

Bodily representations in the Baroque: Psychoanalytic considerations.

Lillian Ferrari

Throughout his seminars Lacan will make several references to the Baroque period to transmit some of his psychoanalytic concepts and ideas. Evidently, the art forms and rhetorical devices proper to the baroque sensibility were appealing to Lacan, who found them to resonate with some of the questions addressed by the analytic discourse.

Thus, for instance, during the seminar on the Ethics Lacan will make a reference to anamorphosis, a technique frequently exploited by artists during the 16 and 17 centuries through the manipulation of the laws of perspective. The phenomenon of anamorphosis, which consisted in the subtle formation and deformation of images by shifting the position of the viewer, aimed at emphasizing the artificial quality and the effect of lure inherent in our world of representations. Lacan makes a comparison between the technique of anamorphosis which entails the incorporation of an emptiness- and the function of the signifier, insofar as the “fashioning of the signifier and the introduction of a gap or a hole in the real is identical.”¹ More properly, the device of anamorphosis ends up suggesting the dimension of the subject in so far as, first and foremost, the subject corresponds to a fading:

¹ Lacan, Jaques. *Book VII The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (1959-60) Edited by Jacques-Alain Miller. Trans. by Dennis Porter. (New York: Norton, 1986). 121.

“And I believe that the Baroque return to the play of forms, to all manner of devices, including anamorphosis, is an effort to restore the true meaning of artistic inquiry; artists use the discovery of the property of lines to make something emerge that is precisely there where one has lost one’s own bearing or, strictly speaking, nowhere.”²

What is at stake in anamorphosis is essentially an operation that consists in the de-centering of the subject, an operation that is both proper to psychoanalysis and to the baroque. Indeed, the Kepler gesture, by shifting the movement of the celestial bodies from circular to elliptical – with the consequent loss of a fix and stable center — is emblematic of the initiation of Modernity and the sense of destabilization that ensues. It is a moment marked by the ascent of science, by the decline of the Church’s authority and its subsequent splitting. Baroque representations, with its oblique, twisted and labyrinth-like forms is suggestive of the great spiritual crisis that affected man and woman during the XVI and XVII centuries, which, amounting to an ‘epistemic cut’ had multiple manifestations in art, literature and architecture. In words of Sarduy *“the Church’s axis is fragmented and it renounces its pre-established trajectory...the city is decentered, it loses its orthogonal structure, its intelligible signs...literature has to renounce its denotative level, its linear enunciation; the unique center disappears.”³*

² Lacan, Jaques. *The Seminar VII The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (1959-1960) op.cit., 136

³ Sarduy, Severo. *El Barroco y el NeoBarroco*. (2011) Buenos Aires: Cuenco del Plata. 6. *My translation.*

With its overabundance of words and forms, its use of metaphor, hyperbole, and allegory as its main rhetorical devices, with its labyrinthine proliferations (*'several entrances, several facets, several layers of writing'*, as Christine Buci-Glucksmann⁴ has noted), baroque representations invite themselves to a process of ciphering and deciphering, creating a potential for the practice of reading that resonates with the functioning of the unconscious, and thus with psychoanalytic transmission.

Moreover, as some authors have noted, most notably Eugenio D'Ors⁵, Baroque style shows the tendency to 'reunite in only one gesture several contradictory intentions', presenting forms that at times assume the manifestation of a paradox, such as the one expressed in the painting *Noli me tangere*, by Correggio. In the painting, the figure of Christ extends one hand towards the figure of Magdalene, as if drawing her towards him, while at the same time, he refuses her (Don't touch me); on the one hand, he indicates to her the heavens above, while on the other he leaves her firmly stuck to the ground; lastly, the voluptuous body of Magdalene is used to embody the figure of the repented sinner. The expression of polar opposites is a constant trait within the baroque: the body is both voluptuous and pure, ennobled and abject, divine and sensual, and where ideals of beauty and youth may coexist side by side with ugliness and decay.

⁴ Buci-Glucksmann, Christine. *Baroque Reason, The aesthetic of Modernity*. (1994) London: Sage Publication. 39.

⁵ Eugenio d'Ors. *Lo Barroco*. (2002). Madrid: Editorial Tecnos/Alianza.

In this manner, Baroque style displays forms that are consistent with the way the unconscious truth of the subject is manifested in analysis, through formations which tends to disregard the principle of contradiction and might condense in a single representation several psychical impulses that are opposite in nature, as Freud noted.

As Denis Maurano⁶ has pointed out, the perspective adopted by Eugenio D'ors manifests several interesting converging points with the analytical perspective.

