Baroque and Neobaroque

ABSTRACT. I view Baroque as a cultural interface of epochal dimension set between the old and the new, the old aural world of manuscript culture and the new world of print that was “rolling off the press.” Today, as we move away from the “modern” mechanism of print to the “post-modern” circuitry of electronics, we find ourselves immersed in a similarly patterned, highly creative and equally unstable, hybrid cultural condition that we may call Neobaroque.

To begin, here and now. There are times, in the life of a man (or in the life of a woman, çà va sans dire), when one feels the need to stop, look around, retrace his own steps, consider how he got where he is. It might happen in the middle of a city never visited before, or perhaps while driving in a highway with too many or not enough signs. There and then one has to come up with an assessment of the situation, and decide what to do next.

I think we live in a particular historical period that demands this kind of assessment. We simply do not see a linear “development” (to use an obsolete term) of our present condition. Rather, we perceive that we are in the eye of an epochal storm, in the middle of a gigantic transformation that can take us (before taking our children) anywhere, in terms of cultural as well as socio-economic conditions.

Once we stop where we are, to reflect on how we got here, the first obstacle we encounter, for a clear vision of the present as well as the past, is our own culturally conditioned view. Our culture works as a filter that
“colours” every perception; in that, it is an obstacle, no doubt. But our culture is also our home, and we would be even more lost without it. And so, we must become aware and flexible. Aware of our limited, or filtered view, and flexible in adapting our logic inside and outside of our cultural home.

With our flexible approach, an obvious, but problematic opening statement for an analysis of the present would be: “We are now living in the middle of a crisis.” This implies a precedent condition of not crisis; and since nobody likes crisis, and the precedent condition would be better than the one we are immersed in, we would also consider ourselves afflicted by a sense of anxiety and with a desire to get out of this sick state, get out of this crisis, as soon as possible. Continuing with our “we are in a crisis scenario” we would have to analyze the crisis, without forgetting that we are immersed in it..., before deciding what to do, where to turn.

For a more relaxed view of the present we should perhaps erase every negative connotation from the word “crisis,” but since that is hardly possible, we could perhaps speak of our present condition as “a period of accelerated cultural transformation.” The definition gives us a good point of departure, a more solid, albeit in motion, term of reference without moralizing, or de-moralizing connotations. After all, we want to understand where we are and that assessment has to be as neutral as possible.

And so we observe our reality. It is made of instability, of discontinuous, fragmentary and episodic artistic and literary discourses as it is of heuristic and... feeble, as it has been called, philosophy. It is made of a great tension between an aging materialistic epistemology and a new appreciation of spiritual values. It is also made of unhappiness with heuristic and feeble philosophy, and of new and great “imperial” designs of future epics. And it is made, in fine, of a new form of “monarchy” that I would call iconic (with new kings and queens as stars, sports stars, music stars, models and supermodels as stars, aristocratic people redefined media stars, like Lady Di, and of course Hollywood “true” stars): a new form monarchy that accompanies the decline of democracy (as we have intended it for most of the modern age, the democracy of the ballot box.

We seem to be, to conclude the preamble, in a moment of extreme tension between the future and the past. We are all aware that changes

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22 A significant series of aristocratic titles appears in the music world, where we have a king, with Elvis, a Duke (Ellington), and a Prince, followed by a more demotic, equally iconic, re-tribalized Boss (Bruce Springsteen).
are inevitable, but at the same time are attached to the reality that we know best, trust and feel that we can control if not dominate.

To make sense of all this, to understand our present cultural condition, our best bet is history. Perhaps we have been here before, perhaps we are in a phase of a cultural cycle that has already been defined in the past. If we could retrace the pattern we would know what is the next phase of the cycle and look at the future with more confidence.

Is there a sense in history?

