyment.

Plastic artist Pamela Longobardi’s 2017 installation *Anchor (Our Albatross)* [FIG. 1] is made of recovered ocean plastic, survival rescue blankets, life vest straps, and steel – a material intertextuality, as it were. Again, Longobardi’s *Plastic Looking Back* [FIG. 2] comprises of «hundreds of objects from remote locations in Panama, Alaska, Indonesia and Greece, including microplastic from Hawaii» (Scarborough 2020, n.p.). She observes:

plastic objects are the cultural archaeology of our time. These objects I see as a portrait of global late-capitalist consumer society, mirroring our desires, wishes, hubris and ingenuity. These are objects with unintended consequences that become transformed as they leave the quotidian world and collide with nature to be transformed, transported, and regurgitated out of the shifting oceans. (qtd. in Scarborough 2020, n.p.)

Artists Judith Selby and Richard Lang realize *For here or to go* [FIG. 3], a shockingly beautiful and overpowering work of art where steam tables are filled with white plastic and white ceramic plates are filled with white beach plastic. As Selby-Lang explain, our throw-away ethos has resulted in a plastic existence:

Besides the blight of plastic itself, a mad scientist’s brew of toxic chemicals is leaching into our bodies. We have learned that every human being has traces of plastic polymers in their bloodstream. That’s the bad news we live with these days. There really is no choice when asked for here or to go? It’s all here, and there is nowhere for it to go. Simply, there is no away. [1]

[1] From a text on the artists’ website:
<https://www.beachplastic.com/for-here-or-to-go>.

Plastic art exists as a mode of representation and manifests differently in a deconstructive moment of self-explosion. Plastic Baroque finds the plastic moments in Baroque art and manifestation and is itself annihilative in moments of outstanding revelations. Plastic Baroque in its performance and ontology estranges us



[FIG. 1] Pamela Longobardi, *Anchor (Our Albatross) and Hope Floats* (2017). Longobardi studio / Atlanta, GA. Courtesy of the artist.

21

[FIG. 2] Pamela Longobardi, *Plastic Looking Back* (2014). Longobardi studio / Atlanta, GA. Courtesy of the artist.





[FIG. 3] Judith Selby & Richard Lang,
For here or to go, (2022). Courtesy of
the artist.

from the fixity and formidability of meaning – an estrangement in language that comes from the Baroque being and, as Joslin observes by following Marshall Brown's remarks, «the spectrum of affective response from the grotesque to the sublime, an art that expresses the entire gamut of highs and lows of human being» (Joslin 2020, 44; see also Brown 1997). The Baroque «usurps the classical, rational form in its “becoming”, and infuses it with living energy, renders its existence somehow other, corrupted, less than perfect, even insane, but perhaps more closely human» (44). This is not just a chaotic excess, «the monstrous phantasms of the imagination and unreason, but rather the appearance of deformity or disorder that follows its own internal rules based on the convergence of perspectives» (46). Plastic Baroque with its “(dé)reglement” is no different from that.

