EXUBERANCE BY DESIGN:
NEW WORLD BAROQUE AND THE POLITICS
OF POSTCOLONIALITY

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My essay consists of three parts. In the first section, I review the historical context of Baroque aesthetics as it is developed during the late 16th and 17th centuries in Europe and then I track its development in Latin America into the third quarter of the 18th century. The principled excess of the Baroque, to adapt Cyrano de Bergerac’s formulation cited below, was designed for theological and imperial purposes. Secondly, I address more recent literature and literary theory. Why, in the early 20th century, did Latin American poets, novelists, essayists and critics begin to rediscover, recover and reconstitute Baroque modes of expression? What was it about this Catholic, monarchical, colonizing aesthetic that now seemed suited to postcolonial purposes? I refer to several theorists and writers who pioneered and/or inspired the 20th-century idea of the New World Baroque as a rebellious retort to Europe rather than a passive reflection. My third section considers how to teach the politics of Baroque aesthetics, and why Baroque aesthetics remains relevant today.

“Exuberance by design, and not from wildness...is the dominant trait of the Baroque.”
— Jacques Barzun, on Peter Paul Rubens

“Excess is not excessive, you see, if it’s been conceived on principle.”
— Cyrano, in Edmund Rostand’s Cyrano de Bergerac

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I. Baroque Excess, Baroque Reason

The Baroque began as polemic, that is, as a careful consideration of aesthetic strategies aimed at communicating an ideology—the ideology of the Catholic Counter-Reformation. Baroque art and architecture were the Catholic Church’s response to the Protestant Reformation. The Council of Trent was convened by Pope Paul III and met in three sessions between 1545 and 1563 to reform and regularize Catholic administrative and doctrinal matters in the face of mass defections in Northern Europe. In its final session, the Council of Trent turned its attention to winning back the hearts and minds of believers, or at least stanching the flow of defectors. What better way to do so than to engage their senses and thus their emotions and their devotion? Given this Catholic project, it is not surprising that vision—the faculty of seeing—and the visual arts took on new importance. It is safe to say that virtually all Baroque religious art is didactic in purpose and that virtually all Catholic believers at the time were trained to be visual learners. Counter-Reformation representation is designed to encourage the imaginative practice of envisioning spirit, as the Eucharist encourages believers to visualize the body and spirit of Christ in the sacramentally changed bread.

Imaging/imagining was central to Counter-Reformation policy and provided the ideological impetus for exuberance in Baroque art and architecture. The Catholic Counter-Reformation doctrine holds that the senses may lead to spiritual knowledge; sight may lead to insight; physical beauty may be commensurable with metaphysical

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2 Anyone writing today about Baroque aesthetics and ideology stands on the shoulders of giants: Friedrich Nietzsche, Heinrich Wölfflin, Mario Praz, Walter Benjamin, Eugenio d’Ors, René Wellek, Alfonso Reyes, Pedro Henríquez Ureña, Alejo Carpentier, José Lezama Lima, Severo Sarduy, Haroldo de Campos, Christine Buci-Glucksmann, José Pascual Buxó, Gonzalo Celorio, Carlos Fuentes and Édouard Glissant, to name some of the essential voices who have (re)defined Baroque aesthetics for contemporary scholars. My co-editor Monika Kaup and I have gathered together essays and/or excerpts by each of these foundational figures in *Baroque New Worlds: Representation, Transculturation, Counterconquest* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010). To their sustained and sustaining conversation, I dedicate this essay.

3 The twenty-five decrees of the Council of Trent may be found at http://history.hanover.edu/early/trent/trent.html.

truth. The Catholic effort to regain old ground in Europe and gain new ground in the Americas led to vast artistic production in which the affective engagement of the viewer’s or reader’s senses was primary. The greater the aesthetic quotient, correctly conceived and executed, the greater the political impact. Baroque religious images were created for the purpose of inspiring awe, and to this end, they needed to provoke a combination of empathy and imagination in the viewer. Scenes were to be painted as realistically as possible in order to appeal to the senses and thus to the visual imagination of viewers. Privileged visual subject matter corresponded to matters under siege by Protestants: the role of the Virgin and saints as intercessors between believers and God; the necessity of suffering and martyrdom as sanctifying activities; the status of particular sacraments (the Eucharist, the priesthood, penance). Figures in ecstasy, figures in *extremis*—these embattled areas of theology lent themselves naturally to arresting artistic depiction. (At least, we think it natural to depict them this way until we realize that explicit physical depiction of sanctified suffering is, in many ways, a Baroque invention.\(^5\)) Christ’s passion, Mary’s mourning, the martyrdom of saints, penitent figures: such scenes were designed to encourage the beholder to experience empathically their suffering and thus to share in their transcendence. Exuberance by design; excess conceived on principle.