*Is there a sense in history?* is my loose translation of *Se la storia ha un senso*, the title of a recent book by an Italian colleague, Remo Bodei, teaching philosophy at the university of Pisa. There might be a sense but we don’t see it anymore, is the implicit answer. Determined to be an optimist in a nihilistic world, Bodei concludes by pointing to a paradoxical advantage: since we do not know where we are going perhaps we are free to choose, or better, to create, establish or project *ex novo* our future destination (if we insist on having one). This solution, or rather this escape from chaos or nothingness, is ingenious but I am afraid it doesn’t help us to get out of a general feeling of unredeemable impotence. “There aren’t too many people today,” Bodei says, “who by reason, rather than by faith, can affirm that history has a sense” (17). Of course, the assumption here is that reason is better than faith. But for our purpose, it could be read differently: it is reason, and not faith, that is struck by a crisis; it is reason, and not faith, that cannot cope with contemporary reality.

An so, perhaps, we can turn somewhere else for help, where there is some faith. Northrop Frye has always fascinated me: often when I am stuck with a problem, missing link in my train of thought, I get the distinct feeling that he has gone through an identical or similar thinking pattern.. but of course he always has the answer. And here it is, from *The Great Code*: a theory of history with faith.

Typology is a figure of speech that moves in time: the type exists in the past and the antitype in the present, or the type exists in the present and the antitype in the future. What typology really is as as a mode of thought, what it both assumes and leads to, is a theory of history, or more accurately of historical process: an assumption that there is meaning and point to history, and that sooner or later some event or events will occur which will indicate what that meaning or point is, and so become an antitype of what has happened previously. Our modern confidence in historical process, our belief that
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despite apparent confusion, even chaos in human events, nevertheless those events are going somewhere and indicating something, is probably a legacy of Bible typology: at least I can think of no other source for its tradition. (81)

Of course, Frye’s “modern confidence in historical process,” of which he speaks in 1992, plays havoc with Bodei’s end of the century doubts (or end of the second millennium doubts, which for some reason correspond to the end of history as a linear narrative or process), and we are not making collective psychological anxieties go away by announcing an older theory. We can work with Frye, however, and see, within the wide scope of historical typology, if we can recognize a phase of development, becoming or transformation, that reminds us of our present cultural conditions. We have several choices: different but similar theories of the cyclical flowing of history offer us a view of a particular interest for our purpose. Specifically, we are focusing on the phase (or part of it) that corresponds to the end of a cycle and the beginning of next one.

Skipping the pagan saturnalia or the death and resurrection of Adonis, as well as the apocalyptic design of Gioacchino da Fiore, we could pause at Giambattista Vico’s theory of corsi and ricorsi. Since it is also part of a reasoned out Scienza nuova, or new science of the exclusively man made history and not an article of faith, it might serve to dispel any doubt on the amplest applicability of the theory: not only useful, in other words, to the faithful.

But even with Vico, we have some practical limitations: the development of the nations from the age of the Gods to the age of the heroes, and from this to the age of man, with the corresponding development in the human mind, of the senses, the imagination and the reason, is too large a framework to be reduced to a manageable set of distinctive values for one of its phases.

Vico, thank God, inspired a large number of thinkers, from Heinrich Wölfflin to Hayden White, from Frye to McLuhan, each developing their own system. We can trust Wölfflin with the geometrical ‘correction’ of the circular design of history by Vico with the spiral: we return to the beginning of a cycle but not to the identical spot, the shift being a consequence of chronology. The consciousness of a linear, chronological flowing of history, is so much part of our culture, so much part of our understanding of history, that we have to make it part of our rational understanding of the present. And we are certainly grateful to Hayden White for making us acutely aware of the creative nature of historiography. A good way to look at it, I believe, is to be conscious of making contempo-
rary history as we write about the past, however distant; and this, of
course, applies to personal biases as well: as we become aware of the
“filtered view” imposed by our cultural environment, we are also sensi-
tive to our own biases. Finally: to be conscious of the impossibility of
total objectivity make us humble, aware and flexible, if I can repeat with
some theoretical backing the good intention stated at the beginning of
this paper. We shall turn now to some of Frye’s categories. McLuhan
will help us later.