Plastic art is true to its representation, has its limitation of the material and optics, but thrives on an excess that corresponds well with Baroque art that knew its ways of representations, techniques of expressions, but was never out of aberrative exits and seductive excesses. Plasticity of the Baroque and Plastic Baroque then speak of “eroticism”, which is a space of excess and surplus. This is what determines «the Baroque as *play*, in contrast to the determination of the classical work as a labor» (Sarduy 2010, 288). Plastic Baroque in its depth and display exhibits, in the words of Sarduy, much «squandering», «the pageantry, the immoderation, the pleasure» – «in eroticism, artificiality, the cultural, is manifested in the game with the lost object, a game whose objective is within itself and whose intention is not to convey a message – in this case, reproduction – but of their waste as a function of pleasure» (288). There is a failure of representation in the art: a loss of object, an emptiness that holds a lot of possibilities of signifiers. And Plastic Baroque cannot fall out of features that mark the Baroque style in that both Selby-Lang and Longobardi's art exhibit a movement through ornamentation, a folding of visual and aesthetic spaces impacting on the gaze of the viewers, a stunning use of color, monumentality, unexpected nonlinearity of stylistic innovation and a parallax in spectatorhood. In short, an eroticism. True to Baroque art, we see diffusion of surfaces as much as complexity of the fold in the interior and exterior of every plastic art installation. The pronounced visibility and often a garish spread of colors and forms address the thresholds between Neo-Baroque and Plastic Baroque. Longobardi's *Plastic Looking Back* and *Anchor (Our Albatross)* are instances of a spatial fluidity that disrupts all unilateral understanding of being and the image of thought. The gaudiness and visually overwhelming aspects of the images are meant to challenge the limits of thinking and throw us into the face of a negativity that is productive and exploratory: what this means is that there is an abnormality and unconventionality and unreality about the artwork, which indirectly throws open the missing links with the exigencies and contingencies of our existence, the over-plasticization of our lives and living. Here, representation constructs its own challenges and Plastic Baroque puts its faith in supplement – an expressivity that leaves many signs in play.

A plastic bleeding of borders

William Egginton writes that

what appear to be holes are in fact folds, a case of invagination in a plane that for some point of view may appear to be a hole. The passage from inside to outside is further inhibited by the fact that, for Deleuze – and for the thinker who is the focus of Deleuze’s study, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz – there is no absolute distinction between interior and exterior space, but only one relative to point of view. (2010, 19)

Plastic art has a façade to itself that separates the interior from the exterior without making the distinction very stark and non-negotiable. This initiates plasticization, which punctures holes in the idea of separate wholes, leaving us to question whether a pure inside and pure outside can exist at all. Through an investigation of several Baroque paintings, Egginton argues that «the common problem at the heart of the play of the Baroque involves a bleeding of borders, an invitation to the spectator to step into another reality» (18). Plastic art enacts and plays out this inside-outside syndrome, the “bleeding of borders”. This is not monadic, since the inside is “without an outside”. Deleuze writes that «it has as its correlative the independence of the façade, an outside without an inside. Now the façade can have doors and windows – it is riddled with holes – although there may be no void, a fold being only the site of a more rarified matter» (1993, 28). The holes are the passages that leave open a communication amidst an apparent aporia between the exterior and the interior. The seeming incompatibility among walls of seeing, material assemblage and aesthetic specialities create a Baroque fluidity and an eventful enfoldment in thought, affect and perception. Baroque art is spatialized and visualized in folds – “fold over fold” – and Plastic Baroque is recreative in alternative rationality and aesthetic; in fact, discard art is Baroque by its disruption of conventional ideas of architecture and other established forms of artistic installations. I would like to see this as Deleuze’s «splendid moment», where «an excess of principles, a hubris of principles» (68) are at work. Plastic Baroque (the images demonstrate) fills a vacuum of thought – a vacuum that comes to thinking how an unavoidable material and its rapacious and reckless use is setting up insurmountable planetary crisis. The experimental excess comes from the horror of the vacuum in thought that cripples us to imagine what is yet to come: the unborn nature and an erratic Earth.

Plastic Baroque introduces an abundance in thinking, a series of unique moments in material experimentation, that easily challenges the classical space of stratified form. Deleuze notes that «classical reason toppled under the force of divergences, impossibilities, discords, dissonances. But the Baroque represents the ultimate attempt to reconstitute a classical reason by dividing divergences into as many worlds as possible, and by making from impossibilities as many possible borders between worlds» (81). True to the Baroque aesthetic, Plastic Baroque responds to the existential and contextual question of the present through the creation of parallel worlds and the intermeshing possibilities of understanding and knowledge. Arguing through Leibniz, Deleuze reaches at an interesting point when he observes:

For with Leibniz the question surges forth that will continue to haunt Whitehead and Bergson [two twentieth-century philosophers of “emergence”]: not how to attain eternity, but in what conditions does the objective world allow for a subjective production of novelty, that is, of creation? [...] The best of all worlds is not the one that reproduces the eternal, but the one in which new creations are produced, the one endowed with a capacity for innovation or creativity. (79)

The installations have their power of transfiguration, deficiency and incompleteness in art – a tension that speaks of art, the overflow of emotions, the power of the present and instant, a seduction that challenges border mappings in art’s manifestation and form-making. This is the shock and the affect produced by the Neo-Baroque. I say Plastic Baroque.