St. Ignatius Loyola, founder of the Jesuits, intuited and then prescribed the form of attention required by Counter-Reformation policy. In his *Spiritual Exercises*, published in Latin in 1548, he presents a series of meditations on sin and on the life, passion, resurrection and ascension of Christ. He does not speak explicitly about the relationship of visual images to these themes, but he constantly calls upon the considered experience of the senses—and especially the eyes—to lend reality to the contemplated scene. This call to visualize the invisible, and to visualize oneself doing so, led viewers to an increasingly self-conscious relationship with the physical bodies of Christ, the Virgin and the martyred saints. Sensuous representation became a primary conduit to the supernatural, and representations of flesh and blood the means of bringing the beholder into mystical

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communion with disembodied divinity. *Spiritual Exercises* was nearly contemporaneous with the decrees of the Council of Trent that declared the need to engage the visual imagination in Catholic worship. The decrees (particularly the 22nd and the 25th, issued in 1562 and 1563 respectively) affirmed the Church’s commitment to visual imagining, and Loyola’s text gave worshipers practical guidance in doing so. The influence of the *Spiritual Exercises* surely contributed to increasingly opulent church interiors and façades during this period and to the growing magnitude and magnificence of individual artworks, including works not overtly religious.

The perspectival pyrotechnics of the Baroque conform to this Tridentine/Ignatian striving toward a mental state that we might call envisionment (vision + enlightenment). Baroque illusionism, like Baroque naturalism, aims to subvert habitual ways of seeing in favour of visions of what is, by definition, impossible to see: divinity, spirit, eternity, infinity. Beyond envisionment, Baroque illusionism reflects another side of the Counter-Reformation: the conceptual void opened up by the new sciences developing during this period.

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6 In his landmark essay on Baroque aesthetics, “Baroque Curiosity” (in *Baroque New Worlds*, 212–40), Lezama Lima writes admiringly of Loyola’s *Spiritual Exercises*, and proposes the willful/willing guidance of the senses as a primary characteristic of Baroque aesthetics:

> [A]t the center of the legions who went out to defend Rome are Ignatius de Loyola’s *Exercises*, with their reliance on the power of the will to maintain the performative tension in attaining the path to purification. So we read in the *Exercises* that “we must make use of the acts of the intellect in reasoning, and of the acts of the will in manifesting our love.” There is here a kind of *trust in the ability of form to encompass essence, the idea that spirituality originates in form, in the love of what is visible, for how else can the will act except through visibility*?... His entire *Exercises* rests on this principle and foundation, subdivided into two main branches of concentric subordination: mankind is created to worship God “and the other things on the face of the earth are created for man to help him in attaining the end for which he is created.” We worship God if we enjoy all things as a banquet whose purpose is God. (221–22; author’s emphasis on the word *performative*; my emphasis following)

7 In *Looking at the Overlooked* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), Norman Bryson describes the way in which the *Spiritual Exercises* encouraged the coordination of all the senses—sight, smell, hearing, touch and taste—in his discussion of the secular still lives of Juan Sánchez Cotán and Francisco de Zurbarán. (65) He states that these painters share “the same Ignatian mission of reproving and refining worldly vision through a transfiguration of the mundane.” (70)
The discoveries referred to collectively as the Copernican Revolution impelled a radically changed understanding of the universe that challenged religious certainties and unsettled previously held ideas about the nature and experience of space.\(^8\) To this new understanding of space, with its attendant fear of emptiness and absence, Baroque artists reacted with depictions of kinetic energy: proliferating figures and motifs in expansive, dilating spaces; theatrical spaces opening onto infinity; blurred boundaries between real and pictorial spaces; spaces filled to overflowing in response to what art historians now refer to as *horror vacui*, horror of a vacuum.\(^9\) Secularization and pluralism had begun, despite the Church’s best efforts to keep God in his biblical heaven. Erwin Panofsky, a great contributor to our understanding of the historical Baroque, put it succinctly: “No period has been so obsessed with the depth and width, the horror and the sublimity [of space] as the Baroque, the period in which man found himself confronted with the infinite as a quality of the universe instead of as a prerogative of God.”\(^10\)

This new sense of space, with its adventures and uncertainties, is nowhere more apparent than in the art works grouped collectively

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\(^8\) The term *Copernican Revolution* refers to the new conception of physical space based on the shift from a Ptolemaic to a heliocentric model of the heavens. This revolution is largely the work of four astronomers: Nicolaus Copernicus, Tycho Brahe, Johannes Kepler and Galileo Galilei. More generally, the new sciences of the 17th century involved changing conceptions of nature based on studies of anatomy, physiology, botany, etc.

\(^9\) Michel Foucault’s well-known discussion of this epistemic shift in *The Order of Things* is epitomized in the following statement:

> At the beginning of the seventeenth century, during the period that has been termed, rightly or wrongly, the Baroque, thought ceases to move in the element of resemblance. Similitude is no longer the form of knowledge but rather the occasion of error.... The age of resemblance is drawing to a close. It is leaving nothing behind it but games. Games whose powers of enchantment grow out of a new kinship between resemblance and illusion; the chimeras of similitude loom up on all sides, but they are recognized as chimeras; it is the privileged age of trompe-l’œil painting, of the comic 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: it is the age in which the poetic dimension of language is defined by metaphor, simile, and allegory.


under the term *trompe l’oeil* (literally, “deceive the eye”). *Trompe l’oeil* techniques existed before the Baroque period, but became a regular feature of church interiors and paintings during the 17th century.11 *Trompe l’oeil* art calls attention to its artifice by manipulating the mimetic techniques of Renaissance realism so that images will not merely represent the real, but will be (mis)taken for it. Central to all *trompe l’oeil* is this debate of art with itself—this spectacle of realism engaged in an assault on its own realistic claims. Jean Baudrillard, theorist of simulacra, describes this irony:

In *trompe l’oeil*, it is never a matter of confusion with the real: what is important is the production of a simulacrum in full consciousness of the game and of the artifice by miming the third dimension, throwing doubt on the reality of that third dimension by miming and outdoing the effect of the real, throwing radical doubt on the principle of reality.12

Doubt is also cast upon the existence of the viewing subject: *trompe l’oeil* paintings transgress the separation between subject and object, between pictorial and real space, that defines Western representation. The objects and spaces in *trompe l’oeil* paintings are no longer bound by the viewer’s controlling gaze; rather, the viewer is obliged to enter into a dynamic relation with the painted objects and spaces. It is no wonder that Baudrillard finds *trompe l’oeil* less a branch of painting than of metaphysics.

Yet another Baroque response to the new sciences of the 17th century—a response that would seem to be something like the opposite of the kinetic illusionism that I have just described—is still life. Still life painting developed in Europe during this time as an autonomous genre that encoded (sometimes quite explicitly) the science of natural history, which had been given new impetus by the exotic objects arriving in great quantities from areas of the world being colonized by Europe, as well as by the increasingly rationalist impulse to catalogue and categorize.

Thus, from Loyola’s *Spiritual Exercises* to the new physical sciences, the exuberance of Baroque representation is impelled from within and without to respond to imperatives (pluralism, empiri-
cism, materialism) that mark the onset of modernity. Henri Lefebvre summarized the situation in _The Production of Space_: “With the advent of Cartesian logic...space had entered the realm of the absolute. As Object opposed to Subject, as _res extensa_ opposed to, and present to, _res cogitans_, space came to dominate, by containing them, all senses and all bodies.” After outlining briefly the discussion of space in Spinoza, Leibniz, Newton and Kant, Lefebvre concludes: “These protracted debates marked the shift from the philosophy to the science of space.”

The constant addition of new details to maps of the world would have been more than enough to undermine existing spatial relations, and among the most resistant of those new parts were the Americas, in all their diversity and grandeur. The Catholic dominions in the Americas did not fit (or even appear) on existing maps, and in Spanish America, the Baroque aesthetic was called upon to respond to an unruly arrangement of places and peoples, and to reassert theological order by visual means. But the Baroque proved a poor instrument of colonization because its exuberance and illusionism allowed for the inclusion of fragments that weren’t foreseen by the colonizers. The Baroque in the New World reacted less to the Protestant insurgency or the new sciences than to local imperatives. The dynamic spaces of imported Baroque models, rather than imposing theological order, began to accommodate America’s diverse topographies, cultures and peoples. The New World Baroque came increasingly to prefer accumulation of visual elements (faces, figures, decorative elements) to selection, and polycentric perspectives to any single (or singular) viewpoint. The Mexican novelist Carlos Fuentes describes the persistence of this psychogeography in his essay on William Faulkner, the “Dixie Gongorist,” as the literary Allen Tate called Faulkner disrespectfully:

> The Baroque, Alejo Carpentier once told me, is the language of peoples who, not knowing what is true, desperately seek it. Góngora, like Picasso, Buñuel, Carpentier, or Faulkner, did not know; they discovered. The Baroque, language of abundance, is also the language of insufficiency. Only those who possess nothing can include everything. The _horror vacui_ of the Baroque is not gratuitous—it is because the vacuum exists that nothing is certain. The


14 I use Guy Debord’s term loosely. See Merlin Coverley’s discussion in _Psychogeography_ (Harpenden, UK: Pocket Essentials, 2010).
verbal abundance of Carpentier’s *The Kingdom of This World* or Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* represents a desperate invocation of language to fill the absences left by the banishment of reason and faith. In this way, post-Renaissance Baroque art began to fill the abyss left by the Copernican Revolution.\(^\text{15}\)

Fuentes moves seamlessly between the 17\(^{th}\) and the 20\(^{th}\) centuries, European and American artists, and verbal and visual media. Clearly, this instability of periods, genres and media underpins the “desperate invocation” to which he refers and appealed to the artists whom he invokes. In this passage, Fuentes mentions Carpentier, leaving his own strong affiliation with the New World Baroque implicit.\(^\text{16}\)

Thus, in neither the European nor the New World Baroque is exuberance or excess judged negatively, as they often have been (and are) in Protestant Anglo-American aesthetics. For those born in cultures where the Baroque is the norm—in much of Europe and Latin America—and for North Americans who have acquired a taste for the Baroque despite our largely Neoclassical, rationalist, materialist and Protestant national origins, words like “plenitude,” “awe,” and “opulence” are more likely to come to mind than “excess.”\(^\text{17}\) So, too, is “Baroque reason,” the French theorist Christine Buci-Glucksmann’s phrase, with which she indicts the Enlightenment reason that holds the world separate from, and controlled by, the observing I/eye.\(^\text{18}\) Here, it is appropriate to note the etymology of

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\(^{17}\) In this context, I would acknowledge the work of cultural education of the Hispanic Baroque project at the University of Western Ontario under the leadership of Juan Luis Suárez and other professors in Canadian universities. See their multiple projects on the Baroque at http://www.hispanicbaroque.ca/.