Patterns of archetypal becoming

Frye sets up his historical *modes* right at the beginning of his *Anatomy of
Criticism*.

Fiction […] may be classified […] by the hero’s power of action, which
may be greater than ours, less, or roughly the same. Thus:
1. If superior in *kind* both to other men and to the environment of other
men, the hero is a divine being, and the story about him will be a *myth*
in the common sense of a story about a god. Such story have an im-
portant place in literature, but are as a rule found outside the normal
literary categories.
2. If superior in *degree* to other men and to his environment, the hero is
the typical hero of *romance*, whose actions are marvelous but who is
himself identified as a human being. […]
3. If superior in degree to other men but not to his natural environment,
the hero is a leader. […] This is the hero of the *high mimetic* mode, of
most epic and tragedy. […]
4. If superior neither to other men nor to his environment, the hero is one
of us: we demand from the poet the same canons of probability that
we find in our own experience.[…]
5. If inferior in power or intelligence to ourselves, so that we have the
sense of looking down on a scene of bondage, frustration of absurdity,
the hero belongs to the *ironic* mode. (32-33)

Our focus is on the necessary link, since these are the phases of a cycle,
between phase “5” and phase “1.” Frye clarification that phase “1” oc-
curs “as a rule” outside the realm of literature is not a concern since we
are dealing with culture in the broadest sense. As we look for specific
imagery related to our present cultural condition that we have assumed it
is suspended between the end of a cycle and the beginning of the next,
we find clusters of archetypes in the third essay of *Anatomy*, “Archetypal
Criticism: Theory of Myths.” The *pre-generic mythoi* or *archetypal nar-
ratives* corresponding to the *modes* of the historical cycle are the follow-
ing, distinct in four categories: 1. Comedy; 2. Romance; 3 Tragedy; 4.
Irony and satire. Each is associated to the seasons of the year ( respectively: Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter), the periods of the day (morning, noon, evening, night), the periods of life (youth, maturity, old age, death).

At this point, if we define “ironic” the position of Bodei, linked to the Winter of modern philosophy, that has brought us the pensiero debole (feeble, weak thought, as expressed by Gianni Vattimo in the lucid darkness of his transparent society)3, we begin to see how useful Fye’s categories can be for us. They are, however, quite a few, and occasionally the terminology gets complicated. Adding extra flavours to an already over-spiced stew, I am now presenting another set of categories of Frye’s archetypal warehouse. Each of the four mythoi described above is divided in six different phases, but only the last of “4. Irony and satire” and the first of “1. Comedy” interest us.

The sixth phase [of the “irony and satire” archetypal narrative] presents human life in terms of largely unrelieved bondage. Its setting features prisons, madhouse, lynching mobs, and places of execution, and it differs from a pure inferno mainly in the fact that in human experience suffering has an end in death. In our day the chief form of this phase is the nightmare of social tyranny, of which 1984 is perhaps the most familiar. We also find, on this boundary of the visio malefica the use of parody-religious symbols suggesting some form of Satan or Antichrist worship. In Kafka’s In the Penal Colony a parody of original sin appears in the officer’s remark, Guilt is never to be doubted.” (Anatomy of Criticism 238)

This lead us to the following phase of the cycle, and that is the first phase of the “comedy” as archetypal narrative.