What a close reading of the Neo-Baroque brings to us in its Latin American and Caribbean contexts is the open spaces left alluringly for re-appropriation and experimentation beyond the instrumental reason of the Enlightenment. Omar Calabrese sees Neo-Baroque as «simply a “spirit of the age” that pervades many of today’s cultural phenomena in all fields of knowledge, making them familiar to each other and, simultaneously, distinguishing them from other cultural phenomena in a more or less recent past» (1992, xii). This dissipative and diffusive energy of the baroque brings «a search for, and valorization of, forms that display a loss of entirety, totality, and system in favor of instability, polydimensionality, and change» (xii). Baroque has its past and pastness as much as a presentness where the past speaks in its unannounced revelations. The seventeenth and eighteenth century, in a kind of plastic explosion, establish an art form that declares discontinuous instants in its continuity. Baroque reinvents itself. In a 1975 essay entitled *The Baroque and the marvelous real*, the Cuban novelist-critic Alejo Carpentier sees Baroque as symbiosis and *mestizaje*; he sees «the awareness of being Other, of being new, of being symbiotic, of being a *criollo*; and the *criollo* spirit is itself a Baroque spirit» (1995, 100). By having a profound re-turn value, Baroque is deeply plastic in its philosophy and existence. Carpentier’s deep investment in art historical specialism does not conceal his advocacy for the potencies of “worlding” in Baroque aesthetics. He does not see just a classical mimesis at work; rather, he attributes a plastic mimesis that brings *forth* different identities and modes of representation keeping the explosive possibility of artistic expressions alive and in play. This produces a new logic of sense, a separate vein of articulation that connects the representation with our being in the world, the contexts of our existence, the institutional embeddings and other existential questions. The plasticity in Baroque reason tells us how it is less a product and more a process – Carpentier knew and believed in it, and Deleuze could not have considered it outside the folds as an image of thought. Nadir Lahiji notes that, for Deleuze, the Baroque is more like a living machine for the production of “plastic forces” and relationships: «Plastic forces are thus more machinelike than they are mechanical, and they allow for the definition of Baroque machine» (Deleuze qtd. in Lahiji 2016, 63). There is the aesthetics of becoming in Baroque reason; Plastic Baroque is profoundly anchored in the becoming, in the metamorphosis, in differentiations, in the rebelliousness. The plasticity of Baroque is in the transcultural appropriations that Baroque tradition had undergone. Neo-Baroque is deeply transgressive in its manifestations.

Baroque reason, unlike classical reason, encourages contradiction as much as a crisis in representation and revelation, thus challenging the limits of how we think a tradition in its circumambient context and also in its proleptic force to unsettle the existent critique; this makes for a revisionary understanding that makes a work of art and expression build its own plasticity. Plastic art is informed by the refigurative force of Baroque reason.

Heterochronic temporality

Within the dynamic and performative of Plastic Baroque the images announce how plastic materials washed up and tossed about in delirious abandon have their own voices – materially intoned and scripted – that connect chiasmatically with the voices of the artists. This is the point of a physical, figural, conceptual and aesthetic intertwining. I see in this negotiation a connection and a separation – a syncopic formulation where the contact with plastic forms its own revulsion and retraction. Seeing and feeling plastic is experiencing and discoursing the anguish that the “degenerate” plastics produce. Here is a joy in art which comes close on the heels of an agony. We rethink history here – our historicalities, our slip-pages in understanding of the subject and the object, the deception and truth of representation, the incompleteness and failing in all projects of totality. Anthropocenic future is not lived but imagined in the present: it is a history that we live in the present, in moments of presentism. Plastic Baroque does that, and in such enfoldment time, period, style, emotion, expectation, representations are plasticized. Baroque deconstructs itself in ways that do not leave it deracinated from its periodic niche; it connects with the plastic motor (or what Catherine Malabou calls the “motor schemes”, see Malabou 2010) to lay it out with different angularities and expectations. If a movement and style do not claim their own suffocation, make their own shouts of release, induce their own trans-moments, they were never a movement: movement is mobility, it is non-totalizable – and Baroque is no less.