\(^{18}\) Christine Buci-Glucksmann engages poststructuralist theory, phenomenology and Neobaroque theory in her books, *Baroque Reason: The Aesthetics of Modernity*, (tr.) P. Camiller (London: Sage, 1994) and *La Folie du voir* (Paris: Galliéé, 1990). Like her contemporaries and compatriots, Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze, she explores alternatives to Enlightenment reason, and like her predecessor Maurice Merleau-Ponty, she explores the concept of embodied vision—what Merleau-Ponty called the “seeing-visible body.” Chapter 2 of *La Folie du
the word “excess,” from the Latin root *excedere* (to depart, to go beyond). This etymology applies to Baroque aesthetics, as does the etymology of “exuberance,” from the Latin verb *uberare* (to bear fruit; *ex* + *uberare*: to bear fruit in excess, to be fruitful in extraordinary measure). The Baroque exceeds established boundaries and defies expected norms; for this reason it was, and continues to be, well suited to express Latin American cultural realities.

II. The Twentieth-Century Recovery and Revaluation of the Baroque

How and why, during the 20th century, did the Baroque evolve from a European colonizing instrument—from a didactic aesthetic that encoded Catholic and imperial ideologies—to an instrument of resistance to those same structures? During much of the 18th and 19th centuries, the European Baroque came to be seen as irrational and reactionary when compared to the Enlightenment ideals of rationalism and realism that followed it. In Latin America, too, the Baroque was depreciated as a sign of colonial domination. In Mexico, as in Spain, innumerable Baroque altarpieces and other invaluable artefacts were destroyed, to be replaced by those of the more sober, rational, Neoclassical style. By the 1920s, however, Enlightenment rationalism had itself become oppressive and, in some cases, totalitarian. In England, T. S. Eliot was revisiting—resuscitating, really—the 17th-century metaphysical poets, John Donne, Richard Crashaw and Abraham Cowley, at the same time that the poets of the Spanish “Generation of ’27”—Federico García Lorca, Dámaso Alonso, Rafael Alberti, among others—were recovering their Spanish Baroque precursors Góngora and Quevedo. The year 1927 was chosen to name this “generation” to honour the tercentenary of Góngora’s death. In Germany, Walter Benjamin was writing his dissertation on 17th-century German Baroque drama—the so-called *Trauerspiel*, “mourning play”—a dissertation never accepted by his university but nonetheless published in 1928.19 During this period, the German

*voir*, titled “The Work of the Gaze,” is translated by Dorothy Z. Baker in *Baroque New Worlds*, 136–57. In “The Work of the Gaze,” Buci-Glucksmann focusses on the paintings of Tintoretto, arguing that the experience of seeing depends upon “the return of the body and the emotions to the visual field.” (137)

19 Benjamin’s work, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, was translated into English as *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1977) and into Spanish as *El origen del drama barroco alemán* (1990). Note the different translation of *Trauerspiels* in the two titles: whereas the English translation avoids the word
cultural historian Oswald Spengler and the Catalanian cultural historian Eugenio d’Ors were constructing their own transhistorical and transcultural conceptions of the Baroque—conceptions that would, as it happened, prove useful to Latin American writers who wished to include indigenous, Arabic, African and Asian cultures in their own conceptions of the New World Baroque.

This resuscitation of the Baroque in Europe during the first decades of the 20th century is interesting for our purposes. 17th-century Baroque aesthetics responded polemically to contemporary conditions and now again, in the early 20th century, it seemed possible that the Baroque might contest the inadequacies of Enlightenment rationalism, Hegelian historicism and instrumental reason. In Latin America, the great Mexican intellectual Alfonso Reyes was writing about Góngora in essays collected as Cuestiones gongorinas, published, not coincidentally, in 1927. By then, Jorge Luis Borges had also published several essays on Spanish Golden Age writers (Quevedo and Cervantes, whom he adored, and Góngora, whom he didn’t) in collections that he later disinherited, and that were not fully reprinted until after his death.20

If, in the 1920s, Reyes and Borges were interested in the poetics of the European Baroque—Góngora, Quevedo, Cervantes, Sir Thomas Browne—by the 1940s and 1950s, the emphasis had shifted from poetics to politics. The Cuban writers Alejo Carpentier and José Lezama Lima, along with a number of cultural critics, had begun to develop the cultural and historical—that is, the ideological—potential of the New World Baroque. In Latin America, as in Europe, the Baroque began to counter reigning notions of positivism, empiricism, and scientific materialism. For Carpentier and Lezama, Baroque structures had encompassed the multiple histories and cultures of the region and could do so again. I have mentioned Reyes’ and Borges’ recuperation of Spanish Golden Age poets, whom they likened to Mallarmé and other avant-garde poets of their own time21, but with Carpentier and Lezama the relative quotients of aesthetics

Baroque, the Spanish translation does not. Neither gives a literal translation, but the different choices reflect different cultural and historical attitudes toward the Baroque.


21 See “Baroque, New World Baroque, Neobaroque: Categories and Concepts,” the introduction to Baroque New Worlds (1-35), in which Monika Kaup and I discuss the shared characteristics of Baroque and Modernist poetics that made the pairing of Góngora and Mallarmé a commonplace.
and ideology shifted. The recovery of the New World Baroque in Latin America had evolved from attention to poetics into a theory of cultural identity—a postcolonial theory, long before the term came into use in academic discourse.

