

# **Baroque**



## **The Baroque: A Term of Art**

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## Abstract

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The spiritual torsion and material complexity so characteristic of Baroque aesthetics is something that extends to (or perhaps, better, issues *from*) the intension of the term itself. This much is evident in the sense that, since the twentieth century, various projects have proposed such notions as a medical-baroque, a postcolonial-baroque, and a digital-baroque. Beyond any given object of analysis, then, in this way the Baroque adduces the concepts by which any inquiry into objects might take place. As such, the Baroque can be said to be that which signals the ongoing relation of thought to the world, of 'the inside' to 'the outside' (while at the same time problematising the priority of either side over the other). Indeed, following certain post-Kantian readings of Leibnizian philosophy, the Baroque is to be regarded not so much as something to be understood but rather as a frenzied development of the understanding itself.



No matter the putative object of any art-historical classification — whether a period, a general style, or an individual artefact — one reason why the term ‘Baroque’ continues to provoke interest is that it is at once something encountered with regard *to* things, and, at the same time, something employed in the discussion *of* things. Indeed, in this way — when “thought ceases to move in the element of resemblance”<sup>1</sup> — the Baroque could quite literally be said to be both (*à la fois*) *une Mot* et *une Chose*.

As has been shown, support for such a conceit (of the legible *together with* the visible, for example) finds support from no less an undertaking than the great study of the *concetto* undertaken by Emanuele Tesauro in his 1654 *il Cannocchiale aristotelico*<sup>2</sup> — a work which evidences the Baroque realisation that language itself is not simply a vehicle for thought but rather its very motor or orientation. Accordingly, while the Baroque may well involve received and familiar questions of cognition, as the homonymous problem of *philosophical* aesthetics its

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1 Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (London: Routledge, 1970), 56.

2 Umberto Eco, “The Scandal of Metaphor: Metaphorology and Semiotics,” trans. Christopher Paci, *Poetics Today* 4, no. 2 (1983): 217–257; Eugenio Donato, “Tesauro’s *il Cannocchiale aristotelico*,” *Stanford Italian Review* 5 (1985): 101–114; Jean-François Groulier, “Concetto,” in *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*, ed. Barbara Cassin and trans. Steven Rendall, Christian Hubert, Jeffrey Mehlman, Nathanael Stein, and Michael Syrotinski, translation ed. Emily Apter, Jacques Lezra, and Michael Wood (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 166–169; Herbert H. Knecht, *La Logique Chez Leibniz: Essai Sur Le Rationalisme Baroque* (Lausanne: L’Age D’Homme, 1981).

understanding is one that is not only occupied by the (transcendental) relation of concepts to objects but also with the requirements and very nature of this relation — in other words, with the sheer generation of concepts (the reality of which is not given according to the conditions of possible intuitions).

To be sure, Kant himself, with a passing reference in his third *Critique* to “the Baroque taste in furniture”, attests to a certain “free play of presentational powers” whereby the imagination is unconstrained by any rule required by the understanding.<sup>3</sup> And yet, Kant continues, although we may be charmed by such encounters when the mind is “continually being aroused by the diversity [Mannigfaltigkeit] that strikes the eye” — just as “when we watch, say, the changing shapes [Veränderlichen Gestalten] of the flames in a fireplace or of a rippling brook”<sup>4</sup> — variability itself, strictly speaking, precisely insofar as it admits of no constraint by any rule of cognition, cannot be an object of experience. The reason for this, Kant insists, rests on an important distinction: “we must distinguish beautiful objects from beautiful views [Aussichten] of objects (where their distance [Entfernung] prevents us from recognizing them distinctly)”<sup>5</sup>.

As something that draws upon but ultimately exceeds any Kantian warrant, then, the Baroque may well be recognized as the iconic characterization of variability even if, in the end, this cannot legitimately be said to designate anything beyond its own mesmerizing labyrinth (one that includes not least of all its very name) — a sensibility that is only ever impressionistic and constituted by certain discursive associations that are “either words, or visible (algebraic or even mimetic) signs and they merely *express* concepts”<sup>6</sup>. What remains, then, is to remark upon the field of such concepts (concepts not of objects of possible experience but of sheer associative variability) and how the distance [Entfernung]

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3 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment, Including the First Introduction*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 93. First published 1790.