Indeed, Eugenio d'Ors proposes that baroque aesthetics, with its contorted and irregular forms, its tendency to accentuate movement and exalt the passions through theatricality and excess, and its exploitation of contrast and chiaroscuro, is the structural counterpart of rational classism, which emphasis order, measure and balance. For him, the forms of the baroque, conforming to a tradition of 'accursed poets' and aberrant monsters are displayed within a constant parallelism with the rationality of classism, as a reaction against it or as if wanting to indicate its underside. Thus, according to him the baroque does not refer to a specific historical period, but rather it constitutes a 'category,' a constant in history that, in spite of the diversity of its forms has recognizable signs. In this way, the dissemination of baroque esthetics as a human constant throughout history would attest to the presence of that 'other side' in the human spirit, a side that connected with the reality of our drives and our unconscious impulses

⁶ Denis Maurano, *La présence du baroque dans l'invention de la psychanalyse*, in Freud et Vienne: "Freud aurait-il inventé la psychanalyse s'il n'avait pas été viennois?" Sous la direction de Alain Didier-Weill. (2004) 'Editions Érès.

may coexist —we can contiguously— with the psychical tendencies expressed through reason and logos.

Similarly, for Christine Buci-Glucksmann, the presence of baroque elements is constitutive of an aesthetics of modernity, such as the one we find in the writings of Benjamin, Kafka, Rilke and Baudelaire among others. For her, these artists constituted that modern movement that will end up questioning the great epistemological traditions embodied by the Enlightenment. In so doing, they pointed out to the ‘Other side’ of classical reason, that ‘other side’ which, escaping dialectical reason and historical progress, is nonetheless consubstantial with it. As an example, she points out to the frequent appearances of the figure of the Angel —a baroque figure par excellence— among some of the modernists’ productions, arguing that this figure (in French a condensation between the words *l’etre-ange* and *l’etrange*-) constituted an allegory which ultimately referenced a border or frontier zone analogous to the one that Freud described in the phenomenon of the Uncanny; as she puts it, this was a zone in which ‘conflictual and extreme psychical polarities overlap: human/unhuman, ephemeral/eternal, Angel/Satan, female/male, real/unreal’⁷. In the end, these artists and writers would find in the figure of the angel a metaphor and a point of access for that opaque real zone that psychoanalysis terms the zone of *jouissance*.

Lacan would explore further the relationship between *jouissance* and the baroque during Seminar XX, in which he postulates that baroque art, and baroque paintings in particular, are

⁷ Buci-Glucksmann, Christine. Op. Cit., 45

evocative of a dimension of *jouissance* that is more consonant with our subjective truth, and that its representations — while mainly concerned with the subject of Christianity (“*The baroque is, at the outset, the ‘storyette’ or little tale of Christ.*”⁸)— were able to constitute a true ‘dit-mension’, that is, a saying that, while knotting together the three registers, reaches something of the order of true that for the speaking being can only be half-said. Why?

In the first place, we should note that the religious paintings promoted by the Catholic Church during the baroque, especially Italian baroque, were designed essentially to reignite the religious fervor and the Christian faith, after the internal crisis endured by the Church with the protestant movement. Thus, the art of the baroque could be conceived as the art of the counter-reformation, which received its main impulse from the program that animated the Church during the Council of Trent. The idea was to give new impetus to the faith and to incite religious feelings through the production of artistic forms that could ‘*persuade and move the mass of believers... by influencing them not only through the sense of hearing but also through the sense of vision...*’⁹ Looking to inspire religious feelings, and to get men and women closer to the Divine by reinforcing the identification with Christ the son, the iconography of the counter-reformation sought to exalt the themes related to Christ’s passion, the sufferings of his flesh,

⁸ Lacan, Jaques. *The Seminar of Jaques Lacan, Book XX Encore* (1972-1973). Edited by Jacques-Alain Miller. Trans. by Bruce Fink. New York: Norton. 107

⁹ Weisbach, Werner. *El Barroco, Arte de la Contrareforma*. Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 1942., 59. (my translation)

the mortifications experienced by the saints and martyrs, and other biblical themes. The *“Counter-Reformation was ultimately a return to the sources and the baroque the parading thereof”* Lacan will say¹⁰. In the meanwhile, the bodies represented in the baroque, while mortified and ‘fallen’, are charged with sensual eroticism, exuding a mystical transfiguration that, with a mix of suffering and delight is clothed in religious pity. Indeed, expressions of mystical fervor, in which the soul seeks an amorous encounter with God tended to be exploited among the artistic productions of the period and in general, the subject of mysticisms would make a deep impact on baroque sensibilities. What we see depicted in these bodily images, is an ‘exalted obscenity’ in which the body ‘crumbles, delights, is delirious’¹¹. However, in none of these exhibition of bodies, we see something resembling a sexual copula.