An essential precursor of Lezama Lima’s in this process of “post-colonializing” the New World Baroque was Ángel Guido, an Argentine historian of art and architecture. In 1936, Guido gave a lecture titled “America’s Relation to Europe in the Arts,” in which he focussed upon the transculturation of the European Baroque in New World contexts. For Guido, the transcultural revision of European models over the course of the 17th and 18th centuries constituted a “reconquest” by which Americans reconquered their own territory—a reconquest that substituted local cultural imperatives for those imposed from outside. Guido’s 1936 lecture was included in his seven-hundred-page illustrated history of Latin American art, entitled Redescubrimiento de América en el arte, which was published in 1941. It seems certain that Lezama read it, because he, too, focusses on the transcultural formations of the New World Baroque, citing several of the same examples as Guido in his own definitive essay on the New World Baroque, titled “Baroque Curiosity,” published in La expresión americana in 1957 and now translated in Baroque New Worlds.23

Both Guido’s 1936 lecture and Lezama’s 1957 essay argue that mestizaje and hybridity form the basis of the New World Baroque—cultural and racial mixing that subverts the colonizer’s norms and forms. In support of his claim, Guido refers to the work of the indigenous architect and sculptor José Kondori and particularly to the façade of the 17th-century church of San Lorenzo Potosí, in what was then “Alto Peru” and is now Bolivia. Instead of the European caryatids that hold up the weight of what is above them, Kondori fashioned indiátides (indiatids), as Guido calls them. That indigenous figures

22 Angel Guido, “America’s Relation to Europe in the Arts,” (tr.) P. Blaine, in Baroque New Worlds, 183–197. The term “transculturation” was coined by Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz in the 1950s, and popularized by Uruguayan literary critic Angel Rama in his book, Transculturación narrativa en América Latina (Mexico City: Siglo XXI, 1982). The term refers to the processes of cultural change—modification, adaptation, assimilation, etc.—when two or more cultures come into contact over a period of time. Colonial cultures in Latin America are generally discussed in terms of the transculturation of European, indigenous, and African forms of expression, behaviours, belief systems, etc. See Chapter 1 of The Inordinate Eye for further discussion of this concept and its principal exponents.
supplant the weight-bearing European figures suggests the burden that fell upon the indigenous peoples who built the church and also their ownership of New World Baroque iconography.

Thirty-one years after Guido’s study, Lezama also focusses on Kondori and on another New World Baroque architect also mentioned by Guido: Antonio Francisco Lisboa, a mulatto architect and sculptor who was known as Aleijadinho, “the little cripple.” Aleijadinho worked in Minas Gerais, Brazil, during the last quarter of the 18th and into the 19th century. He designed the church of Bom Jesus de Matosinhos in Congonhas do Campo, and sculpted the twelve prophets on the stairs leading up to the church. Some of these figures are accompanied by their identifying attribute—a lion from the den into which Daniel was cast, Jonah’s whale—and all are shown holding scrolls that unfurl down the length of their torsos on which are incised passages from their prophetic texts. The subject of this group of statues is God’s word: divine revelation in visual form.

These two New World Baroque artists—Kondori and Aleijadinho—are well known now, but in 1936, when Guido wrote about them, they were not—or at least not beyond their own regional spheres. Guido was the first art historian to engage the New World Baroque as a form of cultural criticism—as a postcolonial theory, if you will. It was he who pioneered the 20th-century idea of a rebellious, transculturated Baroque. In this, Lezama Lima followed Guido and together they challenged contemporary postcolonial theories that constituted the colonized subject as merely returning the gaze of authority. Their point is precisely the opposite: the New World Baroque does not return Europe’s gaze, but revises it radically. The Baroque is no longer the art of conquest, but of counter-conquest. The term is Lezama’s, and it epitomizes this revision.

In the writing of Guido, Lezama Lima, Octavio Paz, and Carlos Fuentes, to name but a few, the New World Baroque took on a kind of polemical power, as had the European Baroque in the 17th century, but this time as an aesthetic suited to local cultures and conditions in Latin America. As different as those local cultures and conditions were, “Latin America” during the 40s and 50s was coming into focus as a totality, and it was doing so according to the politics of cultural mixing and hybridity—politics to which, as I have suggested, the New World Baroque was well suited. Perhaps the most influential purveyor of this cultural politics was the Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier, without reference to whom any discussion of 20th-century theories of the New World Baroque would be incomplete.

