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**Baroque/Neobaroque/Ultrabaroque:  
Disruptive Readings of Modernity**

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(Translated by Gerardo Garza)

My song shall be a flood.

—Francisco de Quevedo

Allegories are, in the realm of thought,

what ruins are in the realm of things.

Hence, the baroque cult of ruins.

—Walter Benjamin

I am dressed in baroquism.

—Jacques Lacan

It seems to me that the laboratory of the future

is in Latin America, and that it is there

where one ought to think and experiment.

—Félix Guattari

**From Colonization of Imaginaries to the Post-Auratic Era:  
The Baroque Disruption**

**1. Accidentalism, *Difference*, and the Origin Myth**

As it is known, attempts to explain the term *baroque* etymologically have coincided in a double derivation of its meaning: one aspect recovers the name assigned to one of the argumentative forms (the baroque syllogism as “the prototype of absurd formalistic and scholastic reasoning” [Corominas 88]) while the other refers to a deformity, to an unfinished desire. As an allegorical introduction for a characterization of the American Baroque, this duality could be condensed in the following image, always brought to mind: A foreign particle becomes implanted into the corporeal substance of a mollusk, and it is slowly

surrounded by layers of nacre that develop into a pearl. Nevertheless, if in the process of its formation, the emerging jewel finds irregularities in the interior walls of the oyster, its potential circularity is disrupted. Imperfect, pathological, that deformed pearl evokes a sphericity never achieved: its slightly monstrous body is affirmed in the nostalgia of totality and perfection.<sup>1</sup> The baroque pearl is a melancholic, transubstantiated, impure being, saturated by matter. It is, at the same time, hybrid and palimpsest, a deformity conceived through the transgression of its own limits—something new, that results from the defensive struggle exercised by the body that receives the challenge of heterogeneity. As the product of a contradictory dynamics of absorption and resistance, the baroque pearl combines, in its process of formation, both the norm and its exception. This product, which is appropriated and deterritorialized by culture, is extracted from its natural habitat, turned into sumptuous merchandise, and integrated, in its doubly symbolic and real character, in the elites' imaginaries as well as in their spaces of social and material exchange.

The syllogistic meaning, as well as the one that refers to the imperfect pearl, includes the inescapable detonator of conflict: the irresistible, vainly hyperbolic, and not totally achieved rationality; and the logic of a formal existence that evokes precisely what "it lacks," sinks into its limits, and explores its own borders.

From this initial etymological digression I am interested in recovering what might be called *the logic of baroque disruption*, that is, its epistemological operational capacity with respect to the discourses that accompanied the entrance of Latin America to the successive instances of globalized modernity.<sup>2</sup> This implies, in the first place, the understanding of the constitutive paradox of baroque aesthetics: the one that marks it as one of the principal mechanisms in the processes of transculturation implemented in America by Spanish colonialism, and that, at the same time, recognizes in the Baroque a fundamental piece in the process of construction of differentiated cultural identities in overseas territories. Thus, power and resistance, identity and difference, rationalist excess and sensorial extravagance are articulated, from the beginning, in the over-codified registry of baroque aesthetics, which was imposed on American territories as an instrument of domination and colonization on colonial imaginaries. Secondly, my research seeks to ascertain the cultural, historical, and ideological transformations of the baroque paradigm that extends, through continuities and ruptures, from the humanistic enclaves of the viceregal period up to what might be called the post-auratic—postmodern, postcolonial—era, one that would correspond to the establishment of the Ultrabaroque.<sup>3</sup>

In this sense, I propose to read the Baroque as the allegorical reproductibil-

ity of the struggles of power that are inherent in the process of insertion of the American world in the context of Occidentalism. Elsewhere I have referred to the processes of appropriation of the baroque code in the colonies, as well as the functions it assumes with respect to the processes of emergence of Creole consciousness in the "New World."<sup>4</sup> In that analysis I mainly emphasized the way in which the Baroque, which is introduced in America with the propagandistic, mass-oriented, and popular dimension analyzed by José Antonio Maravall for the case of Spain, is co-opted by the Creole agenda. In effect, in the same manner in which the materials of construction and the climates of America imposed onto the architectural Baroque lines, colors, and structures that were alien to European models, the residue of pre-Hispanic cultures colonized the visual and linguistic spaces of metropolitan Baroque with images, words, and messages that transcended and re-signified the canonical norms. In this sense, one might say that the Baroque of the Indies implements, more than the mimesis, the mimicry of hegemonic imaginaries.<sup>5</sup>

The adoption of the Baroque in America is not, therefore, just a moment of appropriation or recycling of the imperial aesthetics, but a process of cannibalization in which the sumptuous, symbolic merchandise of the colonizers turns into a *barrueca* anomaly—deformed pearl—in its contact with the social body that receives it. The anomalous or monstrous is the mark of an American *difference* that resists the perfection of the sphere, and, in addition, refutes the universality of its aesthetic value restoring in its place its singularity and contingency. In this way, American "accidentalism" opposes the modernizing and Eurocentric "Occidentalism" and reverts it. The prestigious wit of Sor Juana turns her into someone who must assume a masculine appearance in order to survive: "me obligaron a malear la letra porque decían que parecía letra de hombre" (they forced me to corrupt my handwriting because they said that it looked like masculine handwriting), she says in the so-called "Carta de Monterrey" (de la Cruz 17). Juan Ruiz de Alarcón's hump visualizes his hybrid identity, one that is impacted by deterritorialization. The purple facial blemish that characterizes the *mestizo* Juan de Espinosa Medrano, *El Lunarejo*, underscores the anomaly of his sermons, which were preached in Quechua from the pulpit of Cuzco, and the disruptive value of his complaints about the relegation of the learned Creole that he includes in his brilliant study of the Gongorine aesthetics. These symbolic marks of American *difference*—to which critics have conferred an iconic importance, understanding them as signs of a conflicted socialization—point to the understanding of America as a space of contaminating and transformative exchanges, where the cultural logic of the dominator acquires new meaning as it is reformulated from, and in spite of, the positions of subalternity and mar-

ginalization imposed on Creole subjects by the practices of colonialism.<sup>6</sup> The “deformation” that takes place in the American Baroque—its *ab-normality*, its anamorphous nature, its *monstrosity*—is, therefore, “*de-monstration*” (“[in the Baroque] the monster is essentially a visual entity: monster, ‘mostrar’ (to show), demonstrate” [González-Echeverría, *Celestina’s Brood* 165]).

In this way, an art like the Baroque, which is exported from the metropolis as a mechanism of homogenization in accordance with the unifying plans of imperial Spain—“One God, one king, one language”—becomes, in its colonial re-production, a hybrid product, refolded upon the heterogeneity that it seeks to reduce, and unfolded from the parameters of “high” culture toward the popular horizons of the American difference and heterogeneity. It would be impossible to recognize the countercultural meaning that the appropriations of the Baroque acquire in the colonies without the recognition of this *agency* from which colonial subjects appeal not just to the re-*production* of imperial protocols, but above all, to the proactive-*production* of a performativity that carries those models to the extreme in the process of their reconversion. Consequently, without the recognition of that cultural and political agency, it will also be impossible to evaluate in depth this foundational instance of the process of identity formation, both in itself and in relation to the development of Latin American culture in later centuries.

In its Latin American formulations, the baroque aesthetics appears to reformulate in multiple ways *the myth of origin*. In fact, we can ask ourselves: Where does America’s consciousness begin? Where can one locate the traditions that feed the production of meanings that modernity sets in motion in order to legitimize the legacies of colonialism and domesticate the resistances to it? Are they in the pre-Hispanic cultures or in the discovery, in the classical and post-Renaissance traditions, in Counter-Reformation thought, in the emancipation and emergence of national cultures, or in the influences of Enlightenment and the establishment in Latin America of liberal, bourgeois modernity? Which contents become incorporated and which are displaced by the postcolonial subjectivity in the processes of formation of social identities? Which cultural contents are articulated in this process, and in what hierarchical order? But, above all, how do the voices that do not find representation in discourses of power speak in the imaginaries of the various Latin American modernities? And in that significant symbiosis, how does the neocolonial condition of Latin America play in imaginaries that constantly evoke both the violence originated by the conquest and the violence that is also inherent to European domination in postcolonial, transnational settings? In which way and to what degree does

the baroque aesthetics play a role in the construction of emancipatory projects in Latin America? How is the baroque model articulated to the agendas of gender, to antiauthoritarian and re-democratizing thought, and to the vindication of marginal subjects? How do historical variations as well as political and cultural circumstances become incorporated in scenarios of symbolic representation in which the Baroque prevails as a constant referential focus of postcolonial subjectivity, “like the building principle governing the behavior and social objectives that in the midst of their heterogeneity reveal a co-membership among themselves, a diffuse but unmistakable parentage” (Echeverría, *Modernidad, mestizaje cultural* 14, my translation)?

For Octavio Paz, the Baroque—a style that is conceived as a transgression of the Renaissance and as an essentially paradoxical form—is situated in the origins of American expressivity, because it is assimilated from the colony to the “existential anxiety” of Creole subjects. According to Paz, “there was a profound psychological and spiritual correspondence between Creole sensibility and the baroque style. It was the style that [the Creole society] needed, the only one that could express its contradictory nature” (26). For Carlos Fuentes, the Baroque is also an inescapable style, though for different reasons: it provides the possibility of disguising the face and expressing ambiguous identities, trapped by the imperial domination and sheltered through the Baroque in the “art of abundance based on need and desire; an art of proliferations founded on insecurity, rapidly filling all the gaps of our personal and social history.” Fuentes adds: “the Baroque is the art of displacements, similar to a mirror in which we are constantly able to see our mutant identity” (206). The Baroque is the gaze that focuses on itself but discovers, at the same time, *another* look, in the process of that original *de-monstration* that reveals the first instances of individual and social (self-) recognition.