Plastic arts have a resonant or intrinsic time that comes from its organization, contemplation and aesthetic unity. Étienne Souriau argues that «the time of the work radiates, so to speak, around the prerogative moment represented. The latter makes a structural center from which the mind moves backward to the past and forward to the future in a more and more vague fashion until the moment when the image fades gradually into space» (1949, 295). Time trembles; the moment glows through a plastic rhythm; art *presences*. Plastic Baroque works on heterochrony (Bal 2011): this signals a swing between the tenses where the present, past and the future are caught in an oscillation that we can call heterochronic. To contemplate Baroque time is to find beauty in imperfection in the assessment, measurement, and representation of time. How then does time take the shape of an asymmetrical pearl? Baroque time is multilayered, rife with contradictions, alternately exact and inexact, and highly particular in its cultural manifestations. Caught in a time tunnel, Plastic Baroque makes for the existence in the time-present, in presentness, the immediate thought about an inevitable past and a “coming to”. Heterochronic temporality produces a new experience of the “contemporary” – the movement between frames of

time and thought that is always tensional and productive through conflicts. Artworks shock; temporal ruptures are forceful encounters with a future that we imagine to live in the present and that is also what an inevitable past generates. The signs of the artwork enforce thought and thinking in a way where our acts of viewing are very different from how we conventionally look at an object of art. I call this the moment of violence where a serious disruption in viewing is initiated, resulting in a break with the object and rupture from the homely conventions of aesthetic experience.

Plastic Baroque art is conceived in shock and rupture, in breaks and non-linearity, rather than in straight lines. Anthony Cascardi notes:

Baroque art and architecture demonstrate both an aversion to the straight line and an affinity for curved lines and surfaces. This has consequences for the way we understand Baroque “figures of form”, but it also matters for questions of force. It is, first, one example of an interest in blurring the lines between the static object-world and dynamic nature, between the animate and the inanimate. (Cascardi 2019, 455)

In its aversion and avoidance of straight lines, Plastic Baroque is Deleuzean in a productive way. Plastic art appropriates Baroque not as an essence, but rather as an operative function, a trait. It endlessly produces folds. The folds that plastic art generates transform our expectations, viewpoints and experiences as they create and change spatialities and expose us to a variety of revelations and affordances. Plastic Baroque produces unexpected turns and leads to unpredictable encounters diffusing boundaries of experience and imagination, thought and knowledge. Folds can irrationalize; the sense of the inside and the outside, the relationship between totality and the fragment, the material and the materialization, the surface and ground are re-viewed and introduced to a fresh line of thought. Baroque has the ability to disrupt, dislocate an experience of linearity, and can often fuse and fold into different artistic or architectural positions, borders of construction and aesthetic-material experiences. Longobardi’s art and Selby-Lang’s installations produce trans-spatiality, inter-objectivity, the reality-affect and affective reality, and within the Baroque spirit they play up deception with reality. There is a close match between deception and the real.

