

INTERNATIONAL LEXICON OF AESTHETICS

Spring 2023 Edition, ISSN 2611-5166, ISBN 9791222303253, DOI 10.7413/18258630137

NEOBAROQUE

By Alessandro Montefameglio

(First published May 31, 2023)

It. *Neobarocco*; Fr. *Neobaroque*; Germ. *Neobarock*; Span. *Neobaroco*. The term refers to 1) the evocation of significant aspects of Baroque style in 19th and 20th century architecture, arts and literature, and 2) a transversal concept that designates many of the aesthetic phenomena of the contemporary era, from the late 20th century to the present days, characterized by specific analogies with Baroque aesthetics. The term has a particular significance in the Latin American and Italian debates, through the work of authors such as Gillo Dorfles, Severo Sarduy and Omar Calabrese.

ARCHITECTURE AND ARTS

If the presence of neobaroque tendencies in the arts has been discussed since the 1890s (Hocke 1987: 50, 208), then the term has been generically used by contemporary historians of architecture to designate a revival of Baroque style in specific examples of late 19th century eclectic architecture, such as Jean Louis Charles Garnier's *Opéra* in Paris (De Fusco 1993: 536).

A decisive date for the birth of a formal idea of neobaroque is 1946, when the Italian art critic Gillo Dorfles published *Attualità del barocco* and *Spazialità e plastica nella nuova architettura*, presenting *in nuce* the original ideas that would be later thoroughly explored in 1951 in his *Barocco nell'architettura moderna*. Taking part in the European debate on Baroque, which had had among its protagonists authors such as Henrich Wölfflin, Henri Focillon and Eugeni d'Ors, and indicating Albert Erich Brinckmann as his direct precursor for his idea of Neobaroque (Dorfles 1951: 9-14; Brinckmann 1924), Dorfles conceived a relevant part of the architectural phenomena of his time as a historical extension of 17th century Baroque style. In contrast with the idea of an *organic architecture* exemplified by the work of Frank Lloyd Wright and defended in Italy by Bruno Zevi, Dorfles' attention went specifically to the notions of monumentality, movement, musical rhythm, and light, which he claimed to be the conceptual protagonists of this new architecture (Dorfles 1951: 22-38). Finally, if according to Dorfles neobaroque mainly involves

contemporary architecture and therefore personalities such as Walter Gropius, Erich Mendelsohn and Alvar Aalto, its principles can be found also elsewhere, i.e., in design, sculpture or painting.

THE LATIN AMERICAN CULTURE

One of the very first appearances of the term "neobaroque" dates back to 1914, when the Andalusian poet Antonio Machado spoke of *neobarroquismo* to identify the revival of specific tendencies of Baroque literature among its contemporaries, in particular in the poetics of the Nicaraguan poet Rubén Darío (Machado 1997: 858). In the 1950s, the Brazilian poet Haroldo de Campos coined the term *Neobarroco* not only to define the fragmentary poetics of authors such as Stéphane Mallarmé, James Joyce and Ezra Pound, but also to refer to the issue of "the hybrid origins of Brazil", recognized by him "in the baroque" (Kaup, Zamora 2010: 317).

However, the main theorist of Neobaroque in the Latin American debate was the Cuban writer and critic Severo Sarduy. Inheriting the works of Alejo Carpentier and José Lezama Lima on Baroque and its contemporary evolution in the New World, i.e. the so-called *New World Baroque* (Kaup, Zamora 2010: 7-10), and the structuralist approach of Roland Barthes and Jacques Lacan, assimilated during his long permanence in Paris, from the 1970s Sarduy started to report the existence of peculiar elements of 17th century Baroque aesthetics in contemporary culture, not only in the New World.

In his analysis, Sarduy focused mainly on the role of concepts such as artifice, disharmony, irregularity, simulacrum, irony, and parody. According to Sarduy, for instance, Baroque and Neobaroque can both be designated as aesthetics of artifice. This concept, following Sarduy's idea, aimed at foregrounding "the contingent nature of meaning as such" and at uncovering «the arbitrariness of the relations between signifier and signified», even suggesting «that all linguistic structures are meaningful only as artifice» (Kaup, Zamora 2010: 266). Furthermore, as it appeared from his 1972 essay *Barroco*, concepts such as disharmony and irregularity allowed Sarduy to extend the Neobaroque paradigm beyond the boundaries of aesthetics, assigning to it significant philosophical connotations. Following Sarduy's words, "contemporary baroque, i.e., neobaroque, structurally reflects on the disharmony, on the rupture of homogeneity of logos as absolute logos, on the deficiency that constitutes our epistemic fundament. Neobaroque of disequilibrium, structural reflection of a desire that cannot reach its object, desire for which logos has arranged nothing more than a screen that hides a deficiency. [...] Neobaroque: a necessarily pulverised reflection of a knowledge aware that it is no longer peacefully closed in on itself. Art of dethronement and discussion" (Sarduy 1987: 211-212). Having provided this definition of neobaroque, the Cuban writer could then widen this perspective and evoke scientific issues specific of Baroque period (an emblematic example is Sarduy's analysis of the consequences of Kepler's cosmology for 17th century literature, art and architecture), comparing them, for instance, to the influence that contemporary physical theories, such as the Big Bang Theory and Chaos Theory, have on our *Weltanschauung* and, therefore, also on the way we approach to aesthetic issues. According to Sarduy, in fact, we can identify common characters of a same paradigm only if we accept the idea that there is a *retombée*, i.e., an impact,