When examining in detail this kind of genealogical analysis that has guided an extensive part of studies on the Baroque, Carlos Rincón notices that, in some cases, the appropriations or re-productions of the Baroque constitute an attempt to find in this consecrated aesthetics roots that could render prestige and authenticate subsequent cultural developments in Latin America. For instance, according to some critics (e.g., Pedro Henríquez Ureña, Luis Alberto Sánchez) the Baroque would be a historical antecedent of the modern Latin American narrative. The relapses of the Baroque are read, then, as transhistorical recurrences. In other cases (e.g., José Lezama Lima, Alejo Carpentier), the baroque tradition allows us to understand the cultural history of Latin America in a more integrated and global manner, thus overcoming restrictive models such as those

of identity, culture, or the *national* literary canon (the Baroque is interpreted, then, as an American phenomenon, that is, as a migrant, totalizing, and transnationalized model of symbolic representation).<sup>7</sup>

As part of his project to identify the foundations that give rise to an expressive form that we could recognize as *specifically Latin American*, Alejo Carpentier conceptualizes the Baroque as a style that is bound to the expressive requirements of *American* elements. The Baroque constitutes, therefore, a *necessary*—inescapable—style that explains and projects into the future the adoption of those specific forms of aesthetic codification, thus naturalizing a tradition that continues to feed and legitimize literary forms in the twentieth century. For Carpentier, the expansion of the baroque phenomenon not only manifests itself at the geo-cultural level, but also at the transhistorical, temporal level:

Barocos fuimos siempre y barrocos tenemos que seguirlo siendo, por una razón muy sencilla: que para definir, pintar, determinar un mundo nuevo, árboles desconocidos, vegetaciones increíbles, ríos inmensos, siempre se es barroco. Y si toma usted la producción latinoamericana en materia de novela, se encontrará con que todos somos barrocos. El barroquismo en nosotros es una cosa que nos viene del mundo en que vivimos: de las iglesias, de los templos precortesianos, del ambiente, de la vegetación. Barocos somos y por el barroquismo nos definimos. (cited by Rincón, "La poética" 176)

(We were always baroque and we have to continue being baroque, for a very simple reason: in order to define, paint, determine a new world, unknown trees, incredible vegetation, immense rivers, one is always being baroque. And if you take the Latin American production in matters of the novel, one will find that we are all baroque. For us, the baroque style is something that comes to us from the world in which we live: from the churches, from the pre-colonial temples, from the ambience, from nature. We are baroque and by the baroque style we define ourselves.)

In this way, for several authors, either in a historicist reflection or in one of a geo-cultural character, the Baroque is re-signified through interpretations that bind this aesthetic model to multiple strata: to the qualities of the American nature, to the conformation of the bourgeois culture (urban and liberal), or to the hybrid and fragmented continental identity. This identity, which although it is often essentialized by liberal criticism, takes part in processes of socio-cultural (self-) recognition that were affected, from the colony to modernity, by the material and symbolic violence of European colonization and the subsequent modernizing instances. The problem is how the Latin American artist manages to assume, from his/her peripheral and dependent circumstance, that

foundational violence, and how he/she represents, in a symbolic manner, all subsequent stages of American coloniality. Finally, this also poses the question of how baroque reappearances can be understood, as the Baroque continues to appeal, from the symbolic locations that were once occupied by the old Empire, to the aesthetics of saturation and proliferation, in order to reshape the utopia of definitive emancipation.

The interpretations of the Baroque and its more current manifestations in Latin America constitute, therefore, the history of the re-appropriations and re-significations of the European model, both from an aesthetic and an ideological perspective. From this point of view, Carpentier's quote takes on a new meaning, one that suggests a much more programmatic and complex significance than the one that might have inspired the Cuban author at the moment of his reflections. Perhaps it is precisely the perpetuation and the recycling of the Baroque that is the most clear proof of the persistent dialogue between Latin American postcolonial cultures and the "perverse modernity" imposed in overseas territories both in colonial and in contemporary times, which has resulted, then and now, in the configuration of heterogeneous, peripheral, and hybridized models of symbolic representation. And perhaps it is precisely from the residue of colonization and the subsequent reality of a perpetuated or surviving coloniality ("colonialidad supérstite") mentioned by Mariátegui in his *Seven Essays*, that the implication of the process of absorption and implementation of the Baroque in America could be thoroughly analyzed, both in the colonial and contemporary eras. In this sense, Bolívar Echeverría indicates that the baroque model puts forward, even in its more current forms, "an original dramaticity" (*Modernidad, mestizaje cultural* 25) that would explain its transgressive mode, its constant symbolic and ideological influence, and its functional character, within so many diverse cultural contexts. In my opinion, this is also why it is necessary to historicize its constant reappearances, without being tempted to explain the relapse of the Baroque as a merely mechanical survival of the remote, but better yet as a *return of the repressed*, that is, as the obsessive resurgence of a sensibility that the narratives and practices of modernity have suppressed, marginalized, and turned invisible.

Aside from the foundational moments that would correspond to the first stages of Westernization in the colonial period, and concentrating now on the more current critical revisions of the legacies of Enlightenment and modernity, the question regarding the reasons that would explain the recurrences of the Baroque (that "cultural operator," according to Rincón) within so many different cultural and historical contexts acquires new validity.

## 2. Toward a Baroquization of Latin America?

It is obvious that the phenomenon of the reappearances of the Baroque has gone beyond the geo-cultural territories that we traditionally identify as the primary sites of baroque production in the Hispanic world. For many authors, the expansion of this aesthetic model already constitutes a transnational process of “baroquization without borders.” In his study titled “La curiosidad barroca,” José Lezama Lima acknowledges that in the twentieth century, once the neoclassic moderation that opposes the decorative excess of European Baroque as a superficial and degenerative form is overcome in America, the baroque aesthetics is reinstated at many different levels:

Se amplió tanto la extensión de sus dominios, que [el Barroco] abarcaba los ejercicios loyolistas, la pintura de Rembrandt y el Greco, las fiestas de Rubens y el ascetismo de Felipe de Champagne, la fuga bachtiana, un barroco frío y un barroco brillante, la matemática de Leibniz, la ética de Spinoza, y hasta algún crítico excediéndose en la generalización afirmaba que la tierra era clásica y el mar barroco. Vemos que aquí sus dominios llegan al máximo de su arrogancia, ya que los barrocos galerones hispanos recorren un mar teñido por una tinta igualmente barroca. (Lezama Lima 302)<sup>8</sup>

(The dominions of the Baroque extended so much that they included the exercises of Loyola, paintings by Rembrandt and Greco, the festive representation in Rubens, and the asceticism of Felipe de Champagne, the Bachian fugue, a cold but also a brilliant Baroque, Leibniz's mathematics, Spinoza's ethics, and even a critic who, exceeding himself in the generalization of the term, stated that the earth was classical and the sea was baroque. There, we see that its dominions reach highest degrees of arrogance, since the Hispanic baroque galley covered a sea tainted by an equally baroque ink.)

In a similar radical sense, Adolfo Castañón sees the Baroque—“a cabalistic word that suggests both magic and enchantment”—as a stylistic symptom that crystallizes in artistic manifestations which are very dissimilar, both historically and culturally.

[E]n el árbol de Navidad del barroco encontramos suspendidas la Contrarreforma y los sonetos, la poesía metafísica inglesa (inspirada directamente en el sermón hispánico y portugués, según hace ver José Ángel Valente), la poesía desengañada y fría de un Quevedo, pero también la letrilla mordaz y salaz de Góngora y sus imitadores como el brasileño Gregorio de Matos, la pintura flamenca y los artistas

del claroscuro, la máquina de guerra jesuita y los claustros, el hedonismo y el masoquismo, la monarquía autoritaria y la semilla de los imperios de papel que hoy llamamos burocracia. (Castañón 1644–45)

(We find, hanging from the Christmas tree of the Baroque, the Counter Reformation as well as the sonnet, the English metaphysical poetry (directly inspired by the Hispanic and Portuguese sermon, as it has been shown by José Ángel Valente), the cold and disenchanted poetry of Quevedo, but also the scathing and salacious writing of Góngora and his imitators, like the Brazilian Gregorio de Matos, Flemish painting and the artists of chiaroscuro, the Jesuit war machine and the cloisters, hedonism and masochism, the authoritarian monarchy and the seed of administrative Empires that today we call bureaucracy.)

Serge Gruzinski has spoken about the “baroque planet,” whose very extensive specter would embrace, in a unifying and significant gesture, the grotesque and the sublime, the original centrality and its peripheral modalities, the manifestations of Humanism and the hybridity that characterizes the processes of transculturation. Gruzinski locates the baroque phenomenon within the extensive framework of “world transculturations” that in America's case are initiated with the “discovery.” The artistic nomadism, connected to the imperial expansions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, is part of the processes of transculturation that constitute early stages of globalization: “This premodern order, that has made us forget the triumph of the nation-states, is the origin of the baroque planet, its paradoxes and ambiguities” (Gruzinski, “El planeta barroco” 116). Hybrid and *mestizo* elements, which act as cultural interventions of Eurocentric modernity, create “the appearance of a planetary language” (Gruzinski, *El pensamiento mestizo* 40) that baroque reappearances reaffirm and reformulate through the epochs.

In this direction, the critics have persisted in identifying the lines of expansion of the Baroque which, aside from its canonical manifestations, extends transgressively through the most diverse mediations, creating a series of endless cultural flows that run across different media.<sup>9</sup> The Baroque appears in many different forms of symbolic and cultural production that converge on the global market. It can be seen in representations as diverse as the visual proliferation of Peter Greenaway and the compositive pastiche of Cindy Sherman, liturgical rituals and religious festivities, the representational exuberance that saturates public spaces and the decorative twists and turns that configure modern urban life and bourgeois intimacy. Other scenarios that have also been catalogued as baroque are, for instance, the dense settings of Luchino Visconti, the churrigueresque language—the horror of silence—of Cantinflas, Hollywood extrava-

ganzas, magical realism, kitsch—which Calinescu recognized as one of the “five faces of modernity”—and the “Eden-like industry” (Monsiváis) where tapestries and folkloric artifacts offer to the consumer of the “popular” the aesthetic value of what is *dissimilar* as the paradigmatic expression of what in every culture is, in a final analysis, *differential* and not transferable. Finally, in the settings of postmodernity, the Baroque is inserted in the virtuality of cyberspace, which saturates with the obscenity of over-representation and extreme availability of messages, and with the multiple temporalities that modernity had ordered in a historical, linear, progressive, teleological course, and that now are displaced and endlessly rearticulated in a communicative carnivalization.

My research turns away, nevertheless, from the mere registry of the epiphenomenal dispersion of the Baroque in the diversity of cultures. In a study that follows a direction different to the one I am proposing here, Omar Calabrese, for example, illustrating the aforementioned interpretations of the Baroque, has analyzed the ample field of formal and compositive moments that would make it possible to understand the Neobaroque as a “sign of the times.” In *Neobaroque: A Sign of the Times*, Calabrese alludes to the Neobaroque as an “aesthetic of repetition” that would characterize the “contemporary taste binding objects and phenomena that go from the natural sciences up to phenomena of mass communication, from art products to everyday habits” (xi). The Neobaroque covers, in his analysis, an ample specter that includes from chaos theory and the theory of catastrophe to the experiences of consumption and some specific philosophical elaborations of contemporary times. Therefore, all the fields of knowledge and cultural phenomena would be united, according to Calabrese, by a recurrent *motif* that confers to them an *air of familiarity* supported on the common traits of instability, polydimensionality, and change (xii). Calabrese calls *neobaroque* that substantial *form* that underlies the representational disparity of culture, and that functions as a principle of “abstract organization of phenomena, governing the system of its internal relations” (xiii).<sup>10</sup> The suggestive study of Calabrese dismisses, in a radical manner, the historicity and contingency of all cultural production in order to establish a transmediatic and transcultural perspective that approximates phenomena and fields of knowledge that, in fact, are only related by their semiotic behavior and their contemporaneity. It is as if the advent of postmodernity had resulted in the spontaneous reappearance of formal and conceptual reactivations that, for some reason never explained, became particularly popular and efficient in the task of capturing and re-presenting the spirit of the times. Calabrese distances himself explicitly from all possible historicification of the (neo) Baroque, indicating that the adoption of the term is just conventional, a “label” that allows him to qualify his analysis,

and to differentiate the phenomena he focuses on the characteristics that have been adjudicated to postmodernity, in the attempt to understand culture, even now, as an organic totality. He clarifies, in this sense, that “it is not a question of going back to the Baroque” (xii). He is, instead, identifying a recurrence (a relapse or *retombée* in the sense used by Sarduy and recovered by Calabrese [11]).<sup>11</sup> He refers, then, not so much to a *style* or a form of *sensibility*, but to a *cultural behavior* that interconnects, in diverse contexts, varied and heterogeneous textualities, from science to art. The interpretative strategy of Calabrese is only possible from the total abstraction and universalization of the features that he identifies as inherent traits of baroque aesthetics (which he characterized as a “spirit of the epoch”). He does not propose to problematize the ideological value of those operations of aesthetic reappropriation—just to register and interpret them synchronically.