4 Kant, *Critique of Judgment, Including the First Introduction*, 95; Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam, 1963), 132–133. First published 1790.

5 Kant, *Critique of Judgment, Including the First Introduction*, 94; Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, 132.

6 Kant, *Critique of Judgment, Including the First Introduction*, 227; Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, 306.

brought about by our outlook [*Aussicht*] on objects is something that involves the generation rather than the privation of cognition.

To be sure, the canonical understanding of the Baroque is the archetypal expression of the agitation so characteristic of the seventeenth century sensibility. This much, at least, is what has conventionally been recognized in the emblematic works of Bernini, Borromini, and Caravaggio which exhibit and give dramatic figuration to the frenetic tension between, on the one hand, a providential or redeemed order of things and, on the other hand, their profane subjection to this world's caducity: an utter entropy. This much can be seen in the "use of limestone to produce spongy, cavernous shapes, or to constitute a vortical form always put in motion by renewed turbulence, which ends only in the manner of a horse's mane or the foam of a wave; matter tends to spill over in space, to be reconciled with fluidity at the same time fluids themselves are divided into masses", as Deleuze writes<sup>7</sup>, after Wölfflin.

Yet no matter how acute the actual historic experience of the challenge to traditional (theological) Reason brought about by the burgeoning empirical sciences — that is to say: regardless of the ubiquitous cherubs, clouds, and divine rays of light — the singular tension expressed by the Baroque is not one whose definition is exhausted by that century's own paroxysms of religious art. Instead, and noting the functionalism taught by Kantian transcendental thought, perhaps the inveterate questions that the Baroque occasions<sup>8</sup> might be rephrased and thereby understood in such a way that what is to be proposed is an account of its roles rather than its essence.

Indeed, even since the neo-Baroque revivalism of the late Nineteenth-Century, a *Digital Baroque*<sup>9</sup> has recently been proposed for the anxiety of our very own

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7 Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, trans. Tom Conley (London: Athlone Press, 1993), 4.

8 Jean Rousset, "Peut-on Définir Le Baroque?" in *Actes Des Journées Internationales D'études du Baroque du Montaubon* (Toulouse: La Faculté des Lettres et Sciences Humaines de Toulouse, 1965), 19–23; Pierre Mesnard, "Existe-t-il Une Philosophie Baroque?" in *Actes Des Journées Internationales D'études du Baroque du Montaubon* (Toulouse: La Faculté des Lettres et Sciences Humaines de Toulouse, 1965), 37–42.

9 Timothy Murray, *Digital Baroque: New Media Art and Cinematic Folds* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

times — an era in which the new media proliferation of data and networked-communications have sought to respond to, or even compensate for, the loss of ‘metanarratives’<sup>10</sup>. In this way, recasting Wölfflin’s seminal analyses, perhaps it is as much the case that the Baroque is a contrast between the *high and the low*, *light and shadow*, or *inside and outside* as simply the fact of the dissimulation of the *here and now*. And if this is in turn a question of how the infinite might be given finite expression, let alone determination, then perhaps the Baroque is the (apprehensive, and inescapable) comprehension, or even the *realisation*, of the ungroundedness of things; a fragmentary, dissipative or metastable unity, as noted by the early German Romantics (“no longer... ontology but ‘logology’”)<sup>11</sup>.

In much the same way, classically speaking, to speak of the Baroque as a ‘unity’ is to speak at once of a *pan* and a *holon*<sup>12</sup> (an “odd” or “peculiar term” indeed<sup>13</sup>, for even if “the cosmic spectacle of matter jostling in the void is unsettling in the extreme... it also happens to lend itself to poetic description”<sup>14</sup>). The reason for this is that the Baroque is not so much a concept (*for* an object) as the *name* of a concept or, as Sauvagnargues has suggested in Kantian terms, the production of an original rule<sup>15</sup>. Further to this, and even if Kant would have abjured as much as an ontological claim, the Baroque could be understood to be a concept *without* an object — a pure predicate, an unschematised intuition, or, once again, after the ancients and since Panofsky, an ‘Idea’.