We notice in ironic comedy that the demonic world is never far away. The rages of the senex iratus in Roman comedy are directed mainly at the tricky slave, who is threatened with the mill, with being flogged to death, with crucifixion, with having his head dipped in tar and set on fire, and the like, all penalties that could be and were exacted from slaves in life. An epilogue in Plautus inform us that the slave-actor who has blown up his lines will now be flogged; in one of Menander fragments a slave is tied up and burned with a torch on stage. One sometimes gets the impression that the audience of Plautus and Terence would have guffawed uproariously all through the Passion. We may as-

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3 I am referring to La società trasparente, Vattimo’s most popular book. For a detailed discussion, see my “Re-presenting Postmodernity: McLuhan for the Nineties,” 173-76.
cribe this to the brutality of a slave society, but then we remember [...] The Mikado [...] The Cocktail Party [...] The Lady’s not for Burning [...] Any reader can think of comedies in which the fear of death, sometimes a hideous death, hangs over the central character to the end, and is dispelled so quickly that one has almost the sense of awakening from nightmare. (Anatomy of Criticism 238)

Of course Frye was more interested in showing the continuity of the cycle, rather than the opposition of two of its phases, but it is very clear that even with a smooth passage from one to the other there has to be a of reversal and a change in direction, as in the summersault and climbing of Dante at the bottom of Hell. Now that we have a good repertoire of symbols for the phase that precedes and for the one that follows the, we can concentrate our attention on the inertia at the centre of the process of transformation.

**From End to Beginning: Anatomy of the Gap**

The greatest reversal in the history of mankind must have been the coming of Christ. Again, we can get some inspiration from Northrop Frye:

> The time of Christ was [...] the period of the great consolidation of Classical literature under Virgil and Ovid. Here, as we should expect, the controlling imagery is that of the cyclical movement, which had expanded to take in such larger rhythms as the precession of the equinoaxes. Hence there were many theories about a new cycle of history, just as there are theories about an “age of Aquarius” now. (The Great Code 96)

I don’t know how serious Frye was with the comparison to contemporary theories of the “age of Aquarius,” but it will be however useful to remember the connection, when we’ll get to discuss the nature of Neobaroque or contemporary culture.

> The coming of Jesus into the world, then, seems to have taken place historically at one of those dialectical confrontations in which history suddenly expands to myth and indicates a dimension beyond the historical. (Ibid. 98)

Virgil and Ovid of course did not know Jesus, and the fact that they are witnesses and agents of the historical change brought by the beginning of Christianity leaves us with a phenomenon to observe for which we have
no cause. We see, however, that Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* represent the closing of a cycle that had begun with a mythological revelation. It all started, as in Vico’s primordial times, with the personification of objects of nature: the sun, the moon, the earth, the sea, were identified with the divine bodies of Jupiter, Diana, Proserpina, Neptune *et cetera*. The transformations narrated in Ovid are reversed, and so you have the metamorphoses of Daphne into a laurel tree, of Adonis, Narcissus and Hyacinth into flowers. We have, then, at the end of the cycle, a retrieval of the primary process of transformation but with the reversed direction. We have also a great consolidation of knowledge, generally expressed in literature by works of the epic nature. And we have, finally, a crisis of history, which, as Frye puts it, “suddenly expands to myth” since it appears unable to contain or justify the extraordinary events of the present.

In terms of archetypes, Frye’s *mythos* of Comedy tells us that the sexual imagery is central here, for it leads to marriage and progeny, and the transformation turns into the establishment of a new society. In the case of the coming of Christ and the process of historical transformation beyond history of which it is at the centre, the union would be of Jesus with the Church as a bride:

> In the sixteenth century the conception of a transcending of the Church within history came into focus […] The Church’s role was to enter into a dialogue with the Word of God and not to replace it as the source of revelation. Milton, who, being a poet, understood the changes in metaphor were far more important than changes in doctrine, remarked that this involved thinking of the Church not as “mother” but as a young bride. (*Ibid.* 85-86)

**Gap 1 = Baroque**

We have all the elements we need to start looking at Baroque as the first of our two transformations. But first, we have to face this question, “why Baroque?” We know that there are cultural transformations and we know, or we assume that we know, that the pattern of all such transformations include a moment of inertia, or a gap, in which the line of “development” of culture reverses its direction… but we just have found no reason yet to be speaking of Baroque.