My intention here is, rather, to understand baroque relapses taking into consideration the processes by which American societies were introduced to the dominant paradigms of Occidentalism during the first modernity, which corresponds to the period of viceregal consolidation in the “New World,” when a *differentiated* social consciousness crystallized within Creole society. It is clear that the case of the Baroque challenges the critical strategies that associate established forms of collective sensibility and symbolic representation with the particulars of a specific historical-political moment. The dissemination of the Baroque confronts us, rather, with the challenge of interpreting transhistorical reappearances of representational paradigms that connect with foundational cultural and ideological matrices of historical consciousness. In this sense, the history of the Baroque implies an unfinished series of aesthetic accounts, an always renovated succession of symbolic and allegorizing narratives that cover the cultural history of Latin America with an obsessive recurrence. From that highly formalized repertory which, at the same time, presents an overflowing abundance of subject matters and formal representational strategies, these *accounts* interrogate—interpellate—the different stages of continental development. These *accounts* pose questions that point to the relation between subject, power, and representation, to the *possible* agency that neocolonial subjects can develop in the context of modernizing projects, and to the possibilities of articulation of utopian and emancipatory spaces within diverse social and political contexts characterized by the fragmentation of the public sphere.<sup>12</sup>

Starting with a critical revision of what we could call *the question of the Baroque*, this study attempts, then, to provide some basis for an understanding of the proliferating disseminations of the Baroque: its aesthetic and ideological ubiquity and its constant processes of re-signification at different symbolic and

cultural levels. In fact, we could begin by posing a series of critical interrogations: What parameters of aesthetic and ideological evaluation should one turn to in the effort to understand the tormented art—the “creative leprosy”—of Aleijadinho, or the artistic syncretism of the mulatto Juan Correa, or the Indian Kondori, generally quoted as examples of subaltern appropriations of baroque aesthetics? How does one explain, from the perspective of postcolonial theory, and in the particular case of Latin America, the reappearances of an aesthetic style of imperial origin that reemerges in the context of the Cuban Revolution, is reaffirmed in the settings of the post-dictatorships in the Southern Cone, and is reinstalled in the fragmented settings of postmodernity, with all the formal and ideological variations that correspond to these diverse historical contexts? What sense does one assign to the reinscriptions of that particular art of writing and imagery in projects so dissimilar like the ones by Alejo Carpentier, José Lezama Lima, Severo Sarduy, Luis Rafael Sánchez, Néstor Perlongher, Marossa di Giorgio, and Pedro Lemebel? How does one read the innumerable gravitations of the critics toward the baroque paradigm? How does one interpret the Peronist and Lacanian Osvaldo Lamborguini who “turns into Baroque or messes up” (“embarroca o embarra,” Perlongher 27) the preserved space of Argentinean writing by reterritorializing in it an archaic, dissonant, and remote literary style? How does one understand current trends that transfer to the visual scenarios of our globalized postmodernity, techniques already explored by American artists since the seventeenth century, now recovered with the purpose of channeling, for instance, the sensibility of an “anomalous”—*in-between*—Latin culture in the United States, thus representing a transnationalized, de-centered, *out of place* post-identity—which will be, in turn, reterritorialized as simulacrum and pastiche in the allegorizing and symbolic space open by the Ultrabaroque?

Obviously, the heterogeneity presented by these cultural products requires an updated and flexible concept of art and culture. In this sense, it is worth remembering that since the works of Alejo Carpentier, the conception of the Baroque as utopian convergence of heteroclit elements resulted, in the first place, in the relativistic reevaluation of Eurocentric and humanistic centralism, and, secondly, in the vindication of America as an-*other* nucleus of the Western civilization, which was supposed to generate new meanings and incorporate the idea of *difference* into the concept of cultural identity. This is a nucleus, then, that generates forms of expression and representation that reveal new epistemologies constituting an alternative to the dominant ones, which have survived the ups and downs of modernization since the beginning of colonial times. A second effect resulting from this conception of the Baroque as a space of ar-

ticulation of dissimilar elements was the redefinition of both the concept of art and the notion of originality and aesthetic transcendence that are traditionally associated with it. All production is in the Neobaroque—*re*-production—and every art product is an artifact. Severo Sarduy acknowledged in his definition of the *Baroque*, that in this style, author and work are refunctionalized. In the process of de-auratization of art, *the copy* (which has been seen as one of the characteristic procedures present in the formation of neocolonial imaginaries) is not inferior to the original, but is rather situated in its own self-supporting epistemological space.<sup>13</sup>

The Neobaroque is not, in this sense, a *creative art*, but an *art of citation*. Recycling, pastiche, fragmentation, and simulacrum intervene the territory of cultural and historical memory, and reactivate it in combinations that are, at the same time, evocative and parodic. The Neobaroque gives momentum to the expansion of the concept of art, until it covers from textures and monuments of nature to the mobile sculptures by Alexander Calder and the *ready-made* by Marcel Duchamp, as it was noticed by Carlos Rincón in his studies on the genealogy of magic realism. Both pre-Hispanic art and Orientalism, the popular craftwork as well as “high” bourgeois culture, ecological elements as well the legacies of “ethnic” cultures, are not organized in the Neobaroque from the perspective of an *aesthetic of shock* which is typical of surrealism, but through processes of articulation that explore the conditions of possibility for the vindication of *dissimilarity*, i.e., of art products where the constituting elements interconnect in productive and unseen simultaneity. This new function of the aesthetic product that the “dialectic sensibility” of Carpentier recognizes (Rincón, “La poética” 28) makes it possible to explore, from another perspective, the relations between dominant and dominated cultures or, in other words, the dynamics between hegemony and subalternity. It also allows us to understand the production and reception of art as a tense process of continuous rediscovery and re-appropriation of imaginaries that coexist and struggle in the heterogeneous modernity of Latin America.

### 3. Modernity, Negativity, and the Baroque “Machine of Subjectivization”

Facing the challenge that the recurrences of the Baroque present to us—and referring here to both the representational persistence of this style and the constant gravitations of literary and artistic criticism toward this concept—it has been frequently suggested that the term *Baroque* has experienced, with time, a semantic erosion. According to some critics, the term should be reserved to

refer to the “purest” content of the word, the one that closely attaches it to post-Renaissance historicity and artistic production. Consequently, posterior reappearances of the Baroque are considered a banal and ludic perpetuation of an archaic aesthetics. In some cases, the Baroque is associated also with the ideas of decadent affectation, expressive depletion, and representational crisis. Jorge Luis Borges, for example, points out: “I would say that the Baroque is that style that deliberately exhausts (or wants to exhaust) its possibilities and that verges on its own caricature [. . .] I would say that the Baroque is the final stage of all art when this art exhibits and dilapidates its means” (9). The Baroque—or rather, here, the baroque style—is the expression of the limit: an expressivity situated at the abyss of irrepresentability, a language that looks toward silence.

In any case, it is obvious that the cultural-historical expansion of the Baroque and its capacity for aesthetic and ideological reformulation have constituted, through the centuries, a phenomenon that has put to the test—and sometimes, has gone beyond—traditional interpretative strategies that explore the correspondences—both punctual and mediated—between certain historical periods and specific aesthetic expressions. It is exactly that excessive quality which has made the critics gravitate toward the imperial imaginaries of the seventeenth century, suggesting that the new versions of Baroque aesthetics can only be understood as the result of vacating original models of their cultural and historical meaning. The Neobaroque would constitute, thus, from this perspective, a parodic, mannerist, and anachronic gesture traumatically fixed in the transcultured origin of societies dominated three centuries ago by European imaginaries.

In my opinion, the recurrences of the Baroque would require an analysis that, without de-historizing the processes of symbolic production and without sacrificing its various degrees and forms of socio-cultural materiality, would allow for an understanding of the continuous dialogue that the baroque aesthetics establishes not just with specific historical-political moments within the processes of consolidation of political and cultural power in Latin America, but rather—as I pointed out before—with wider and more basic cultural and ideological matrices that run across different periods of continental history. I am thinking, in particular, about the categories of *modernity* and *coloniality*, that could provide a solid point of departure for an exhaustive diachronic study of Latin America’s cultural history.<sup>14</sup>

Concurrently, when bringing up the concept of *negativity* in relation to the processes of modernization and with respect, also, to an aesthetics that, like the one of Baroque/Neobaroque, is associated with diverse stages of development in Latin America, I not only refer to the effects of inhibition and cancellation of

subaltern imaginaries that derive from the transculturating practices in colonial times. I also refer to the photographic *negative*, which reveals in a preliminary and ghostly manner the object of representation.<sup>15</sup> In respect to the first point, Maravall himself points out aspects of negativity in multiple manifestations of the peninsular Baroque. He makes reference, for instance, to social scenarios characterized by urban development and massive populations, where cities are the generating and disseminating nuclei of modernity. He alludes, for example, to the forms of urban and massive anonymity in the seventeenth century and to the loss of individual freedom (to the correlative acquisition, for example, of forms of “*negative freedom or exemption of controls*” [257, my emphasis]) that lead individuals to experiences of violence and feelings of melancholy. In the colonies, one could find innumerable examples of “negative freedom” and cultural devastation, which are the obvious consequences of the colonizing experience. With respect to the second point, in America the appropriations or co-optations of the Baroque, which result from processes of re-signification of hegemonic models of representation and social recognition, constitute a productive instance in which, as in a photographic *negative*, the existence of peripheral imaginaries is gradually revealed.

My suggestion here is that in America the Baroque channels through its belligerent, emancipatory, and vindicative quality—which I have analyzed in my studies on the Baroque of the Indies—forms of *disjunction* and *disruption* of modern consciousness. In this sense, I believe that the archaic quality channeled through the aesthetics of the Neobaroque functions as an efficient interrupter of the discourses that regulate and express the “incomplete” emancipation of modernity—if we want to adopt here, provisionally, a Habermasian perspective—through the different stages of integration of Latin America in globalized modernity. *Interruption*, but also *interpellation*—through the strategies of verbal and visual allegorization—de-naturalize the series of mass-produced messages that modernity administers as part of the plan of homogenization and centralization instituted in America since the so-called period “of viceregal stabilization” to the present.