Vision and Gaze

Lisa Beaven and Angela Ndalianis note:

One of the most prominent traits of the Baroque is its contingency, always in the process of being formed and relying on its audience to re-create it, over and over again. That perceived “flaw” in Baroque culture, its instability and mutability, becomes one of its essential characteristics. To enact this performance of completion it demands a spatial context, imagined or real, and solicits the senses, requesting a response. Baroque spaces – works of art, buildings, and even literature – are in this sense performative, designed to involve the participant in a reciprocal process of sensory immersion. (2018, 6)

The very instability at the heart of the Baroque is its plasticity. It becomes a category that invites revisitations for the uncertainty of its understanding and the continuous fixing and unfixing of its return to its contexts and conditions of emergence. It is the emotive and spectator-consciousness that mark Baroque art as much as Plastic Baroque. The art form and art experience invite the spectator to experience the cultural-material aspects as well as, in the case of Plastic Baroque, the eco-social ones, thus dissolving the separating line between awareness and represented content. The plasticity of Baroque encourages such art-spectator-spectacle melding where one starts to inhabit the art form into an experience that connects them to the present in a different valence and temper. Beaven and Ndalians look at Diego Velázquez's *Las Meninas* for its expansiveness which, they think, invites the beholders in and makes a demand on them to complete the understanding of the picture and «in the process [transforms] the beholder into a participant» (6). This bears a clear correspondence with the beholder-participation dialectic in plastic installation art that questions and stretches our expectations: we are expected to complete the picture with the artist and get undermined by spaces and emotions that the picture represents. The diffusive potential of art relives the Baroque to an extent where the art, the artist, the observer and the critic are on intermediate planes of expression and experience, which results in the interpenetration of aesthetic and visual spaces. The plasticity of Baroque ensures that the spectator is incorporated into the work of art with a variety of aesthetic senses and transtemporal frames of understanding. Here, we encounter a bi-focal understanding of both plastic and Baroque time.

Every picture or piece of plastic art *stages* an interpretation, building a pattern of listening to the art-object. There is a new reality of seeing – the plasticity of seeing – that creates separate aesthetic affordances and epistemological understandings. The materiality of the plastic art forms its own lines of correspondence with the viewer, with the line and ethics of sight; the gaze of art and the gaze of the viewer meet at several points of spatial and sensory understanding, creating room for changing forms of emotion and expression. The materiality and mentality of the work develop productive points of intersections and detour. It is the gaze – the seeing, seeing through and sight – that makes Baroque produce plasticity. Plastic art is invested in the gaze too.

By identifying Longobardi and Selby-Lang's work in line with Plastic Baroque, we find how they circumstantialize and build the *milieu* to produce a connector between the context, the past, and the urgency and intensity of the present. This builds a conjunction between the plasticity of Baroque and the Plastic Baroque involving vision and gaze. Christine Buci-Glucksmann sees the Baroque in the gaze and the gaze as contributing to the Baroque. Here, form and formlessness co-exist as spaces which merge and separate in an intriguing logic and optics. Quoting Jean Starobinski, Buci-Glucksmann notes that «Vision becomes Gaze (*Regard*), in the etymological sense of the term, to guard, to place in safekeeping: "*Regarder* [to look at, to gaze upon] is a movement that aims to recapture, *repren-dre sous garde* [to place in safekeeping once again]. The gaze does not exhaust itself immediately. It involves perseverance, doggedness, as if animated by the hope of adding to its discovery"» (2013, 5). In their work, the