a reflection, or a resonance effect, among elements belonging to different backgrounds (in this case aesthetics and science).

FROM THE 1980S TO THE CONTEMPORARY DEBATE

If the term Neobaroque was sporadically used by Gilles Deleuze in his 1988 work on Leibniz, *Le pli*, to designate the contemporary manifestations (in authors such as Henri Michaux, Pierre Boulez or Simon Hantaï) of his idea of a *fold that goes out to infinity*, derived from an original interpretation of Leibnizian philosophy (Deleuze 1988: 112), then the concept of neobaroque had its most extensive development in the work of the Italian semiologist Omar Calabrese.

From his 1987 *L'età neobarocca*, with the term *neobarocco* Calabrese referred to a "tag" or a "slogan" (Calabrese 2013: 64) identifying a formal "principle of organization" (2013: 50) of many aesthetic phenomena and predominant tastes of contemporary culture. If compared to its predecessors' ideas, Calabrese's neobaroque had three significant elements of distinction. Firstly, Calabrese conceived neobaroque not quite as a form of revival of Baroque aesthetics in the contemporary age, but rather as a paradigm that, despite maintaining "a sort of continuity with historical Baroque" (2013: 23), referred only analogically to it. Furthermore, Calabrese's neobaroque aesthetics was defined by the author as a "social aesthetics" (2013: 24), where the term "social" indicates the specific centrality of the role of the reception of aesthetic messages by the public or a user. Finally, the methodology that Calabrese employed to illustrate his paradigm, investigating several aesthetic phenomena (above all mass culture phenomena, from visual arts to cinema to literature and television commercials), had a specific semiotic and philosophical orientation.

Calabrese's neobaroque has nine couples of principles: rhythm and repetition, limit and excess, detail and fragment, instability and metamorphosis, disorder and chaos, knot and labyrinth, complexity and dissipation, approximation and *je-ne-sais-quoi*, distortion and perversion. If the first couple of concepts defines neobaroque as a peculiar case of an aesthetics of repetition and variation, exemplified for instance by the repetitiveness of certain products, such as TV shows or musical videoclips, Calabrese utilized the spatial categories of *limit* and *excess* to define neobaroque as a decentralized cultural system in which its internal forces tend, on the one hand, to test the stability of its perimetral norms and, on the other, to exceed these edges. At the same time, as an aesthetics of *detail* and *fragment* neobaroque conveys the idea of a loss of totality, "a sunset of entirety" (2013: 125), made possible by the fact that the detail (the cut of an element of a whole operated by a subject) and the fragment (the casual and non-subjective emerging of an element) become independent from the whole. An example of this is represented by contemporary music industry, where reproduction techniques such as compact discs (an analogue element nowadays would be digital streaming platforms) sharply shift the attention of the listener to the infinitely replicable and separable details of a music track. With the ideas of *disorder* and *chaos*, *knot* and *labyrinth*, and *dissipation* and *complexity*, Calabrese introduced then, similarly to Sarduy and Deleuze, a dense lexicon that has a specific reference to contemporary mathematics and physics, applying here to the idea of a neobaroque aesthetics and cultural system. In this sense, disorder and chaos are not conceived by

Calabrese as synonyms of irrationality and randomness, but as characteristics of complex phenomena in which the seemingly opposite ideas of disorder and order do not appear as conflicting and irreconcilable. An example of this is offered by Mandelbrot's fractals or Rosentiehl's labyrinths, i.e., extremely irregular geometrical objects where irregularity is balanced not only by the regularity certified by the mathematical description, but also by their aesthetic value, i.e., their beauty. The evocation of these models allowed Calabrese not only to account for neobaroque taste for these geometrical structures, employed for example in cinema and literature, but more generally to describe neobaroque as a cultural system in which the irregularities and the entropic forces do not lead to the dissolution of the system, but to the constant creation of a new, "different order" (2013: 31) and continuous forms of renewal. Finally, the well-known aesthetic concept of *je-ne-sais-quoi* becomes part of Calabrese's paradigm, together with the idea of *approximation*, to designate neobaroque also as an aesthetics that "runs after an effect of vagueness, of inaccuracy, of indefinite atmosphere" (2013: 31), exemplified by the increasingly frequent employment of cinematographic techniques such as blending or fade-out.