This interpretation would require, at some point, a critical exploration of the applicability that sociohistorical analysis would have nowadays, in the particular case of Latin America. As it is well known, these positions efficiently canonized, at some point, the Hispanic Baroque as a hegemonic, aesthetic and ideological paradigm—as an *organic* model—of Spanish monarchical absolutism in its peak of imperial expansion in the seventeenth century. From this perspective, critics are prone to perpetuate a historicist—and diffusively *dependentist* interpretation—of the Neobaroque in the post (or neo) colonial context



that corresponds to an “emancipated” Latin America. It is worth remembering that José Antonio Maravall himself, the highest exponent of that critical orientation—perhaps in order to preserve the purity of his centralist cultural analysis—never incorporated in his studies on the “culture of the Baroque” its colonial manifestations. Nevertheless, he recognizes the incorporating capacity of the baroque paradigm. In his opinion, the Baroque behaves as a hegemonic ideology with the capacity to celebrate the established power as well as to integrate its “outlying areas” and channel, in several ways, the resistances that imperial power generated on “the ones down below.” As indicated by Maravall when analyzing the eminently urban (and in its way, modernizing) orientation of “the culture of the Baroque,” in Spanish seventeenth century:

los poderosos habitan [en la ciudad] y desde ella promueven el desarrollo de una cultura barroca en defensa de sus intereses; los de abajo se incorporan al medio urbano, los unos porque favorece sus posibilidades de protesta [. . .], los otros porque es allí donde los resortes culturales del Barroco les presentan vías de integración. (267)

(those in power lived in the city and from there, promoted the development of a baroque culture in defense of their own interests; those down below were incorporated into the urban milieu, some because it favored their possibilities of protest [. . .], others because that was where the cultural mechanisms of the Baroque presented them with means of integration.)

It will be precisely that incorporating capacity—that Maravall registers even though he does not foster it as a possible form of countercultural agency—that will allow the heterodox appropriation of the Baroque in America, as well as the factor that will catalyze, through the crevices of dogma and the fissures of its monumentalizing exhibitionism, the co-opting of the canonical model in the colonial world.

In its Janus-like character, the American Baroque constitutes precisely the *performance* that is correlative to the complex network of negotiations that take place in America between hegemony and subalternity, between autochthonous cultures and European traditions, between mimesis and mimicry, between power and desire, exploring—and exploiting—the *negative productivity* of that dominant representational aesthetics from the perspective of stratified subalternization. It is interesting to note how the reappearances of the Baroque after the colonial period will obsessively return to that *negativity* that already exists in the foundational stages of formation of Creole identity, re-presenting the contradictions that accompany the rising of American societies from the begin-

ning. It is precisely from the point of departure of this conflictive dynamics that is inherent to situations of colonial and neocolonial domination—which the Neobaroque tirelessly re-presents—that the American subject articulates itself to the successive modernizing instances that have been imposed, with reiterated alternation of promise and disenchantment, all throughout the cultural history of Latin America.

In the effort to make sense of the insistent reappearances of this imperial aesthetics in the scenarios of Latin American modernity, critics have attempted to interpret baroque recurrences in different ways. In some cases, they have essentialized the phenomenon; in other cases, they have interpreted it in a romantic, stereotypical, and individualistic manner. Nevertheless, these readings have been able to discover in the syncretic, radical nature of the Neobaroque, a creative response to the Eurocentric homogenizing drive that has characterized Latin American neocolonial history. Let us make reference to some of the landmarks of that elaboration.

In his studies on the American Baroque, mainly in *La expresión americana* (1957), José Lezama Lima reflects on the topic of continental identity taking as a point of departure the poetics of Góngora—which Lezama incorporates into his own creative style—that is, following in the footsteps of the Hispanic tradition and its transatlantic reverberations. He begins with the experiences of appropriation of the Baroque by Creole *letrados* who, by conquering the technologies of baroque representation, achieve a participating insertion in the dominant culture. Lezama proposes the image of the “señor barroco” (American baroque gentleman) as a paradigm of the transculturating instances that run across—and counteract, in their own way—the “tumult of the conquest” (230). For Lezama, the “triumph of the city” is, as for Maravall, the social and political phenomenon that creates the conditions of possibility for the installation of a symbolic “order.” Lezama assimilates this order with the American capacity of overcoming through culture, the irrationality of the colonialist depredation. For the Cuban writer, the protagonists—or we could say, perhaps, the agonists of that order—are, on one extreme, the Creole artist or *letrado*, that appropriates the instruments that metropolitan culture provides, and then subverts them by converting them in identity technologies who allow him/her to represent, with the language of the colonizer, American *accidentalism* (e.g., Sor Juana, Sigüenza y Góngora, Domínguez Camargo, etc.). In the other extreme, and following an impulse of culturalist romantization, Lezama turns his focus toward the American “plutonism” that merges the *organic* fragments of European repertoires into the metamorphosised, anomalous, hybrid, *Barroco mestizo*.<sup>16</sup> The Indian Kondori represents, for Lezama, the “Hispano-Incaic” side of

this production. In an exercise of Quechua-Spanish syncretism, Kondori installs in the facades of the churches of Potosi his hieratical figures of Incaic princesses that colonized the visual archive of the Peninsular missionary Baroque. In Brazil, the “creative leprosy” of the Afro-Brazilian Aleijadinho illustrates in turn the “Hispano-Negroid” synthesis (Lezama Lima 245) with sculptures and altars that populate stealthily the city of Ouro Prêto and its surroundings, during the mythic nights in which the creating spirit triumphs over the body corroded by sickness and colonial marginalization. The American Baroque is, then, according to Lezama, a repository in which the living forces of an inexhaustible cultural spirit are lodged. In this scenario, baroque aesthetics constitutes an alternative time-space, a “puro recomenzar” (pure starting over, Lezama Lima 232), a “plenary” form that although emerges from an original negativity, is not a “degenerative” modality but an efficient combination in which *tension* and *plutonism* are conjugated (meaning, *tension* as the expression of conflicts of power and epistemic struggle but, for Lezama, also *plutonism* as the synthesis that unifies, through the creative fire, dispersed fragments of meaning [229]). In his reading of the origin of American consciousness, Lezama considers the saturation of signs as a phenomenon of fusion that exceeds the underlying indigenous, African, or Peninsular traditions, in order to propose in its place a synthesis that is much more than the sum of its parts. Nevertheless, in this exercise Lezama discovers, on the one hand, a teleology (“an impulse turned toward the form, in search of the finality of its symbol” [Lezama Lima 231]) and, on the other hand, “the effort, as Dionysian as dialectic, of incorporating the world, of making the exterior world his own, through the transmutative furnace of assimilation” (235). But the Cuban writer takes just a marginal look at the conflictive political nature of those operations, at the economic structures that make those operations possible, and at the cultural matrices through which the symbolic and material domination of the American world are exerted. He sets aside, then, the agency of the colonized subjects who exist in several degrees of marginality (Creole, Indian, or Afro-American) and who are able, each one of them from his/her own specific epistemological and socio-cultural *locus*, of carrying out the appropriation and re-signification of acquired models as part of the dynamics of transculturation.

In any case, for Lezama Lima, the “counterconquest” of the American Baroque—that takes up again Weisbach’s idea of the “baroque as art of the Counter Reformation”—consists of reversing the constitutive negativity of the *Barroco de Estado* (Baroque of the State) referred to by Maravall. But, what is more important, Lezama Lima notices in the reappearances of the Baroque renovated attempts to establish a dialogue with the Eurocentric *grand nar-*

*ratives* taking precisely, as a point of departure, the archaic, transhistorical, and disruptive impulses of colonial Baroque.<sup>17</sup> The (Neo)baroque is proposed, then, paradoxically, not only as a mimetic impulse, but also as the aesthetics of (dis)integration: an expressive form that is essentially agglutinative and hybridized, and, at the same time, an art that, by evoking the origins of the imperial appropriation, explores the drama of colonialism and the possibilities of dis-aggregation and divergence—of de-totalization and fragmentation—of the models that represent absolute power and dogmatic truth.

Alejo Carpentier would undertake, on his part, a similar and at the same time differentiated search from the one that Lezama Lima carries out in *La expresión americana* and in his narrative, particularly in *Paradiso* (1966). The telluric and “ontological Baroque” of Carpentier (Moulin-Civil 1650 n. 5) persists, in the footsteps of Eugenio D’Ors, in the attempt to vindicate a beginning without origin, a continuity that farther away from the catastrophes of colonization, would allow a reading of the continental history as universal history or, better yet, as the history of multiple convergent universes, truthfully transnational and wishfully transhistorical:

Nuestro arte siempre fue barroco: desde la espléndida escultura precolombina y el de los códices, hasta la mejor novelística actual de América, pasando por las catedrales y monasterios coloniales de nuestro continente [. . .] No temamos, pues, al barroquismo en el estilo, en la visión de los contextos, en la visión de la figura humana enlazada por las enredaderas del verbo y de lo ctónico, metida en el increíble concierto angélico de cierta capilla (blanco, oro, vegetación, revesados, contrapuntos inauditos, derrota de lo pitagórico) que puede verse en Puebla de México o de un desconcertante, enigmático árbol de la vida, florecido de imágenes y de símbolos, de Oaxaca. No temamos al barroquismo, arte nuestro, nacido de árboles, de leños, de retablos y altares, de tallas decadentes y retratos caligráficos y hasta neoclasicismo tardíos, barroquismo creado por la necesidad de nombrar las cosas. (Carpentier, “Problemática” 32–33)

(Our art has always been baroque: from the splendid pre-Columbian sculpture and that of the codices, to the best current Latin American novel, through the colonial cathedrals and monasteries of our continent. [. . .] Let us not fear, then, the use of the Baroque in different styles, in the vision of scenarios or human figures bound by the bindweeds of the verb and of what is *ctónico*, fitted in the incredible angelic concert of a certain chapel (white, gold, vegetation, intricate, unprecedented counterpoints, defeat of all that is Pythagorean) as it can be seen in Puebla, Mexico or in an enigmatic, disconcerting tree of life, flourished in images and symbols from Oaxaca. Let us not fear the baroque style, an art that is ours, born out of trees, out

of wood, out of retables and altars, out of decadent carvings and calligraphic portraits and even late neoclassicism, baroque style created by the necessity to assign a name to things.)