force of the gaze and the discoveries that it makes within the capture of the artistic moments are the vision; in turn, the vision in its energy, perspectival diversity and the “invention of an aesthetic” speaks of plasticity. Buci-Glucksmann’s observations of the Baroque as a «revolution in the ways of seeing» (8) relates to Plastic Baroque in inventive ways – striking representations with the material and affective materiality. Like Baroque, plastic art builds a speculative perspective and curiosity – a mix of wonder, charm, anxiety and intrigue. There is a loss in watching, something that goes amiss, a scarcity of understanding that destabilizes the aesthetic and politics of the artwork, leading to a transposition of views and projections. Longobardi and Selby-Lang draw us with a seduction and aura, but also disrupt the experience as our gaze breaks through the apparent aesthetic and lead to an experience that is not merely the present; shaken by the future and what the present has to offer in an oblique relationship with the past and future. The Plastic Baroque, here, invites the eye that does not simply see but breaks through the geometry of things and settlement into a zone that undoes the subject: the subject exhausts the mere visuality of the art and destroys it into a new experience – an experience that comes from the shifting gaze and fluidity of positions. The fluidity of Plastic Baroque is both from the art – its form, material, arrangement, mask, physicality – and inhabitation generated through the imagination and gaze – the transfiguration, the disguise, the apparent completion, the instability. It is relevant, here, to recall that Buci-Glucksmann sees form as exhibiting «itself in its *Darstellung*: it appears, transforms itself, disappears, returns changed by its retreat, by its movement, in a way that speaks to the polysemy of the Greek term *katastrophe*. Its literal meaning: to reverse, overturn, knock down, die, reach its end, its conclusion, to master» (11). Plastic Baroque imbibes this amazing pack of vectors that make art telic and yet incomplete and yet self-transcending and yet self-annihilative and yet discursive. The trajectory from Baroque to Plastic Baroque plays and invests in forms in that there is «metamorphosis to anamorphosis, from a form beyond form that rejects the static self to a form that reclaims its own visual prehistory, its catastrophist dynamism, an emergence of emergences» (11). Plastic Baroque produces an amazing consonance in view and understanding, but the dissonance is deep seated. Art can often overwhelm by its color, texture, materiality, imagination, and concept. Baroque essentially has this virtue to overwhelm and to leave us with a sense of unfulfillment. This is not because of the skill, technicality and craft that went into the making; it is because the inside and the outside fold into each other, intensifying the passion of experience and a sense of transubstantiation that exceeds the materiality of art. It is in the unique ability to transcend itself that Baroque connects with Plastic Baroque.

As an aesthetic expression, as an aesthetic of taste and style, of form and concept, Baroque transgresses time and culture zones; it is not an exclusive preserve of European art lasting for two or three centuries only. Henri Focillon points out that:

in the life of forms, Baroque is indeed but a moment, but it is certainly the freest and the most emancipated one. Baroque forms have either abandoned or denatured that principle of intimate propriety, an essential aspect of which is a careful

respect for the limits of the frame, especially in architecture. They live with passionate intensity a life that is entirely their own; they proliferate like some vegetable monstrosity. They break apart even as they grow; they tend to invade space in every direction, to perforate it, to become as one with all its possibilities. (1992, 58)

Baroque's trans-spatialities make it plastic; the experiments, argues Focillon, are swept into «by some hidden force that constantly overshoot the mark» (58). The plasticity in the life of the Baroque makes form and content, intention and expression, play up their own game of representation and experience. Forms do not rigidify; rather, Baroque urges a fluidity in appropriation, in a kind of nostalgia that makes the present seek its own branches with antiquity, with models that look apparently incommensurable. There is a delight, a *jouissance*, a curious intrusion and inversion. The emergence of the Baroque and its dissemination and journey across cultures and epistemic boundaries owe to the concept of form as process: this process, as Maiorino (1990) observes by considering cases that range from Michelangelo to Giordano Bruno, brought about an incompleteness and openness. There, forms were not merely bound and stated, they were rather embedded in poetics of abundance with flow and plasticity.

Neo-Baroque and Plastic Baroque revel in excess, a kind of abundance that challenges us optically but is also deeply meaningful semiotically and symbolically. The expansion and energy in the plasticity of the Baroque and in Plastic Baroque draw us to a zone of wonder, agony, exuberance and frustration. Djelal Kadir calls it the «surfeit of eccentric fragmentation» (1986, 86). There is a kind of incompleteness, of «supplementary alterities» (86), a plenitude in display and several points of dislocation in understanding. Plastic Baroque provides the liminality, «that ever-extended errand which characterizes the baroque enterprise as perpetual mobility and displacement» (89). As Wölfflin wrote, «the Baroque never offers us perfection and fulfillment, or the static calm of “being”, only unrest of change and the tension of transience» (qtd. in Kadir 1986, 89). The Baroque artwork *Plastic Looking Back* is both eccentric and acentric – which, in the words of Kadir, makes it become a «subversive and ever-errant deflector bent on de-authorizing all privileged programs and centeredness – metaphysics, orthodoxy, myth, authenticity, primogenial acts, hieratic monads, transcendental signifieds, mnemonic determinacies, and mystified historicities – manifests an inexorable gravitation toward its illusionary antitheses» (90).