Carpentier visited Mexico in 1926—he was twenty-two at the time, and it was a life-changing visit to which he later referred as his
“initiation.” In Mexico City, he met Diego Rivera and absorbed Mexico’s post-Revolutionary discourse, an important aspect of which was the celebration of Mexico’s indigenous past. Carpentier returned to Cuba, but left again in 1928 under political pressure. He spent the entire decade of the 1930s in Paris, during which time he was in close contact with the Surrealist writers and painters and read the works of Oswald Spengler and Eugenio d’Ors. It was the Catalanian art historian d’Ors who proved to be the essential precursor to Carpentier’s theory of the New World Baroque. D’Ors himself had no interest in Latin America, but he rejected the Baroque as solely a European art historical category and insisted instead upon the Baroque as a spirit, an attitude, a worldview. As we have seen, José Lezama Lima followed Ángel Guido in focussing on the transcultural hybridity of the New World Baroque, but Carpentier was attracted to Eugenio d’Ors’ definition of the Baroque as a culture’s way of being. D’Ors’ theory, first presented at the Abbey of Pontigny in France in 1931 and published in French as part of a larger work entitled Le Baroque, traced twenty-two distinct types of Baroque art, including a Macedonian, a Nordic, a Buddhist, and a fin-de-siècle variety. He also extended the aesthetic reach of the Baroque by arguing its affinities with Romanticism, whereas his contemporaries generally preferred to define the Baroque in opposition to Renaissance Classicism. D’Ors moved the Baroque from an imperial aesthetic, aimed at imposing and conserving European values, to a dynamic aesthetic with the potential to accommodate an array of cultural, political and social forms and functions. Carpentier would have read d’Ors’ work in French in the mid-1930s (Le Baroque was translated into Spanish as Lo barroco only in 1944) and adapted it over time as he himself searched for ways of representing the diversity of Latin America’s histories and cultures. Following d’Ors, Carpentier would eventually declare the Baroque “a constant of the human spirit” that can “reap-

24 See the excerpt from Eugenio d’Ors, “The Debate on the Baroque in Pontigny,” (tr.) W. Faris, in Baroque New Worlds, 78–92. It should be noted that d’Ors also affirmed the opposition between Classicism and the Baroque, and on this point he was certainly influenced by Heinrich Wölflin, as he was by Friedrich Nietzsche’s short essay “On Baroque Style” (1887). An excerpt from Wölflin’s introduction to Principles of Art History (1915) is included in Baroque New Worlds, as is a new translation by Monika Kaup of Nietzsche’s essay (41–54), with the Editors’ Note to each of these texts.
pear at any moment and does...because it is a spirit and not a historical style."25

Carpentier’s use of a European category—the Baroque—when he was, in fact, aiming to distinguish American cultural identity from European cultural models, may seem odd, but he knew what to take from the European Baroque, and what to leave—or rather, what to separate out as New World Baroque, and where to find the counter-conquest enacted by its hybrid forms. Carpentier’s most complete definition of the New World Baroque, his 1975 essay, “The Baroque and the Marvelous Real,” represents the culmination of three decades of theorizing the New World Baroque, and three decades of dramatizing it in his novels.

Grounding Carpentier’s argument are a number of examples of Baroque art and architecture. Not surprisingly, considering his initiation in Mexico fifty years earlier, most of these examples are Mexican. He mentions the Baroque façade and carved retablos of St. Francis Xavier Tepotzotlán, the Jesuit seminary north of Mexico City. Begun in 1670, completed in middle of the 18th century and now the site of Mexico’s National Museum of the Viceroyalty, it is a consummate example of the Mexican Baroque style called Churrigueresco, named after the Spanish architects Churriguera who, in fact, never worked in Mexico. But, Carpentier insists, this is only part of the story, because the European Baroque immediately encountered indigenous forms that were also Baroque. For Carpentier, the encounter of European and Amerindian forms constituted a Baroque to the second power, an intensified Baroque, a New World Baroque. Carpentier discusses Tepotzotlán together with the pyramid of the sun at Teotihuacán, pointing out that neither building’s façade leaves any space unfilled: elements repeat, respond, circle back and around. There is no central focus, no singular point of view; instead, there is what Carpentier defines as Baroque spatial organization par excellence: “proliferating nuclei”.26 Continuing to multiply examples in Baroque fashion, he goes on to cite the Mesoamerican codices and the Chapel of the Virgin of the Rosary in Puebla.

Carpentier’s final example of the New World Baroque is the ancient goddess, Coatlicue, the great mother goddess of the Aztec culture, goddess of life and death. She was carved, archaeologists

26 Ibid., 93. See my discussion of Carpentier’s structural concept, which I describe in terms of “metonymic displacement,” in The Inordinate Eye, 141–48.
agree, shortly before the fall of the Aztec empire in 1521, a late expression of the iconographies of various indigenous groups over several centuries. For Carpentier, she is as Baroque as any 17th century Spanish representation of the Virgin, and today, she reigns over the Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City, the first among legions of ancient deities. Her head is formed of serpents' heads facing each other; her necklace is made of hands and hearts with a pendant skull; her skirt is a web of writhing snakes; her hands and feet are armed with claws. Coatlicue is a combination of several animals, including the human, and she epitomizes for Carpentier the Baroque impulse to accumulate, accommodate, include. After referring to Coatlicue, Carpentier asks his reader: “Why, then, is Latin America the preferred territory of the Baroque? Because all symbiosis, all cultural and racial mixing engenders the Baroque. The cumulative impulse of the American Baroque is based on the awareness of otherness, of newness, of symbiosis, of cultural mixing; and this spirit of cultural combining is itself the Baroque spirit.”27 Octavio Paz puts it more succinctly: “Coatlicue attempts to say everything.”28