“In everything that follows from the effects of Christianity, particularly in art –and it’s in this respect that I coincide with the “barroquism” with which I accept to be clothed- everything is exhibition of the body evoking jouissance –and you can lend credence to the testimony of someone who has just come back from an orgy of Churches in Italy- but without copulation. If copulation isn’t present, it’s not accident. It’s just as much out of place there as it is in human

¹⁰ Lacan, J. Seminar XX Encore, op. cit., 116.

¹¹ Lacan, Jacques, op. cit., 116

reality, to which nevertheless provides sustenance with the fantasies by which that reality is constitute. Nowhere, in any cultural milieu, has this exclusion been admitted more nakedly".¹²

Indeed, the proliferation of these images depicting bodily *jouissance* disseminated during the baroque, whose representations are evocative of the function of the fantasm, are ultimately grounded in an impasse, in that gap 'inscribed in the very status of the *jouissance*' that in this seminar Lacan connects to the in-existence of the sexual relation. 'Where it speaks, it enjoys', Lacan says, without knowing anything about it, as our unconscious manifests.

It is important to note, that in this seminar Lacan advances on the hypothesis that first and foremost, language is a device whose primordial effect is to engender *jouissance*, and that in approaching the regime of *jouissance*, including sexual *jouissance* —and absent any 'knowledge' that could make up for the lack of a 'genital drive'— the speaking being is absolutely dependent on the signifying traits inscribed in his/her unconscious. The idea is that the presence of language and speech by subverting any supposedly 'a-priori' determined form of bodily enjoyment, subordinates the realm of the subject's satisfaction to the register of the signifier. At the same time, it induces the supposition of 'another enjoyment', one that would not be 'contaminated' by the intervention of the signifier and its equivocations. Thus, we have on the one hand, phallic *jouissance*, not unrelated with the *jouissance* of speech, which is the *jouissance* imposed by the delimitation and the cut of the signifier. While on the other hand we have a *jouissance* that we suppose exists or would like to believe in, a *jouissance* as it were,

¹² Lacan, Jaques. Seminar XX Encore, op. cit., 113.

beyond the constraints of language which Lacan designates the *Jouissance* of the Other. It is because phallic *jouissance* is determined by the signifier, and is as such limited and perceived as insufficient (a fact that the phallic organ illustrates very well), that it engenders the idea of its beyond, eliciting the supposition of an Other *jouissance*, one that would be more complete and more bodily. But this is only a supposition, for when it comes to the 'finality' of *jouissance*, to a supposedly right encounter between the subject and its object, between the subject and the other, between the man and the woman, there is a hole in knowledge, a hole in the Other that Lacan writes as $S(A)$, the signifier of the barred Other.

In fact, these images remind us that, for the speaking being, the dimension of *jouissance* emanates from one's unconscious, from the signifying traits and marks articulated therein, which also includes the function of *object a* in its different modalities, without, however, constituting a knowledge adequate to the sexual relation.

On the male side, these images verging on a masochistic enjoyment testifies to a phallic *jouissance*, a *jouissance* that is always accompanied with an eroticism of the body that responds to the function of the *object a* as the object cut off from the body of the partner (breast, gaze, voice, etc.). But as such, phallic *jouissance*, always partial and limited, ends up constituting the obstacle to the relation since it always results in a "not that", that is, it is grounded in that irreducible difference between the satisfaction sought after and the satisfaction obtained, as noted by Freud.

On the female side, Baroque paintings also lent a vision to that *jouissance* that a woman may experience insofar as she is not-All inscribed in the phallic logic, insofar as she can access some

supplemental *jouissance* beyond the *jouissance* of the One, and insofar as she is ‘radically Other’ in the sexual relation. This vision is immortalized in Bernini’s Santa Teresa, rendering testimony of a *jouissance* that ‘is experienced and felt, but that nonetheless continues to be in disjunction with knowledge, insofar as “the essential testimony of the mystics consists in saying that they experience it, but know nothing about it.”¹³

To conclude, is not by chance if the manner in which baroque style enunciates something of the order of truth is appealing to the discourse of Psychoanalysis. After all, this historical period coincides with the ascent of scientific knowledge founded in the Cartesian step, a period which by ‘rejecting truth outside de dialects of knowledge’ created the conditions for what long after would be the emergence of psychoanalytic discourse where, through the symptom and the division of the subject ‘truth regains its rights’¹⁴

Lillian Ferrari

Apres-Coup, New York, 2019

¹³ Lacan, Jaques. Seminar XX Encore, op. cit., 76.

¹⁴ Lacan, Jaques. *Crucial Problems for Psychoanalysis*. (1964-1965). Seminar Unpublished. Class XXII.