Maravall sees the world as unfinished and its innermost contexture as possessing «a contradictory, unstable, dynamic consistency» (1986, 88). The world, as Maravall notes, is «struggle of oppositions» (157) – and this ensures the movement. What, then, did the Baroque individuals do? He writes that

in having to ask themselves in a much more dramatic way than at other times about the ambience of their existence, inasmuch as they perceived it to be critically threatened, Baroque individuals acquired their knowledge of the world and their suffering, pessimistic experience about what the world was; but they also confirmed, with tragicomic simultaneity, that by learning how to play a skillful game they could also aim for positive results. From the notion of this polyvalent

mixture of the world, the Baroque human being drew the elements to construct his or her own figure. (158)

This is no different from Plastic Baroque individuals and their being in the world. The material-art with its spectrality, horror, excess, prospective hubristic predicament builds its conflict with a world in the wake of relentless suffering and instability. The inherent movement in the world and world formations construct moments of disruption and violence. This is as true of Baroque as it is of Plastic Baroque, where the individuals have always been caught up in agonism. It speaks of the reflexivity of the subject and repremises the subject-object order. Perhaps, this vision of the individual and the world keeps reformulating the gaze too.

Plastic Baroque, aligning with the principles of Baroque vision, owes to the view of the subject: how one sees the object built with plastic initiates a collapse of the object into the subject. With a different relation between the subject and object in play, the conflation is both corporeal and internal. Longobardi's art throws open the subject in transition as the materiality of the matter connects with how our body interacts and responds to it; from materiality the experience shifts to how the matter affects the subject internally; this revises the Cartesian form of subjectivity. It is plastic that we use and are actively familiar with; it is the material that occupies a fair share of our body and physical space. But the baroque-ness of the art constructs an unhomeliness of space and the material produces its own moment of rupture from familiarity to precarity, from spatio-visual gaudy remarkableness to existential thoughts, from a moment of familiar present to prospects of unexpected and unprecedented spectrality.

Conclusion

Walter Benjamin saw in the Baroque «a kind of self-deconstructive art – severe, iconoclastic works that, instead of proposing escapist visions of permanence without change, formally encode the inevitable corrosive work of history as decay and ruin» (Zamora & Kaup 2010, 55). Plastic Baroque is deconstructive in that it speaks of a ruin of thought, a decaying culture at the precipice of a material catastrophe. Antinomical in nature, and similarly to how Benjamin conceived of the Baroque, art here takes a “plastic form”: Baroque and the Plastic Baroque have «eruptive expression of allegorical interpretation» (55). Art becomes dialectical, allegorical and, to put it with Benjamin's words, a «plastic symbol» (2010, 63). This is less about offering a corrective to classicism than it is a disruptive way to make art change its own image of expression. Plastic art is an art form that makes art rethink its own ways of expression and establishment. This is not a corrective; not an extension either. It is art speaking in a language that surprises art's very own conditions of expression. Plastic Baroque is our new point of inquiry and the trans-aesthetic juncture of deep contemplation in contemporary art history.