I will follow the evolving theories of New World Baroque aesthetics a step further, to the 1970s, when the terms of the debate shifted once again. The Cuban writer Severo Sarduy moved away from the thematics of cultural nationalism that had impelled Carpentier and Lezama Lima, and focussed instead on the narrative strategies of Baroque artifice. Unlike his compatriots, Sarduy was not interested in the historical phenomena of the New World Baroque, or in the long transcultural process of adapting European Baroque forms to American cultural circumstances. His permanent residence in Paris after 1960 was as essential to his recodification of the Baroque as was Carpentier’s residence in Paris in the 1930s, but where Carpentier had been attracted by the cultural theorist Eugenio d’Ors, Sarduy found quite another source of energy and inspiration: in French poststructuralism and its theorists—Roland Barthes and Julia Kristeva, among others.29 In his 1972 essay, “The Baroque and the Neobaroque,” Sarduy offers a poststructuralist revision of Baroque literary tropes and topics, combining poststructuralist theory and

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27 Carpentier, “The Baroque and the Marvelous Real,” 100.
29 For a brief discussion of Sarduy’s political and cultural trajectory, see the Editors’ Note to Sarduy’s essays in Baroque New Worlds, 265–69. Included in Baroque New Worlds are Sarduy’s essays, “The Baroque and the Neobaroque” (1972), and “Baroque Cosmology: Kepler,” an essay that appeared originally as Chapter 5 of Barroco (1974), translated by Christopher Winks.
Baroque strategies of artifice, substitution, proliferation, condensation, intertextuality and intratextuality to expound a literary theory of “dethronement and dispute.” Sarduy’s Neobaroque aesthetic privileges structures that bear some resemblance to Carpentier’s “proliferating nuclei”: the Neobaroque, according to Sarduy, “obliterates the signer of a given signified without replacing it with another, however distant the latter might be from the former, but rather by a chain of signifiers that progresses metonymically and that ends by circumscribing the absent signifier, tracing an orbit around it, an orbit whose reading—which we could call a radial reading—enables us to infer it.” Sarduy also privileges parody, because parody recuperates previous cultural and literary models and revises them, thus enabling writers to select, reject, adapt, ironize and otherwise ponder (and construct) aesthetic values. With Sarduy, we can speak of a genuinely Neobaroque aesthetic.

Sarduy’s 1972 essay concludes with his reformulation of the Baroque topos of excess. Unlike the ideological and epistemic motives of Baroque aesthetics that I have mentioned so far, Sarduy asserts that the Baroque over-abundance of signifiers rejects any realistic purpose or function. In juxtaposing “Baroque as play” to “Classical work as labor,” Sarduy, like other French poststructuralists of the 1960s, shows the influence of Georges Bataille’s notion of expenditure. An anarchist critic of capitalism, Bataille targets capitalism’s ethics of utilitarianism and functionalism, and its objectification of the world as a resource to be utilized for profit and products. Bataille urges a return to non-productive values, the prodigal wasting of resources and other impulses outlawed by utilitarianism such as non-reproductive eroticism and pleasure. Sarduy’s revolutionary Baroque follows Bataille in advocating non-utilitarian sexual/textual pleasure. In the concluding section of “The Baroque and the Neo-

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31 In her study of Sarduy’s Neobaroque aesthetics, Adriana Méndez Rodenas emphasizes the overlap of the Baroque and Neobaroque in Sarduy’s parodic process of cultural critique when she writes of “the debt of contemporary literature to the poetic procedures of Góngora and Quevedo and also the imperative to radicalize even further these linguistic resources.” (Adriana Méndez Rodenas, Severo Sarduy: El neobaroque de la transgresión [Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1983], 21; my translation)
baroque," entitled “Eroticism,” Sarduy reformulates the Baroque as a queer aesthetic—one that underlies his own Neobaroque fiction.33

Many modes of flamboyant revision or exaggeration characterize the Latin American Neobaroque: we have only to think of Borges’ Pierre Menard (taking Baroque rules of imitatio to their absurd extreme); García Márquez’s Florentino and his autumnal Patriarch (taking Baroque modes of sanctified suffering and demonic possession to their absurd extremes); or Luis Rafael Sánchez’s Macho Camacho, who is an empty signifier, “a work in filigree, itself a disfigurement of other works,” as Sarduy describes Neobaroque textual artifice.34 Even Carpentier’s late fiction, written in the 1970s, appears to follow Sarduy’s poststructuralist turn. In Concierto barroco (1974), for example, Carpentier mocks Vivaldi’s Baroque opera Moctezuma and upsets linear chronology by reversing the trajectory of Europe/America and thus the dichotomy between colonizer/colonized. Examples multiply, but for now, we can say that Neobaroque parody may disrupt narrative realism (Borges), subvert modern notions of individualism and the psychologized self (García Márquez, Sánchez), or ironize European hegemony by including alterity and celebrating hybridity (Carpentier and many other Latin American writers). In all cases, Neobaroque revision pairs cultural continuity with subversive strategies; Neobaroque writers revise in order to revitalize; Sarduy’s “dethronement and debate” requires the former to facilitate the latter, and debate requires that past models be engaged, interrogated and integrated. Unlike the “post” in postmodern, which implies a rupture with the past, the “neo” in Neobaroque reflects the impulse to recover depreciated cultural materials for contemporary use.