Following these considerations, the present debate on neobaroque focuses on different points: 1) the historical and philosophical limits of the category, 2) its relations with other categories, for example with postmodernism, 3) the possibility of a coherent and overall intercultural approach, more particularly between the Latin American and the European debate, 4) the ethical consequences of neobaroque aesthetics, 5) its further hybridization with other fields such as sociology, psychology, anthropology or sciences. For instance, the later point has been analysed, among others, by authors such as the literary critic Brigid Brophy, the art historian and curator Stephen Calloway, the anthropologist Gilbert Durand, the sociologists Michel Xiberras, who employed the category of baroque excess to explain contemporary sociological phenomena such as the proliferation of drugs in the Western world, and Michel Maffesoli, who has theorized a "baroquization" of contemporary world. An intercultural and interdisciplinary approach has been at the core of international conferences on baroque and neobaroque (*El barroco y su double*, which took place in 1990 in Madrid, is a representative example), where the debate on the aesthetic issues of neobaroque intertwined with ethical and political matters, such as the analysis of the relations between baroque politics of absolutism and contemporary phenomena of courtierism, and many of the most recent studies on neobaroque aesthetics, like those carried out by Lois Parkinson Zamora, Monika Kaup and Angela Ndalians.

BIBLIOGRAPHY.

- A. E. Brinckmann, *Plastik und Raum als Grundformen künstlerischer Gestaltung*, München, R. Piper, 1924.
- B. Brophy, *Baroque-'n'-roll and Other essays*, London, Hamilton, 1987.
- O. Calabrese, *Il neobarocco. Forme e dinamiche della cultura contemporanea*, Firenze-Lucca, La Casa Usher, 2013.
- S. Calloway, *Baroque Baroque. The Culture of Excess*, London, Phaidon, 1994.
- R. De Fusco, *Mille anni d'architettura in Europa*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 1993.

- G. Deleuze, *Le pli. Leibniz et le Baroque*, Paris, Les Éditions de Minuit, 1988.
- V. Díaz, *Neobarroco, neo-barroco*, in *Diccionario de términos críticos de la literatura y la cultura en América Latina*, Buenos Aires, Clacso, 2021: 353-364.
- G. Dorfles, *Attualità del barocco*, "Domus", 207 (1946): 32-35.
 – *Spazialità e plastica nella nuova architettura*, "Lettere e arti", 11-12 (1946): 45-46.
 – *Barocco nell'architettura moderna*, Milano, Libreria Editrice Politecnica Tamburini, 1951.
- R. Greene, *Baroque and Neobaroque: Making History*, "PMLA", 1 (2009): 150-155.
- G. R. Hocke, *Die Welt als Labyrinth. Manierismus in der europäischen Kunst und Literatur*, Hamburg-Berlin, Rowohlt, 1987.
- M. Kaup, *Neobaroque in the Americas. Alternative Modernities in Literature, Visual Art, and Film*, Charlottesville University of Virginia Press, 2012.
- M. Kaup, L. P. Zamora (eds.), *Baroque New Worlds. Representation, Transculturation, Counterquest*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2010.
- A. Machado, *Obras II. Soledades y otros poemas*, Madrid, Losada, 1997.
- M.-P. Malczynski, W. B. Faris, *The (Neo)Baroque Effect: A Critical Inquiry into the Transformation and Application of a Conceptual Field to Comparative American Studies*, "Comparative Literature", 3 (2009): 295-315.
- A. Ndalianis, *Neo-Baroque Aesthetics and Contemporary Entertainment*, Cambridge, The MIT Press, 2004.
- S. Sarduy, *Barroco*, Buenos Aires, Sudamericana, 1974.
 – *El barroco y el neobarroco*, México, Siglo XXI, 1972.
 – *Ensayos generals sobre el barroco*, México-Buenos Aires, Fondo de cultura económica, 1987.
- L. P. Zamora, *New World Baroque, Neobaroque, Brut Barroco: Latin American Postcolonialism*, "PMLA", 1 (2009): 127-142.

HOW TO QUOTE THIS ENTRY

A. Montefameglio, *Rhythm*, "International Lexicon of Aesthetics", Spring 2023 Edition, URL =<https://lexicon.mimesisjournals.com/archive/2023/spring/Neobaroque.pdf>, DOI: 10.7413/18258630137.

Please note that this URL is fixed, since it belongs to *ILAe's* archived edition. This allows readers to quote a stable document for academic purposes.

This entry also belongs to the sixth volume of *ILAe's* printed edition. Each issue of this edition collects the *ILAe's* Spring and Autumn online editions per year. The proper reference of the printed edition is:

A. Montefameglio, *Neobaroque*, "International Lexicon of Aesthetics", Vol. 6, Milano, Mimesis, 2024.