Bibliography

- Bal, M. (2011). Baroque matters. In H. Hills (ed.), *Rethinking the Baroque*, 183-202. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Beaven, L. & Ndalianis, A. (2018). Introduction. In L. Beaven & A. Ndalianis (eds.), *Emotion and the Seduction of the Senses, Baroque to NeoBaroque*, 1-17. Kalamazoo: Western Michigan University.
- Benjamin, W. (2010). *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. Excerpts. In L.P. Zamora & M. Kaup (eds.), *Baroque New Worlds Representation, Transculturation, Counterconquest*, 59-74. Trans. by J. Osborne. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Brown, M. (1997). The classic is the Baroque. On the principle of Wölfflin's art history. In Id., *Turning Points: Essays in the History of Cultural Expression*, 88-113. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997.
- Buci-Glucksmann, C. (2013). *The Madness of Vision. On Baroque Aesthetics*. Trans. by D.Z. Baker. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press.
- Calabrese, O. (1992). *Neo-Baroque. A Sign of the Times*. Trans. by C. Lambert. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Carpentier, A. (1995). The Baroque and the marvelous real. In L.P. Zamora & W.B. Faris. (eds.), *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, 89-108. Trans. by T. Huntington & L.P. Zamora. Durham & London: Duke University Press.
- Cascardi, A.J. (2019). Experience and knowledge in the Baroque. In J.D. Lyons (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Baroque*, 449-470. New York: Oxford University Press.
- D'Ors, E. (1990). *The Baroque*. Lisbon: Vega.
- Deleuze, G. (1993). *The Fold. Leibniz and the Baroque*. Trans. by T. Conley. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Eco, U. (1989). *The Open Work*. Trans. by A. Cancogni. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Egginton, W. (2010). *The Theater of Truth: The Ideology of (Neo)Baroque Aesthetics*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Farago, C. & Hills, H. & Kaup, M. & Siracusano, G. & Baumgarten, J., & Jacoviello, S. (2015). Conceptions and reworkings of Baroque and Neobaroque in recent years. *Perspective*, 1. <http://journals.openedition.org/perspective/5792>
- Focillon, H. (1992). *The Life of Forms in Art*. Trans. by G. Kubler. New York: Zone Books.
- Hassold, E.C. (1946). The Baroque as a basic concept of art. *College Art Journal*, 6 (1), 3-28.
- Joslin, I. (2020). Society and spectacle: The sublimation of reality in Baroque aesthetics. *Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics*, 43 (2), 42-51.
- Kadir, D. (1986). *Questing Fictions. Latin America's Family Romance*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Lahiji, N. (2016). *Adventures with the Theory of the Baroque and French Philosophy*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Lambert, G. (2004). *The Return of the Baroque in Modern Culture*. New York: Continuum Press.
- Maiorino, G. (1990). *The Cornucopian Mind and the Baroque Unity of the Arts*. University Park, PA: Penn State University Press.
- Malabou, C. (2010). *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing. Dialectic, Destruction, Deconstruction*. Trans. by C. Shread. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Maravall, J.A. (1986). *Culture of the Baroque Analysis of a Historical Structure*. Trans. by T. Cochran. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Mignot, C. (2014). Baroque. In B. Cassin (ed.), *Dictionary of Untranslatables. A Philosophical Lexicon*, 77-79. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Nietzsche, F. (2010). On the Baroque [1878]. In L.P. Zamora & M. Kaup (eds.), *Baroque New Worlds Representation, Transculturation, Counterconquest*, 44-45. Trans. by M. Kaup. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Sarduy, S. (2010). The Baroque and the Neobaroque. In L.P. Zamora & M. Kaup (eds.), *Baroque New Worlds Representation, Transculturation, Counterconquest*, 270-291. Trans. by C. Winks. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Scarborough, S. (2020). Pam Longobardi: Coastal trash hero. *Fierce Hazel*. https://fiercehazel.com/blogs/online-journal/pam-longobardi?srltid=AfmBoopgTgGMbKdwmLlyHUpG0Z7T2ROOBfHEE1_7NNuoMRdMIZxejXk
- Souriau, E. (1949). Time in the plastic arts. *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 7 (4), 294-307.
- Wellek, R. (1946). The concept of Baroque in literary scholarship. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 5 (2), 77-109.
- Zamora, L.P. & Kaup, M. (2010). Editors' note to *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. In L.P. Zamora & M. Kaup (eds.), *Baroque New Worlds Representation, Transculturation, Counterconquest*, 55-58. Durham: Duke University Press.