Boredom and Baroque Space

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André Bazin argues in '*The Ontology of the Photographic Image*' that 'In achieving the aims of baroque art, photography has freed the plastic arts from their obsession with likeness.'[1] . Photography and the cinema, he says, have satisfied our 'appetite for illusion'. The invention of myriad computer imagery shows this to be otherwise. The appetite for illusion shows no bounds, just as the psychoanalytic proposition of Jacques Lacan the 'metonymy of desire' reminds us that desire itself is an endless process. In this context, new computer based practices of representation are, without knowing it, precipitating a mutation in representational space. There is an uncanny 'return of the repressed' which moves us out of twentieth century photographic realism. A Baroque trend of spatial illusions, theatrical imagination and intense feelings, where an image is a representation of the thing it represents through a relation of meaning, a kind of 'psychological realism' rather than through a mere mimetic likeness or literal resemblance.

The attitude of Baroque art, according to Erwin Panofsky, can be defined as 'based on an objective conflict between antagonistic forces, which, however, merge into a subjective feeling of freedom and even pleasure...'[2]. The paradigmatic example of this for Panofsky is a sculpture, the *Ecstasy of St. Theresa* (1644-47) by Bernini. This famous altar piece in Rome dedicated to saint Theresa depicts the moment in her story when an angel of the Lord has pierced her heart with a golden flaming arrow. She is shown swooning, filled with pain *and* erotic ecstasy. Her facial expression is intended to express this emotional intensity, while streams of light in the form of golden rays suggest the movement of her rising to heaven. The drapes around her body also suggest movement with their crisp dishevelled and whirling forms. Intended to be seen from a single point of view as in the modern photographic image, the three dimensional statue combines picture, relief and plastic grouping. Thus for Panofsky 'Baroque art came to abolish the borderline between the "three arts," and even art and nature, and also brought forth the modern landscape in the full sense of the word, meaning a visualization of unlimited space captured in, and represented by, a section of it, so that human figures became debased to a mere "staffage" and finally could be dispensed with altogether.'[3]

For Michel Foucault 'the Baroque' period is[4]: 'the privileged age of *trompe-l'oeil* painting, of the cosmic illusion, of the play that duplicates itself by representing another play, of the *quid pro quo*, of dreams and visions; it is the age of the deceiving senses'[5] Celestial frescos, anamorphic distortions, the illusion of doors, windows and other images where they do not exist, all move the spatial representation of the world away from one of resemblance. For Foucault, this is the 'essential rupture of knowledge in the Western world, what has become important is no longer resemblances but identities and differences'. If somewhere like Versailles is 'baroque', it is its grand plan, its 'grotesque', 'excessive ornamentation', the 'decorative' components that spiral off into an infinity of minute differences. The vases in the garden: each one the same identity (as vase) yet different in decoration. Decoration is not extra or unnecessary in the baroque, but constitutive of differing identities, of an infinite difference. Where representation had been based in resemblance and similitude in the sixteenth century, the seventeenth century world was represented in signs without guaranteed meaning. While comparison and similitude had revealed the ordering of the world, baroque rhetoric made representation (of the world) a question of analysis. The logic of likeness, resemblance, the 'chimera of similitude' was represented as such. It is no coincidence that the Baroque was also the age of allegory where a sign is always already a collection of other signs. Laid bare, the illusion of space where there is none, (i.e. the *trompe-l'oeil*), may be read allegorically as a critique of the structure of social space and social relations within them. Whether viewed as ugly or beautiful, the common sense of baroque as 'excessive decoration', of an exaggerated, unnecessary artfulness, only shows our distance from an understanding of the Baroque rhetoric of visual splendour. Pleasure is the measure of intelligence and boredom is the signified of a lack of eloquence. A common-sense view of baroque is associated with decadence and a grotesque, as things that grew out of an 'ennui', the result of a boredom with the existing spatial and representational conventions. In courtly life of the period where speech was the equivalent of thinking, a bored response signified a refusal or rejection of the speaker's thought. A boring speech was one composed of boring thoughts, or rather, for the listener no libidinal investment or stimulus in the speakers words. 'Plato is boring because he is not eloquent.'[6]