In *Concierto barroco* (1974), a work inspired on the opera by Antonio Vivaldi titled *Moteczuma*, first performed in Venice in 1733, Carpentier puts in practice those theoretical principles, creating in the spectacular setting of language and phonetics, an impossible alliance where music and words, literature and history, modernity and pre-modernity are conjugated vertiginously. The text synchronizes and juxtaposes the cultural times and spaces of America and Europe, to exhibit the products of the bourgeois modernity saturated with merchandise and melancholy. Vivaldi's operatic Moctezuma overcomes the dimension of myth, becoming only an anachronistic mask (a sign *out of place*) that the Baroque convokes in order to explore the crossroads between "high" and popular culture, between the pre-Hispanic and the modern, emphasizing a utopian unity of heteroclitic elements that supports Carpentier's uncompromising Americanism. *Concierto barroco* proposes a harmonious combination of dissimilar elements, a "pluriversity" (as opposed to "universality") that makes it possible to integrate times, spaces, and cultural forms-epistemologies-in order to establish a Latin American utopia that is summarized in the words that the author puts in the Master's mouth, at the end of the work: "The future is fabulous."

In a more complex way, in Severo Sarduy, the neobaroque carnivalization becomes simulacrum, transvestism, and an affirmative performance of *difference*. It constitutes, at the same time, a process that transforms the negativity of what is missing—the lack, the desire, the abnormality—in original impulse, in the *locus* of the initial suppression/repression that can be hyperbolically filled with meaning and saturated with signs.<sup>18</sup> In his cosmological-linguistic conception of the Baroque as the Big-Bang—the explosion from which a new universe is created out of primordial emptiness—the image of the ellipse is recovered. This image suggests a deformed circle with two centers, one of which looks displaced, challenging the perfection of circularity, of an organized world that rotates around one unique nucleus that capitalizes the production of energy and meanings. This elliptic image could evoke the diagram of an imperial culture that is projected, in imperfect duplicity, in overseas peripheries, i.e., it could be interpreted as an allegorical—baroque reflection on that which is created in America departing from an initial emptiness: a movement of expansion and replica, mimesis and mimicry that inscribe in an irregular-differential-manner, and dominant imaginaries in the imagination of dominated subjects. In this way,

the baroque word and imagery hide and at the same time attract attention on the silence that precedes them. The whiteness of the page challenges and frames the writing that occupies it. The baroque object hides and ratifies the subject that creates it. The explosion of the sign gives origin to a new focus that packs space and time with meaning. The Baroque is a "proliferating focus" of infinite expansion that metaphorically names what lacked denomination and qualifies the indescribable. The baroque *meaning* is figurative, catachrestic, transitional, spurious, and anamorphic.

But in the theorization and in the writing practice of Severo Sarduy, the materiality of the baroque language reaches the transvestite materiality of the body and its attires. In the metamorphoses of his characters and in the eternal return of their intertwined and fragmented vicissitudes, the subject is deterritorialized (it loses its "existential territories" [Guattari 20], its identity of gender, its cultural, primordial roots), articulating unknown subject positions—that we could call *post-identitary*—in a pastiche that resembles the definitive exile of the subject from the certainties provided by modernity. "Poetics of deterritorialization, the Baroque always clashes and runs a preconceived and subduing limit" (Perlongher, "Prólogo" 20). In *Cobra* (1972) the simulacrum forever loses its contact with the original. The body is tortured and forced, an exceeding and insufficient evocation of an "original" form lost forever. *Maitreya* (1978) and *Co-librí* (1988) are also abundant in deformity and excess. The tortured, tattooed, monstrous bodies are in constant metamorphosis; they are vainly sacrificial and conceited (in this sense, they are at the same time excessive and residual, as the baroque pearl). Sarduy's essay writing as well as his narrative (characterized by Castañón as "erotic summary" [1647]) are an organized effort to counter Eurocentric universalism with a "pluriversal" vision. As Castañón puts it, "the body of the universe demands an integral reading that is also sensible and intellectually faithful to its essential polyformism" (1647). Heterogeneity and plurality are articulated in a constant process of rewriting, where the word questions itself and is constantly reformulated, dispersing and multiplying its meanings, canceling all possible forms of consensus and epistemological stability. The Neobaroque no longer encircles, as the copy/original of seventeenth century, "a buried truth" (Picón Salas 123), but dramatizes uncertainty and dis-identity; the word is neither a symbol nor yields to metaphorical strategies or mutations of meaning: it is only sign, impulse, and sound. What greater disbelief than this could have been orchestrated with respect to the supposed transparency and communicability of language as the rational instrument that allows to structure the social experience in the liberal and dependent modernity of Latin America? What greater dissidence with respect to the project of creating a "new" language

(for a “new man”), one that could socialize and regulate the traffic of meaning as part of the Cuban socialist alternative? What more punctual effort could have been carried out from the trenches of literature to vindicate the *difference* in the categorized world of modernity, a world based on mechanics of exclusion and on the perpetuation of coloniality, based on the application of reductive binaries (subject/object, feminine/masculine, private/public, power/desire)?

With “cosmological” and Lacanian support, Sarduy’s concept of the Baroque defends the idea of plural and polyphonic post-identities, but locates these constructions outside of history and beyond the specificity of culture, that is to say, beyond all referentiality and beyond all organized social projects. As González-Echevarría concludes in a final analysis, for Sarduy, “Cuba is a text” (*Celestina’s Brood* 237). Modernity operates, then, as an initial, primordial explosion, that by exposing its negativity, leaves an open and infinite space for the manifestation of subjectivities that exist “in a relation either of contiguity or delimitation with respect to an alterity that is also subjective” (Guattari 20). The Baroque is re-functionalized, then, as a “machine of subjectivization” that counteracts the “war machine” of postcolonial modernity: subjectivity is polyvocal and composed of multiple strata that cover and exceed language, and that propose “collective agencies,” *ritornellos*, and “small social rhythms” that exist disseminated in *the social*—in the social *body*. In other words, those dispersed and fragmented forms of collective subjectivity have found an alternative habitat eluding the settled, institutionalized existence within the regulated and structured spaces of *society* (Guattari, “La producción de subjetividad” 9).

In one way or another, the topic of the crisis of modern subjectivity runs across all elaborations related to the Neobaroque. This aesthetics is interpreted, then, as a proposal of *utopian*, non-programmatic nature, where the saturation of signs would point to a reconstitution of matrices that generate meanings that could promote unknown forms of perception of social and *political* levels. In an attempt to define the “conditions of a desiring cartography”—of the kind that could derive from the poetics of the Neobaroque—Néstor Perlongher alludes to post-identitary phenomena that exceed the limits of modernity, characterizing them as “Dionysian groupings [that exist] in the lustful darkness of the metropolis” (“Los devenires” 14), and remind us of the settings and anecdotes that appear, for example, in the urban chronicles of Pedro Lemebel. According to Perlongher, those minority movements—related to conflicts of race, class, sexuality, etc.—constitute phenomena that could be interpreted “from the point of view of the mutation of collective existence [since] they would be indicating, launching, experimenting ‘counter-cultural,’ dissident, alternative ways of subjectivization” (Perlongher, “Los devenires” 15).

The Neobaroque renders a diagnosis on the crisis of modern processes of subjectivization and depletion of its correspondent identity politics and, at the same time, proposes a proliferating expansion of *difference* (even if we face the risk, as Jameson warned some time ago, that *difference* may turn into the new postmodern *identity*). As a “desiring cartography,” the aesthetics of the Neobaroque does not attack either the profound structure of the social order or the epistemological models that legitimize it, but it effectively breaks down its logic and disarticulates its principles. The poetics of the Neobaroque subverts; it does not revolutionize. It is informed, as we mentioned before, by a utopian principle, where the simultaneities of multiple cultural times open a space full of potentialities and common grounds. As the desire that guides it, the poetics of the Neobaroque cannot be prescriptive, nor can it propose to exhaust in its accumulation of signs the infinite possibilities included in the global design of modernity. It proposes, nevertheless, on the basis of the ghostly presence of symbolic commodity that freely circulates in the plural market of cultures, exposing intersections, superimpositions, and reminiscences. From this perspective, the poetics of the Neobaroque could be understood, as Sarduy suggested, as an aestheticized form of *diagnosis*. In this sense, that poetic can only “be a map of the effects of surface, since depth is nothing [. . .] but a fold and a wrinkle of the surface” (Perlongher, “Los devenires” 14). The neobaroque sign does not *re-present*, then, in the sense of *presenting again*, but in the sense of dramatizing, and converting the world in spectacle, performance, and scenography. Society and politics—as defined by modernity—lose thickness and materiality. In their place, the opacity of the linguistic and visual sign suddenly appears, and the proliferation of the signifier calls attention to itself as the last horizon of social (self-) recognition. The Neobaroque sets up in this manner the dissidence, the *difference*, and the fold, saturating the void to make it visible.

#### 4. *Difference, Ruin, and the Neobaroque “De-Artification”*

Paying attention to the countercultural quality of the American Baroque, Irlemar Chiampi proposes that “[i]f the Baroque is the aesthetics of the effects of Counter Reformation, the Neobaroque is that [of] countermodernity” (144–45). For Chiampi,

[l]os desastres y la *incompletud* de[l] modelo modernizador [implementado a través de la reforma religiosa, la revolución industrial, la revolución democrático-burguesa y la difusión de la ética individualista] [. . .] se ha revelado sobre todo

en su incapacidad para integrar lo “no occidental” (indios, mestizos, negros, proletariado urbano, inmigrantes rurales, etc.) a un proyecto nacional de democracia consensual. No es casual, pues, que sea justamente el Barroco—preiluminista, premoderno, preburgués, prehegeliano—la estética reapropiada desde esta periferia, que sólo recogió las sobras de la modernización, para revertir el canon historicista de lo moderno [. . .] Este contenido ideológico—motivación cultural específica e insoslayable—torna precario todo intento de reducir el neobarroco a un manierismo “retro” y reaccionario—un reflejo de la lógica del capitalismo tardío, conforme sugiere Jameson al mentar el modismo de los “neo” en el arte posmoderno—Tampoco cabe diluirlo en la “atmósfera general,” en el “aire del tiempo,” como un principio abstracto de los fenómenos [Calabrese], y menos aún tomarlo como la salvación de una modernidad crepuscular, tras la supuesta “muerte de las vanguardias” mediante la “impureza generalizada” con que las culturas que relegaron al Barroco al ostracismo, con su buen gusto clasicista, desean renovar la experimentación y la invención. (145–46)

[t]he disasters and incompleteness of [the] modernizing model [implemented through the religious reform, the industrial revolution, the democratic bourgeois revolution and the diffusion of the individualistic ethics] [. . .] has disclosed above all in its capability to integrate the “non-Western” (Indians, *mestizos*, Blacks, urban proletariat, rural immigrants, etc.) to a national project of consensual democracy. It is not by chance, then, that it is precisely the Baroque—preilluminist, premodern, pre-bourgeois, pre-Hegelian—the aesthetics that is reappropriated from the periphery, that only gathered the scraps of modernization in order to revert the historicist canon of what is modern. [. . .] This ideological content—a specific and inescapable cultural motivation—makes all intent of reducing the Neobaroque to a “retro” (and reactionary) mannerism—look like a precarious attempt, a reflection of the logic of late capitalism, in keeping with the suggestion made by Jameson, when he mentions the idiom of the “neo” in postmodern art. It is neither possible to dilute it in the “general atmosphere,” in the the air of time, as an abstract principle of the phenomena [Calabrese], and much less take it as the salvation of a crepuscular modernity, after the supposedly “death of the vanguards” through the “generalized impurity” with which cultures that relegated the Baroque to ostracism, with its good, classicist taste, wish to renovate the experimentation and invention.)