For even though the project of a Critical development of thought would ultimately discount the impudence of such an understanding, Kantian

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10 Christine Buci-Glucksmann, *The Madness of Vision: On Baroque Aesthetics*, trans. Dorothy Z. Baker (Athens, Oh: Ohio University Press, 2013); Gregg Lambert, *The Return of the Baroque in Modern Culture* (London: Continuum, 2004); Mieke Bal, *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

11 Barbara Cassin, *Sophistical Practice: Toward a Consistent Relativism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 2.

12 Cassin, *Sophistical Practice: Toward a Consistent Relativism*, 45.

13 Ada Bronowski, *The Stoics on Lekta* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 348–349.

14 James I. Porter, *The Origins of Aesthetic Thought in Greece: Matter, Sensation, and Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 166.

15 Anne Sauvagnargues, “Le Goût Baroque Comme Détermination D’un Style: Wölfflin, Deleuze,” *Appareil* 9 (2012): 5.

terminology might yet be repurposed to serve as a propaedeutic for philosophy (a prolegomennon, as it were, for any future transcendental philosophy). In this way, the familiar aesthetic register of the Baroque would be extended to obtain in terms of philosophical analysis and dialectics. In other words, rather than being understood as a canon for art-history — that is, as some sort of measure or standard (κανών) which might be applied to *objects* or used to relate thoughts (of objects) to *one another* — the Baroque is itself would be understood as an organon for making sense of things at all.

Key to this employment of signature Kantian vocabulary in the recalibration of transcendental philosophy is the figure of Leibniz who, according to Deleuze, can well be considered as the Baroque thinker *par excellence* — the one who “provides the philosophy it lacks”<sup>16</sup>. The reason for this is that Leibniz’s understanding of predication is as much metaphysical as logical. Significantly, a similar observation is made by Walter Benjamin in the study that Deleuze cites as being so integral to the understanding of the Baroque as an allegorical development of concepts *without* objects. What strikes Benjamin<sup>17</sup>, just as it would Deleuze, is §8 of the *Discourse on Metaphysics* where Leibniz held “that all true predication has some basis in the nature of things... so that one who understands perfectly the notion of the subject would also know that the predicate belongs to it”<sup>18</sup>. For both Benjamin and Deleuze, then, neither the subject of any thought nor (the ontology of) any thinking subject enjoys a unity of representation or cognition with regard to objects since the latter has become hallucinatory; instead, concepts are discursively replete with predicates which are oriented no longer simply according to what can be proposed in any logical order but rather and quite simply (in the sense of being indivisible) to the *metaphysical* order of things.

As an organon of thought, then, in this way it can be said that the Baroque is not just a term of art-history but also one of natural-history — indeed as Benjamin

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16 Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, 33, 126.

17 Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (New York: Verso, 2003), 47.

18 G. W. Leibniz, *Philosophical Essays*, trans. and ed. Roger Ariew and Daniel Garber (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989), 41.

held, developing an analysis by Hausenstein, “Baroque naturalism is ‘the art of least distances’”<sup>19</sup>. The import of this is that, rather than being just another term ‘of art’, the ‘Baroque’ is, as the phrasing goes, ‘a term of art’ — that is to say, an indivisible unity of thought in the sense of such seminal philosophical notions as ‘substance’, ‘knowledge’, ‘perception’, ‘understanding’, ‘(sufficient) reason’, and ‘transcendental’ — although, unlike the symbolism of Kantian thought, one that is not governed by analogy.<sup>20</sup> In other words, as the name of that form of predication which, according to Leibniz, involves the “nature of things”, the Baroque is quite literally, or rather, etymologically, *poetic*, in that its very concept is to be forever created or *made* anew (“because of the poverty of the language and the novelty of the matters”, as the author of *De rerum natura* wrote at the outset of his own project<sup>21</sup> or, as has been observed more recently, since “the more technical the vocabulary of a philosophy, the closer that philosophy seems to come to [s’orienter] art”<sup>22</sup>).