Though Sarduy remains an essential theorist of Neobaroque rhetoric in Spanish, as does the Brazilian poet and theorist Haroldo de Campos in Portuguese,35 we should recall that Carpentier preceded Sarduy and de Campos in addressing stylistic and structural devices that we can now label Neobaroque. In his 1975 essay, “The Baroque and the Marvelous Real,” Carpentier insisted upon what was for him the characteristic structure of the New World Baroque: “proliferating cells, sentences within sentences that have a life of their own and sometimes connect to other asides that are also prolif-

33 See the Editors’ Note to Sarduy’s essay in Baroque New Worlds, 266–67.
34 Zamora, Inordinate Eye, 280.
erating elements”.36 Here, by the way, Carpentier is describing the work of Marcel Proust. Indeed, if we follow Carpentier’s “proliferating nuclei” and Sarduy’s “radial reading,” we find that the Neobaroque is no longer uniquely Latin American. James Joyce, Vladimir Nabokov, Italo Calvino, and Donald Barthelme are equally Neobaroque in their self-conscious commentary on their own narrative artifice, as are many other writers worldwide.

Having just expanded the field of the Neobaroque, I would nonetheless say that the topic of Neobaroque aesthetics is most fruitfully analyzed in traditions where the historical Baroque has operated and evolved over time. The “neo” in Neobaroque privileges revision over rupture. For this reason, the forms of the historical Baroque are necessarily present and recognizable in the Neobaroque, as are the evolving cultural politics they represent.

III. Teaching the Politics of Baroque Aesthetics

As I hope to have made clear by now, the relations between aesthetics and ideology under the aegis of the Baroque have changed over the centuries, as have the purposes of those relations. When discussing the Baroque, the New World Baroque, and/or the Neobaroque, we cannot separate poetics from politics but must weigh their relative quotients and consider the varied relations of their textual and contextual concerns. This question of quotients is essential in approaching all Latin American art and literature, particularly Baroque art and literature, for the historical reasons that I have outlined. There are cultural traditions in which the function of art is, by definition, political, historical, cultural and collective—that is, traditions in which aesthetics serves communal imperatives. In Latin America, poetics and politics have never been separate enterprises. Political literature and literary politicians began with the first implantation of Spanish culture in the New World—not to mention the Mesoamerican tlacuilos—priest/poet/painters—whose codices, sculpted hieroglyphs and other beautiful textual artefacts formed the substratum for the literary impositions of the European empire to come. Immediately upon conquering American territories—in the Caribbean, Mesoamerica, the Andes—Spain sent droves of literate functionaries and clerics who had time not only to rule and convert but also to write literary works, which they did in remarkable quantity. The early alliance of language, literature and politics in the Spanish New

World may be understood as an essential historical condition in the development of politically powerful universities and politically involved intellectuals over the centuries that followed—and up to the present. Now, of course, intellectuals are more likely to be opponents of official politics than occupants of public office, more likely to be outside the political establishment than inside. Contemporary writers and intellectuals do not, however, feel themselves any less politically engaged than their predecessors. The political function of art remains a given in much contemporary Latin America literary and artistic production.

Without marshalling the many examples that would be necessary to support this large generalization, let me invoke the late English literary critic Frank Kermode’s term, “forms of attention,” which I have already used in relation to Ignatian/Tridentine strategies of envisionment. By “forms of attention,” I follow Kermode in indicating the “user’s direction” inherent in the work itself—that is, the kind of reading or viewing or listening that is necessarily encoded aesthetically in the work. I would suggest that the arts in Latin America generally encode a form of attention that requires political readings. Poetry is not sacrificed to political purposes but heightened by them because they are integral to the shared reality of readers, viewers, and listeners. The result of this politicized beauty is that artists, writers and intellectuals are taken seriously rather than marginalized, as I believe they largely are in the United States. Of course, it is still possible to read the Neobaroque writers whom I mention above for their aesthetic qualities alone. In fact, I would venture to guess that most readers who enjoy these works outside of our classrooms enjoy them in this way, and some of my students, too, prefer to deal only with their aesthetic qualities. I encourage my students’ preferences, of course, but I also point out that the works themselves encode something more. Their forms of attention—the kinds of attention they require of the reader—must involve the history of United Fruit and American involvement in Colombia, the dirty wars in the Southern Cone, terrorism and torture, and the dire situation of indigenous peoples in Amazonia who are nonetheless surviving the onslaught of modernity with oral forms of attention.37 New World Baroque and Neobaroque aesthetics are historically and culturally appropriate to address the communal forms of attention encoded in much of Latin America’s cultural production. Over the centuries,

37 Here, I refer implicitly to One Hundred Years of Solitude by García Márquez, The House of the Spirits by Isabel Allende, and The Storyteller by Mario Vargas Llosa.
Baroque forms have changed with the beholder, but they have never ceased to lay claim to political agency. Politics is embedded in Baroque aesthetics in ways that can be traced historically and culturally in buildings and books, paintings, theatre and art, as we have seen in the work of the theorists and writers I have mentioned and as I myself have tried to do here in broad outlines. The Baroque allows for a multidimensional, multidisciplinary approach to Latin American history and culture and should be taught with this purpose in mind.

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