If modernity can be characterized as a model that functions from “hard” identitary concretions, (such as national subject, citizenship, disciplining, progress, gender roles, institutional order, etc.), that dismisses, regulates, or relegates the existence of the *Other*, the baroque or neobaroque intervention would introduce strategies of alteration and detachment in the modernizing imaginaries. It would propose, based on the opacity of languages and representational strate-

gies, *anomalous* contents (in the etymological sense of *irregularity*), that is to say, an *anti-normativity* that invites to a dismantling—a deciphering—from a new perspective, of aesthetic norms and communicative normativeness.

I propose, in consequence, to think about the Baroque through the notions of *difference* and *ruin* that have been frequently associated with the interpretation of modern aesthetics, and that should be placed at the very center of an aesthetic and ideological deconstruction of baroque paradigms, particularly in its peripheral formulations.

I understand *difference* not only as *qualification of the other with respect to the same*—of alterity with respect to *identity*—(that is, not only as “variety among things of the same species”) but also, in the mathematical sense, as *residue* or *remainder* (Corominas 498). Related to this second meaning, the concept of *ruin* refers also to the differential: to what survives and remains in a ghostly existence, out of time and out of place. I refer to *ruin*, then, in the Benjaminian sense in which the illusion of perdurability and the notion of deterioration are combined (ruin, in its primary, etymological meaning of “demolition, collapse,” and also in the meaning by which the primitive is recognized as “ruinous, *gone bad*” [Corominas 516, my emphasis]).<sup>19</sup>

For Benjamin, modernity is precisely an experience of loss and collapse, an experience of mourning that recognizes that in the post-sacred world there is no place for ancient monumentalities, which can only exist vainly, as melancholic vestige, as relic that evokes completeness from loss.<sup>20</sup> Art, then, loses—*ruins*—its value of worship, and de-secularizes its transcendence: it realizes its ephemeral quality—its temporary nature—and ritualizes, in the context of modernity, new forms of spectral presence. Alienated from the “here and now” that were conferred to the work of art (from its legitimacy and “organic” functionality), art—to use here an expression of Adorno—de-artificates itself, and becomes artifact, symbolic operator, simulacrum.<sup>21</sup>

In this sense, the baroque codification would be constituted not only as allegorical reproductibility of the conflicts that characterize the insertion in modernity in the post-auratic era, but also as a re-signifying machine of cultural, social, epistemological alterity, and as *performance*—collection of choreographed and allegorical behaviors—of border subjectivities. In some sense, recovery of the Baroque would renovate then in the post-illuminist modernities and the symbolic impulse of the counterconquest alluded by Lezama Lima, finding in the recourse of formal saturation a way of channeling the elements that were never fully absorbed by the narratives of Occidentalism. The Baroque and the Neobaroque are proposed in this way as systems of codification that, through the articulation of several divergent temporalities, cultures, and

representational means, concretize—materialize—the constitutive hybridity of the colonial and (neo)(post)colonial subjectivity, inserting that productive—*barrueca*—anomaly of American elements, in the variegated and multilayered mixture of language or imagery. It is in that sense that Carpentier indicated that “every symbiosis, every *mestizaje* engenders a Baroque style,” and that in an interpretation not just culturalist but materialist, Bolívar Echeverría speaks of the *baroque ethos* as a specific way—a social behavior, a semiotics—that makes it possible “to internalize capitalism in the spontaneity of everyday life” (*Modernidad, mestizaje cultural* 20). In this way, he conceives this aesthetics as a constructing principle that does not accept or join “the capitalist fact,” but keeps it always as “unacceptable and alien” (20). Therefore, the Baroque, as the first manifestation of the modern *ethos*, emerges and re-functionalizes itself “in the tendency of modern civilization to revitalize, time and again, the code of the Western European tradition after each destructive wave coming from the capitalist development” (21). According to Echeverría, “it is Baroque the manner of being modern that makes it possible to experience the destruction of what is qualitatively produced by capitalistic productivism, by converting it in the access to the creation of another dimension, challengingly imaginary, of what is qualitative” (21). In this way, even though the baroque *ethos* constitutes, from these positions, a “strategy of radical resistance” it is not, in any way, *revolutionary*. In the words of Echeverría,

La actualidad de lo barroco no está, sin duda, en la capacidad de inspirar una alternativa radical de orden político a la modernidad capitalista que se debate actualmente en una crisis profunda; ella reside en cambio en la fuerza con que manifiesta, en el plano profundo de la vida cultural, la incongruencia de esta modernidad, la posibilidad y la urgencia de una modernidad alternativa. (*La modernidad de lo barroco* 15)

(The current standing of the Baroque is, without a doubt, not based on its capacity to inspire a radical alternative to political order in capitalist modernity which is currently undergoing a profound crisis; it resides, rather, in the strength with which it expresses, in the profound level of cultural life, the incongruity of this modernity, the possibility and the urgency of an alternative modernity.)

The specific *type* of baroque radicality is concentrated, then, at the level of the imaginaries, providing not a direct attack to the social, political, and economic foundations of the modern system, but a performative *exposé*—dramatized, carnivalized—of the discursive and representational staging of modernity, a parody of its language and gestuality. According to Sarduy:

Ser barroco hoy significa amenazar, juzgar, parodiar la economía burguesa, basada en la administración tacaña de los bienes, en su centro y fundamento mismo: el espacio de los signos, el lenguaje, soporte simbólico de la sociedad, garantía de su funcionamiento, de su comunicación. (Quoted by Echeverría, *La modernidad de lo barroco* 16)

(To be baroque today means to threaten, judge, parody the bourgeois economy based on the stingy administration of goods, at its very center and foundation: the space of signs, the language, the symbolic support of society, guarantee of its functioning, of its communication.)

The notion of the baroque *ethos* as a form of alternative representation of modern subjectivity is reintroduced and reinforced also from the sociological perspective. Boaventura de Souza Santos associates narrowly the baroque *ethos* with what he recognizes as the two central crises of modernity: the “crisis of the practice and thought of social regulation” and “the crisis of the practice and [emancipatory] thought” (313). According to the Portuguese sociologist, modernity has led to the convergence of these two *critical* forms that he explains in the following manner:

Por ejemplo, la soberanía del Estado nacional—fundamental para la modernidad después de 1648—el derecho estatal, el fordismo, el estado de bienestar, la familia heterosexual separada de la producción, el sistema educativo, la democracia representativa, la religión institucional, el canon literario, la identidad nacional, todo esto son formas de regulación social que hoy están en crisis. Pero al mismo tiempo, y en eso reside la originalidad de la situación actual, hoy están igualmente fragilizadas, desacreditadas, debilitadas las formas de emancipación social que le correspondieron hasta ahora a esa modernidad: el socialismo, el comunismo, el cooperativismo, la socialdemocracia, los partidos obreros y el movimiento sindical, la democracia participativa, la cultura popular, la filosofía crítica, los modos de vida alternativos, etc. Mientras que antes, como señalaba, las dos crisis no coincidían, hoy coinciden y, por tanto, esta crisis doble nos muestra que hoy en día la crisis de regulación se alimenta de la crisis de emancipación. (314)

(For example, the sovereignty of the national State—fundamental for modernity after 1648—State law, Fordism, the welfare state, the heterosexual family separated from production, the educational system, the representative democracy, the institutional religion, the literary canon, the national identity, all these are forms of social regulation that today are in crisis. But at the same time, and here lies the originality of the current situation, today the forms of social emancipation that corresponded until now to that modernity are made equally fragile, discredited,

debilitated: socialism, communism, cooperativism, the social democracy, the labor parties and union movement, participative democracy, popular culture, critical philosophy, alternative life styles, etc. While before, as I have indicated, the two crises would not coincide, today they do coincide and, therefore, this double crisis shows us that nowadays the crisis of regulation is fed by the crisis of emancipation.)

If social regulation and social emancipation are, as indicated by de Souza Santos, the two pillars of the modern project, and they should have a harmonious development, the convergent crisis of both axes places current societies in what this sociologist calls a “paradigmatic transition,” similar, somehow, to the one that is produced in the seventeenth century—in the baroque century—in which epistemological struggles are settled (between Aristotelians and Galileans, Aristotelians and Newtonians, for example, in the field of science), leading to a questioning more and more profound of the certainties that sustained the colonialist, monarchical, and theocentric world. The “diversion,” “dramatization,” “hyperitualization” of the Baroque would operate as mechanisms through which modern subjectivity would pace the path toward postmodernity.<sup>22</sup>

But there is more. De Souza Santos perceives in the question of the Baroque a conflicting dialogue between South and North, observing in his aesthetics not only a particular and joyful form of representation, but also a transgressive search that re-functionalizes ideological monumentalities, rationalities, and forms of authority and representational authorization, creating from the peripheries of the great systems and through the irreverent appropriation of their codes, an alternative *way of looking*. That “madness of looking” of which Buci-Glucksmann speaks constructs reality from a new perspective, subverting the same canons that served to systematize an image of the world from the platforms of modernity. The baroque *ethos* would function, thus, as a utopian proposal oriented “toward suppressed traditions, subaltern experiences, the perspective of the victims and the oppressed, toward the margins, the peripheries, the borders, toward the South of the North, toward forbidden languages, toward the un-recyclable garbage of our mercantile well-being” (quoted by Echeverría 322). Concepts—the one of Baroque, in this case—migrate and are relocated, temporarily and spatially, defying *from the ruin* (from what remains, from the *differential*) the hard nuclei of historical origin and regulated subjectivity, in a centrifugal flight from the centers of elaboration of mass-produced epistemologies, theories, and symbolic practices, toward utopian horizons of liberation and desire.

The cultures that emerged from the colonizing processes implemented

from “weak colonial centers” as Spain and Portugal were at that time, exist, above all, as *border cultures*—Janus-like, *in-between*—and they are characterized by the fluidity, exchanges, and contaminations between diverse cultural paradigms, social projects, and epistemological models, that is, by the hybridity and overcharge of representations that collide and negotiate in the configuration of social practices and cultural imaginaries. The baroque *ethos* de-theorizes reality in order to reconfigure it as utopia. It extremes the limits of colonizing and neocolonial projects, exposes the processes of appropriation and cultural cannibalism in which national cultures are based, and destabilizes the solidity of “strong epistemologies” working from the residual and ruinous—from vestige, from *difference*, from loss and grief, from pastiche and simulacrum—in a disjunctive and disruptive direction with respect to the principles and legacies of modernity. If the *epistemicide* of which de Souza Santos speaks marked mercilessly the colonial and postcolonial history of Latin America, the *codephagia* of which Echeverría refers to (that is, the process “through which the code of the masters transforms itself through the assimilation of the ruins in which the destroyed code survives”)<sup>23</sup> opens another avenue for the study of forms of social consciousness and cultural practices in the subcontinent and in its migrant imaginaries.