That many art-historical commentaries on the Baroque have been vexed not only by the application of this concept but even by its very definition (an irregular pearl, a figure in the scholastic nomenclature of the syllogisms) attests to the frenetic, hallucinatory, and poetic character of its predication; for what makes the Baroque itself significant is less a case of whatever it ‘is’ but what it allows us ‘to say of’ things. This is why, for Deleuze, the remarkable quality of Baroque perspective or point of view is that it involves the “truth of relativity (and not a relativity of what is true)”<sup>23</sup>. For following Leibniz’s formulation, and as Tesauro noted in his kaleidoscopic reading of Aristotle, subjects are to be truly understood only in variegated relation to everything that can be said of

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19 Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 66.

20 Kant, *Critique of Judgment, Including the First Introduction*, 227–228.

21 Lucretius, *De rerum natura*, trans. W. H. D. Rouse (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), 15.

22 Yvon Belaval, *Philosophers and Their Language*, trans. Norbert Guterman (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1966), 132; Yvon Belaval, *Les Philosophes et Leur Langage* (Paris: Gallimard, 1952), 193.

23 Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, 21.



them (their *praedicatorum*): an atomic or elemental, rather than straightforwardly propositional, or even combinatorial, syllogistic.<sup>24</sup>

Moreover, and at the same time, it might be said not only that the Baroque requires this conception of things but that (in an era of acute, complex, and unpredictable ecological change coupled with inter-connected convulsions of political turmoil) so do we. As the name for the predicative relation of various subjects to the “nature of things”, the Baroque provides an example of how certain identities might yet be conceived. For rather than seeking to propose a definitive account of humans’ relation to the environment or even of various types of human (according to received understandings of, say, ethnicity or gender) these definitions are themselves to be forever formulated rather than thought according to certain already understood forms. What can be ‘said of’ things is not regulated by the logic of what these things are (thought to be); rather their very understanding is *yet* to be thought or conceived since, metaphysically, “all true predication has some basis in the nature of things” — and the latter, at least for humans, cannot be known without the perfection of an infinite understanding.

This much is seen in various postcolonial readings of the Baroque<sup>25</sup> but also, as indicated, in various critical re-readings of antiquity. To do so, to stress the contested character of identity, in this way not only avoids the philosophical chauvinism about thinking order according to certain received categories and intuitions of precedence but so too equips the political affirmation of other, radical, categories with the resources to be more than just a protest. Moreover, in so doing, the originally aesthetic tenor of the Baroque is rethought — following the transcendental insight that the conditions of experience rather than objects of experience are primary — rethought so as to no longer obtain only logically but,

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24 Marko Malink, “Aristotle on Principles as Elements,” in *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, Volume 53, ed. Victor Caston (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 176; Michael Wigodsky, “Homoiotetes, Stoicheia and Homoiomereiai in Epicurus,” *Classical Quarterly* 57, no. 2 (2007): 525.

25 Edouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997). First published 1990; Lois Parkinson Zamora and Monika Kaup, eds., *Baroque New Worlds: Representation, Transculturation, Counterconquest* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

rather, also metaphysically (as having “some basis in the nature of things” which is not the same as what is, has, or can be claimed of them).

To think of the Baroque, then, may well involve the acquaintance with a familiar estimation of certain long-standing tensions inherent in the human condition, or of Reason’s ultimate justification, which is manifest so strikingly in seventeenth century arts. But the Baroque itself is not simply a term of literary or art-historical taxonomies. For it names the concept of a subject’s yet-to-be-thought relation to the world, it names the understanding whose very predication identifies a subject as ‘this’ and ‘not-that’ — and stresses that such an identity is always in a process of formation. This much has been recognized in the recognition of a digital-, postcolonial-, and even a medical-Baroque.<sup>26</sup> Rather than simply a further classification or description of cultural artefacts, then, in this way a uniquely philologico-aesthetic (or logological) understanding of the term ‘Baroque’ serves as a metaphysical illustration of how our relation to the world and to one another (the allegory, or conceit, of a “predication” which has “some basis in the nature of things”) can yet inform our concepts.

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26 Georges Canguilhem, *The Normal and the Pathological*, trans. Carolyn R. Fawcett in collaboration with Robert S. Cohen (New York: Zone Books, 1989); Henry E. Sigerist, “The Historical Aspect of Art and Medicine,” *Bulletin of the Institute of the History of Medicine* 4, no. 4 (1936): 271–297.

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