The term Baroque initially begins as an insult, to as a term of abuse and derision to describe – criticise – the bold, 'over-ornate' style. The use of the word boredom similarly describes a negative state, of being bored by something. But boredom is a question of what one does with space. In the nothing to do, or 'nothing to see', it is not that there is not anything to see, rather that the subject cannot see it. Vision is colonized, inhibited, by boredom. The bored person is the one for whom seeing is blasé, the sense of sight, supposedly, as it is commonly said, is 'dulled through over-stimulation'.[7] As Otto Fenichel argues, what such situations really describe is the damming up of a libido. Repressed, the libidinal energy turns around on the subject and disperses through it as a kind of paralysis of any aim (or rather that boredom is now the manifestation of that aim). This boredom is like anxiety, it similarly petrifies the subject into non-action. Boredom and anxiety are defences against libidinal excitement. This can be seen as the 'passive' type of boredom. The 'active' type of boredom is exemplified in the idea of the 'Sunday neurotic': the person who cannot abide the idea of vacation, they are bored by them. When there is no duty to fulfil, the libidinal energy comes rushing out, only to be inhibited and dammed up as 'I'm bored'. At work such a person strives to disperse their desire for intense excitement in the demands of work duties. Once these duties are removed, the anxiety of how to disperse the libidinal energy emerges again in boredom. The activity of work thus offers an escape from the pain of boredom.

The sort of 'clutter' associated with Baroque architecture, sculpture, painting and rhetoric is not merely ornamental, but a constitutive component of the style. If this style is 'irritating' to someone it is because it invokes anxiety and boredom. There is too much 'emotion' in it, too many signifying components, it is 'overstated'. Baroque work itself seems to characterize the active aim of boredom. The 'eclectic' sticking together of 'disconnected styles', the ceilings filled with an imaginary space, the portraits that are crowded allegorical personifications, everything is doubly filled with meanings and details. It is as though the whole age of Baroque recognised the illusion of the Renaissance representational space. Perspective, where a horizon is the vanishing-point of the lines that meet in the infinite distance, hides the anxiety that there is nothing beyond the perspectival horizon. The anxiety of cosmic space is 'filled in' in Renaissance representation by the horizons of Quattrocento perspective. Revealed in the Baroque as a chimera, this perspectival logic is obsessively covered over and simultaneously revealed at the same time. The anxiety of the nothing beyond is actually represented, embodied in the signifying forms of the Baroque. This is the symptom of the Baroque age.

The painting by Velasquez of the maids of honour called *Las Meninas* (1656) holds for Michel Foucault the representation 'of Classical representation, and the definition of the space it opens up to us.'[8] Much earlier Hans Holbein's *The Ambassadors* (1533) had combined two points of view, literally 'perspectives', (one anamorphic) into the same picture plane, simultaneously revealing the supplement of mercantile capitalism and the accumulation of worldly goods: death. The spatial 'distortion' of the anamorphic skull or flying pancake (I am reminded, distractedly, of Lacan's 'hommlette' joke) as it appears from the 'normal' point of view interferes, cuts across, the normal perspectival logic of the picture. It is such 'distortions' that the computer enables to be produced fairly simply, such that these images become absorbed into the dominant signifying practices of our visual culture as 'normal'. We are again in a period of chimerical representation, of eclectic styles, an obsessive covering over of the holes in existence, which both reveals them and denies them. As Baroque art 'upped the stakes' in the demand for the ever new with a spiral of invention – new combinations of contradictions – so its use of the devices and ornaments inevitably multiplied. On the one hand Baroque invention appears as a kind of 'Sunday neurosis', the crowding of signifiers, a constant work of signification, to avoid the anxiety and boredom of 'nothing to see'. On the other hand these eclectic signifiers fill a space which offers no comfort for the subject of a passive boredom. A bored subject is one who craves stimulation. But boredom is not a property of the object, it is a problem of the subject. Thus, whatever the signifier, the signified is always 'boring'. Stimulation is repressed, such that it manifests as a bored response, a constant deferral of dealing with the passing of time. With the speed of new technologies, the distance between things is collapsed, simultaneously different spaces are collapsed into the same time.

Today's culture of the 'visual', based in a logic of the photographic image, is potentially thrown into a baroque 'deception' when the indexical-iconic field of resemblance is constantly disturbed by the new capacities for illusion. If the computer is giving a twist to the uncertainty of the historical kaleidoscope of representation, we may find ourselves in the space of a baroque dream, which bores those who cannot face the present, let alone the future.

[1] André Bazin, '*The Ontology of the Photographic Image*', reprinted in Classic Essays on Photography, ed. A. Trachtenberg (New Haven: Leete's Island, 1980), p.240 | [2] Erwin Panofsky, 'What is Baroque?', *Three Essays on Style*, MIT, 1997 p.38 | [3] Ibid., p. 45 & p.51 | [4] Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, London: Tavistock, 1985 | [5] Ibid., p. 51| [6] See Jacqueline Lichtenstein, *The Eloquence of Colour*, University of California Press, 1993, p.29 | [7] Otto Fenichel, *The Collected Papers of Otto Fenichel*, Vol.1, eds. H. Fenichel & D. Rapaport, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1954),p.302 | [8] Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, (London: Tavistock, 1985) p.16 |