Then, it would be precisely that utopian matrix that would support and explain, according to the proposals of the Portuguese sociologist, the recurrences of the baroque code and its capacity of re-functionalization, as a response to the contradictions of capitalism and the exclusions of modernity. As de Souza Santos indicates, “if it is true, as Hegel said, that the patience of concepts is great, obviously, the patience of utopia is infinite” (de Souza Santos quoted by Echeverría 331).

### 5. Ultrabaroque and Globalization

Based on the scenario we have been outlining thus far, the recovered notion of *Ultrabaroque* constitutes a new twist in the history of reappearances of this aesthetics in Latin America. Utilized to designate extreme forms of baroque style, “rococo” or “churrigueresque” mostly in the European context and then mainly in Mexico in the seventeenth century, the notion of “Ultrabaroque” refers to the syncretic phenomena of ornamental oversaturation, evocative of the Peninsular Baroque, which manifests itself mostly in religious art.

In *Divine Excess: Mexican Ultra-Baroque* (1995), Ichiro Ono indicates:

Fused with native American sensibility while absorbing other influences from the sea-trading world that collected in Mexico, the baroque style evolved and commenced to tightly pack the architecture with so much ornamentation that we could describe it as a kind of “gap-ophobia.” This is “ultra-baroque,” meaning, in other words, the baroque of the baroque. (83)

Some Latin American art historians have preferred, in some instances, rather, denominations that underscore the hybridized and *differential* character of the American forms that penetrate with their cultural uniqueness the imaginary and representational protocols of the master in a kind of visual “counter-conquest.” In this way, for example, Teresa Gisbert and José de Mesa choose a nomination that rescues the multicultural and syncretic character of this art form when referring to the Andean Baroque:

Creemos que la arquitectura barroca desarrollada en América se independiza de los moldes europeos a principios del siglo XVIII [. . .] Las palabras “ultrabarroco” y “churrigüesco” son insuficientes porque indican formas extremas del barroco europeo, pero no concepciones diferentes. Por esta razón hemos usado el término “mestizo” que [. . .] es el más propio para denominar a una *arquitectura estructuralmente europea, elaborada bajo la sensibilidad indígena*. (Gisbert and de Mesa 255, my emphasis)

(We believe that the baroque architecture developed in America becomes independent from the European molds at the beginning of the eighteenth century [. . .] The words *ultrabaroque* and *churrigüesque* are insufficient because they indicate extreme forms of the European baroque, but not different conceptions. For this reason, we have used the term *mestizo* that [. . .] is the most appropriate one to designate a *structurally European architecture, elaborated under the indigenous sensibility*.)

Nevertheless, I am interested in focusing here on the reappropriation of the term in current contexts, in which the word “ultrabaroque” acquires new strength through its insertion within *other* contexts, linked to forms of cultural hybridity related to postmodern scenarios. These scenarios are characterized, as it is well known, by the decline of the epistemological certainties that were articulated around concepts of nationhood, identity, citizenship, consensus, progress, and subjectivity, and that guided modernizing projects since the Independence until the decade of the 1980s. Without getting into a radical dissemination of the processes of contemporary “baroquization” nor in the idealization that would attribute this new relapse of the Baroque to a renovated “spirit of

the epoch,” the Ultrabaroque has been characterized in these new contexts not as a form of expression that abides by definite formal or thematic traits, but as a *disposition* from which it is possible to re-present (to expose, to make intelligible) the processes of transculturation and hybridization that characterize contemporary culture.

Elizabeth Armstrong and Víctor Zamudio-Taylor, curators of the itinerary exposition titled *Ultra Baroque. Aspects of Post-Latin American Art*, and editors of the corresponding catalogue, describe the concept in the following manner:

[W]e suggest that the baroque is a model by which to understand and analyze the processes of transculturation and hybridity that globalization has highlighted and set into motion. Given this approach, we propose that the baroque, in all its conflictive reception and reinterpretation, *is pertinent today more as an attitude than as a style* and is interdisciplinary (sic) in nature and not restricted to architecture, music, and visual arts, the fields to which it has traditionally been confined. The designation “ultrabaroque” is itself a self-conscious (and intentionally playful) [. . .] [and] suggests a very contemporary, postmodern, exuberant visual culture with inextricable ties to a historical period, style, and narrative. It plays off of the Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier’s idea of a “New World Baroque,” in which *the European baroque encountered indigenous forms that were also baroque*. The mingling of European and American forms produced an intensified baroque, “a baroque to the second power”—an ultrabaroque. (3, my emphasis)

In the introduction to *Ultra Baroque*, Elizabeth Armstrong characterizes the trans-historical extensions and the reterritorializations of the Baroque as postnational aesthetics: not only as the aesthetic codification that is transferred from European societies to colonial territories—as it happened, at other levels, with the deterritorialized practices of Christianity, mercantilism, or the slave trade—but also as a product that, in its modern and postmodern modulations, appears definitively emancipated from its historical specificities. In this sense, Armstrong refers to the final twist of the Ultrabaroque as a post-Latin American art, which beyond the limitations imposed by national borders and political identities, is inserted in the most current settings, combining local and global impulses:

[We want] to emphasize our interest in art from Latin America characterized by a postmodern approach to cultural production that is no longer determined by geographical borders and identity politics. Informed by other critical positions engaged in a revision of theory and practices (which are linked to specific rubrics, such as “postfeminist” and “post-Chicano”), this provocative nomenclature reflects the



production of a discourse that can account for artistic expressions driven by local as well as global impulses, that are grounded in historical specificities yet that seek to go beyond them. (Armstrong 5)

The allegorical nature of the Neobaroque convokes in its exacerbated expressivity the politics of citation and the experience of fragmentation, bringing forth as a result products that in its strong syncretism provide “the key to the interpretation of hybridity in the visual culture” and the comprehension of cultural products that reveal the systemic *mestizaje* of Latin America (Zamudio-Taylor 141).

For Serge Gruzinski, the adoption of the Baroque is bound to the internationalization of cultural markets, an effect of the colonizing processes. But what is important is not so much to register that effect as a *necessary* result of European history, but to perceive the significance of cultural hybridizations as counter-Western channels through which new forms of sensibility and new agencies are expressed. The preference for “exotic and novel forms, a taste for the unusual, what is original and what is amazing” (Gruzinski, “El planeta barroco” 117) not only characterizes the Baroque as an *organic* aesthetic and ideological product of the Spanish monarchy and as one of the most prominent expressions of the cultural hegemony of Occidentalism (as a rationalist, bourgeois, and Christian cultural model). It also opens the doors through which subaltern subjectivities colonize dominant imaginaries, while they remain, at the same time, in a constant state of resistance and differentiation. Without a doubt, the negotiations between these new forms of cultural *agency* and the general market of symbolic commodities constitute a complex and frequently contradictory universe of historical and social dynamics. As Gruzinski himself acknowledges, given the current evaluation of the work of American artists, like the Mexican mulatto Juan Correa (c. 1645/1650–1716) or the Afro-Brazilian sculptor Aleijadinho (1738–1814), who are producers of great creations of ecclesiastic Baroque, one is forced to understand their works as a form of submission to the power of the Church and, in general, to the colonizing forces that devastated pre-Hispanic cultures (“El planeta barroco”). Nevertheless, it is in the process and projections of those subaltern appropriations that one should look for the ultimate cultural meaning of the transcultural dynamics. In fact, “[e]ach time that the European paganism allowed the indigenous artist to introduce elements from the Amerindian pantheon, it opened the spaces for the recovery of the indigenous memory” (Guzinski, “El planeta barroco” 120). In that sense, the history narrated by the American baroque production is not only one of colonialization and transculturation, but also one of reciprocal interac-

tions that give place to the expression of *other* epistemologies that force their entrance in the solid, symbolic system of colonialist domination, hybridizing its dogmatic uniqueness.

Evocative and attached to the present, the Ultrabaroque constitutes the most current inflection of a semantics that challenges the rational regulation of art, as well as the representational equilibrium, and the hermeneutic disciplining that go with it. The strategy of the Ultrabaroque is, for the most part, the recovery, de-centering, and re-contextualization of elements that remit to epistemological fractures associated with the crisis of modernity, and with the advent of cultural forms of subjectivization affected by mass-media transformations and de-auritization of humanistic discourses. If the Baroque is defined by its nomadism and its constant aesthetic and ideological re-functionalization, that is, for its constant re-settlement in new existential territories, the Ultrabaroque would constitute the symbolic enclave of our time and our circumstance, where the borders between the two Americas are gradually diluted in processes of exchange and identity reformulation. At the same time, the Ultrabaroque pretends to bear witness to—to *re-present*—the fact that this porosity of borders does not invalidate, but in fact accentuates and tends to naturalize not just the existence of cultural *differences*, but the social inequalities that continue to be imposed, from North to South, in the context of neo-liberal postmodernity.

In this context of fluid territorialities, reinforcement of hegemonies and cultural resignifications, the Ultrabaroque explores anew the limit of aesthetic codification and representability of transnationalized subjectivities—of post-identities—saturating the global space in an irreverent gesture of counter-conquest of consecrated imaginaries. Zamudio-Taylor considers that this new re-functionalization of the Baroque “offers today, in the era of globalization, the key to the interpretation of hybridity in the visual culture” (141), because it acts as an intervention of the (post)modernizing protocols that have been developing since the colony:

The legacy of the Iberian colonialism forced the emergent Latin American colonies, particularly Brazil, Cuba and Mexico to negotiate conditions of modernity fed by mannerist and baroque cultures, that translated, transformed and circulated to the European metropolis. In this sense, the baroque problematized the negotiation of modernity in Latin America, and offered a conduit from which its values in conflict and its language were filtered and spilt to postmodernity. (Zamudio-Taylor 141)

In current settings, the Ultrabaroque dramatizes the weakening of the “hard” contents of individual and collective identity: territoriality as the natural

site of national cultures; the notion of consumption as principle of democratization and as a privileged form of personal realization and social integration; the belief in the transparency of language as a vehicle of political and social consensus; the pedagogical role of art; and the conception of the work or art as a finished, harmonious, and complete symbolic product. Without ritualism, in the post-sacred era, the Ultrabaroque vindicates the materiality and reproducibility of the work, exerts and maximizes the art of citation (the contents *out-of-place*, the minimization of contextual memory), and puts forward the fragmentation and the impurity of cultural signifiers as some of the basis for post-identity representation. The poetic art of the Ultrabaroque maintains, nevertheless, a historic memory that becomes evident in the appeal to elements that remit to the original violence and that make continuous references to colonialism through the almost obscene exhibition of dismembered bodies or overwhelming spaces, saturated by objects. In other cases, the Ultrabaroque creates ephemeral and melodramatic settings—melancholic, in their own way—which do not resemble the monumentality of the great catafalques or the triumphant arches of the first (baroque) modernity. In fact, as an alternative to the consecrating and museistic orientation that characterizes the canonization of art in that and subsequent modernities, the Ultrabaroque operates, rather, from a more immediate, non-transcendental approach to symbolic representation, emphasizing the capacity of art of expressing in a performative manner, fragmentary and even provisional aspects of individual and collective subjectivities.

The Ultrabaroque minimizes the authorial subject but emphasizes the positionality of the gaze, as the principle that organizes experience and self (recognition), in the terms defined by Lacan: “Le baroque c’est la regulation de l’âme par la scopie corporelle” (*Le Séminaire XX*, 105). It is as if from the perspectives of globalization and postmodernity, the irreverent symbolic commodity of the Ultrabaroque would interrogate rhetorically traditions and legacies, analyzing the balance of progress from the savage instances of late capitalism, saturating the transnational space with a *gap-ophobia* that reveals the horror of silence that has followed the death of the *grand narratives*, offering in its place micro-histories that have renounced to philosophic totalization and revolutionary epics. The Ultrabaroque dramatizes, in this manner, in its own way, in times of globalization, neoliberal triumphalism, as well as the reformulation of hegemonies, the realization of having trespassed beyond an epistemological, civilizational, and representational limit. Its utopia does not consist on the capacity or on the desire of articulating concrete propositions, but in still believing in the efficacy of deconstruction and de-sublimation through art. History is neither

circular nor progressive. History is residual; it is *difference* and ruin: it is a fold that returns onto itself, a refolding, and an unfolding; it is *retombée*.

## Notes

1. The definitions that reintroduce the idea of the Baroque as pathology of the form give evidence, above all, of the expository place, and the epistemological positionality from which the baroque aesthetics is evaluated. Bolívar Echeverría has indicated in his definition of the baroque *ethos* that “in effect, only from the formal, *classical* perspective, what is baroque can appear as a de-formity; only in comparison to the *realist* form it can result in-sufficient and only with respect to formal *romantic* creationism, it can be seen as conservative.” He adds that: “It deals, therefore, under those three groups of descriptors that the post Renaissance art has received, three definitions that, taken in themselves, *tell more about the theoretical place from which it is defined than about what is baroque*, what is mannerist, etcetera. They are definitions that only indirectly make it possible to see what can be constituted as ‘baroque’” (Echeverría 23; my emphasis).
2. This work is part of a major project, and for this reason it does not develop in depth some of the proposals that are outlined in this introductory section.
3. I use here the concept of “Ultrabaroque”—that I will discuss later in this piece—in its more current retake to designate practices of reappropriation of the baroque aesthetics in the context of postmodernity, and following the designation suggested in the catalogue titled *Ultra Baroque: Aspects of Post-Latin American Art*, edited by Elizabeth Armstrong and Víctor Zamudio-Taylor.
4. See, in this respect, my *Viaje al silencio. Exploraciones del discurso barroco*, particularly the first part, in which I study the specific characteristics of the Baroque of the Indies.
5. On the concept of the “Baroque of the Indies” the studies by Mariano Picón Salas and Leonardo Acosta, among others, are indispensable. For more current perspectives on the topic, see my *Relecturas del Barroco de Indias* and *Viaje al silencio*. On the concept of “mimicry” in relation to the representation of the colonial subject, see Bhabha.
6. In *Celestina’s Brood*, in the chapters dedicated to Calderón and to Espinosa Medrano, González-Echeverría refers to the theme of monstrosity in the Baroque relating it to the problem of identity (“monstrosity as identity”). He interprets monstrosity as a form of catachresis (trope that makes it possible to give a name to something that does not have it yet, through a procedure of figurative re-signification). According to González-Echeverría, “Monstrosity appears in the Baroque as a form of generalized catachresis, one that affects language as well as the image of self, and that includes the sense of belatedness inherent in Latin American literature” (5). The baroque “mon-

strosity" is associated, in this way, with the proper hybrid quality of the Creole society (of Peninsular ancestry but of American origin and roots), and with the coexistence of contradictory attributes of colonial *letrados*, of the kind that we indicated, emblematically, in the cases of Sor Juana, Espinosa Medrano, etc. As it is suggested by González Echevarría, monstrosity indicates the transitional state of these identities which appear equipped of a two-faced quality, from a cultural perspective and also from the point of view of gender. The symbolic transvestism that is associated with the figure of Sor Juana and that the Neobaroque will take up again, reminds us of the speech of Rosaura in *La vida es sueño*, where she appears, in the eyes of Segismundo—as González Echevarría points out—as a “monstruo de una especie y otra” (“monster of one and another species”); as a man, or as a woman, or as a combination of both), creating an epistemological ambiguity and a saturation of visual and verbal signs that are characteristic of baroque aesthetics. Concerning the relation between monstrosity and colonialism, see also Zavala.

7. For Carlos Rincón, certain interpretations of the Baroque, like the one of Alejo Carpentier, for example, are looking precisely to establish a cultural genealogy that makes it possible to set certain historical, cultural roots from which the narrative of the 1960s would have developed. Then, for example, according to Rincón, “[t]he recourse to the *Auctoritas* of the Baroque as a myth allows to unify the contradictory and refractory reality of the contemporary novel, and paves the way for the one which will be written in the future: it has created an ennobled stereotype. What is presented as a ‘hermeneutic’ process of approximation to the Baroque is an operation to authenticate a cultural myth of origin and legitimate the ‘originality’ of the new narrative. Forged on the base of that cultural *corpus*, it ‘expressed’ and assured a community of consciousness, tradition and language” (*Mapas y pliegues* 192; my translation).
8. Nevertheless, even though Lezama Lima appears to satirize the expansion of the Baroque, it will be precisely this aspect which will guide his assertion that the Baroque “is not a degenerated (*sic*) style, but a plenary one, which in Spain and America represents acquisitions of language, that are perhaps, unique in the world, as well as furniture for housing, ways of living and curiosity, mysticism that adheres to new modes for prayer, ways of taste and handling of delicacies, that exhale a refined and mysterious way of life, theocratic and self-absorbed, errant in form, and deeply rooted in its own essences” (*Confluencias* 229).
9. When studying the genealogy of the American Baroque and its connections with modernity and postmodernity, Rincón also makes reference to the manifestations of a *virtual* Neobaroque present in the configuration of the global “hypermarket of cultural and aesthetic signs” (*Mapas* 157).
10. The use of the term “neobaroque” is attributed to Gustavo Guerrero, who uses it in his studies of the works of Severo Sarduy.
11. In a section in the form of a poem. At the beginning of *Barroco* (1974), the word *retombée* is “defined” in the following manner:

*Retombée*: a-chronic causality

non-contiguous  
isomorphism  
or

consequence of something that has yet not been produced,  
similar to something that does not exist yet. (Sarduy 1196)

Sarduy, then, indicates in 1987: “I called *retombée*, for lack of a better term in Spanish, to all a-chronic causality: the cause and consequence of a given phenomenon may not be successive in time, but coexist; the ‘consequence,’ can even precede the ‘cause’; both can be shuffled, as in a game of cards. *Retombée* is also a similarity or likeness in what is discontinuous: two distant objects, without communication or interference, can reveal themselves as analogous; one can function as the *double* of the other—the word also taken in the theatrical sense of the term: there is no hierarchy of values between the model and the copy” (Sarduy 1370).

12. According to Rincón, “Given the paradoxical condition of Latin American societies as part of the history of decolonization, and given the position occupied by the Baroque in some of its cultures, the deciphering of the Baroque and the issue of the relation mimesis-/alterity tends to be situated and oriented today, in the direction of the new cultural and transdisciplinary criticism and the historization of issues of identity it undertakes” (*Mapas y pliegues* 190).
13. With respect to debates on originality and copy in connection with national cultures, see Schwarz.
14. In fact since the establishment of the so-called “culture of the Baroque” in the seventeenth century, the problems of colonial power, and much later, what Aníbal Quijano has called “the coloniality of power”—that is registered, in diverse modalities, all along the modernizing process and is distinguished, epistemologically, from the historical phenomenon of colonialism—suggest the necessity to integrate these paradigms of social-political structure in Latin America, basic (modernity, coloniality) to the interpretation of cultural and ideological forms. In this case, the same can be used as matrix from which to think about the (neo) baroque aesthetic, which the residues of the imperial monumentality and the subversion of those same canons are combined, which we could call areas of influence of peninsular Hispanic studies.
15. The idea of *negativity* used here is certainly not alien to the concept popularized by Theodor Adorno in *Negative Dialectic* (1973), since the term articulates notions that make it possible to approach a general comprehension of socio-cultural phenomena of post-national or multinational character, as far as it proposes the anti-utopian conception of modernity as an instance that is implemented, not overcome, but rather to reconcile social contradictions.
16. “Lezama wields the Baroque as an already original anxiety of creation and innovation—Lezama’s Baroque is a romantic Baroque, a Baroque endowed with the fundamental features of German Romanticism” (González-Echevarría, *Celestina’s Brood* 218).
17. According to Irlemar Chiampi, Lezama liberates the Baroque from the flux of con-

- tinuous history, in order to produce "a leap" toward what is incomplete and unfinished in that aesthetics, revealing to us how that metahistorical fragment is constituted in a "form" that *situates us in modernity through dissonance*" (140, emphasis mine).
18. Lack and excess are the interchangeable inversion and reversal of Sarduy's metaphoric system (González-Echevarría, *Celestina's Brood* 220).
  19. On the baroque obsession with the ideas of transience and decadence, and the elaboration of these topics made by Walter Benjamin, see Buci-Glucksmann, *La raison baroque*.
  20. Nevertheless, it would be useful to remember that in Benjamin, the loss is not pure negativity but also *production* (in the economic sense, but also in the theatrical one): an encounter of the being with that which lies concealed, awaiting, in order to manifest itself, an instance from which an *other* plenitude can be reached: "Contemplated from the side of death, life consists on the production of the cadaver" (Benjamin 214).
  21. In this elaboration I follow the work of Buci-Glucksmann on Walter Benjamin. See mainly chapter 4, "The Aesthetics of Transience," in *La raison baroque*.
  22. It is worth noting that de Souza Santos separates baroque *ethos* and postmodernity. According to him, "what is baroque is not postmodern, what is baroque is an integral part of modernity; his own digression, in my opinion, is a transgression within modernity. It is a centrifugation from a center that can be, more or less, weak, but that exists and makes itself known. The postmodern, on the contrary, in either one of its two versions, does not have a center, it is a-centric, from which it gets its 'post' character" (Echeverría, *Modernidad, mestizaje cultural* 324).
  23. Echeverría clarifies the semiotic process of "codephagia" in the following manner: "The sub-codifications or singular and concrete configurations of the code of what is human do not seem to have another way of coexisting among themselves that is not of consuming each other; the way of beating destructively in the center of constitutive symbolization which they have in front and appropriating and integrating within themselves, submitting themselves to an essential alteration, the remains still alive that are left of it afterwards" (Echeverría, *Modernidad* 32).

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