Perhaps, then, we should consider these two apparently opposite principles of the *Book of Ecclesiastes*. On the one hand we have that, “There is nothing new under the sun” (1.9); and on the other, “To every thing there is a season” (3.1). The first axioms points to the process of re-
trial, and therefore to the recurring, cyclical nature of the transformational gaps, while the second points to the uniqueness of each transformation as independent experience, with its own particular identity. Baroque, therefore, is one of the many major transformations that have occurred in history, but it is unique in that it happened in a particular time and space. We can comfortably assume the setting is Italy and make the period (the broadest possible for the term “Baroque”) span from 1550-1650.4

So we don’t throw Eugenio D’Ors out of the window, nor do we discard Settembrini: for the first, Baroque is a “universal” category (opposed to classicism with which it alternates in the course of history), for the latter it is a unique historical aberration of human dignity, fostered by hypocrisy, fostered by the Jesuits; Seicento is therefore, for Settembrini, “Jesuitry of the arts.”5

Which works of literature, art, music or architecture will we now choose to confirm our idea of Baroque? A good starting point could be painting, the real avant-garde of all the arts.6 And it could be fascinating to see how, with the mannerists (by Wölflin associated with the Baroque) the decadence becomes sublime and Renaissance becomes Baroque. Or perhaps we could start with Monteverdi to verify that by the humbling process of the seconda pratica (music at the service of poetry) music becomes superb. Or, perhaps, Baroque could easily be illustrated by confronting Bernini’s and Borromini’s ovals and spirals with Alberti’s and Bramante’s squares and circles, new churches with old temples. But

4 Both “comfortable” assumptions are questionable. The time span is the widest possible and, as we shall see, there is a reason for that. As for the space, I chose to speak of Italy for practical reasons. I am not making José Antonio Maraval’s nationalistic mistake, claiming that Baroque is uniquely Italian as he says that it is a Spanish thing (13-36), although my geographical limits would be more accurate than his, since you have no Baroque without Renaissance, and the Renaissance is a primarily Italian phenomenon.
5 More details on these critics (and others) are in the still unsurpassed review of Baroque interpretarions by Giovanni Getto.
6 I get this from Frye, “Wherever we turn in studying this art [painting], we are constantly brought up against the cave itself, as a shrouding maternal womb containing the embryos both of human society and of beings of the natural environment to which that society was most closely related. The persistence of the cave setting in Anatolia, India, Etruscan Italy, and many other places makes us wonder whether painting may not have a spacial relationship to the sense of something embryonic, present within the human civilization but suggesting the outlines of a human civilization not yet born.” (“Literature and the Visual Arts,” 194).
these battles were all won, the questions settled, Baroque accepted and respected. The area of exploration and controversy is now literature, and in literature the king of Baroque, or “the king of the century” as Francesco De Sanctis called him, is the Neapolitan Cavalier Marino, author of L’Adone.

This poem was first conceived in the mind of the twenty-four year old Giovan Battista in 1593, three decades before becoming the poema grande that we know, and the longest poem—it has been said—of the entire Italian literature. The fundamental principle that informed the exuberant growth of the poem is a double faceted one. Conscious of the intellectual inheritance of the Renaissance, and fascinated by the new world of Galileo (whose Saggiatore appeared the same year of L’Adone, 1625), Marino chose to stay in the middle, indicating the new science with the old mythology, the future with the past. Ovid, his declared source of inspiration, supplied the dynamics of the change with the metamorphosis and, with it, the scattered structure of the epic and the narrative centrality of the sexual encounter between the Goddess of Love and the fifteen year old effeminate Adonis, whose delicate beauty attracts the wild boar, the true male of the poem (Pozzi 2.35), that kills him in an erotic embrace. Why such a story, such a myth, to symbolize an epochal cultural transformation? Giovanni Pozzi, introducing the critical edition of the poem, asks himself the same question:

Gli anni […] che si aprono sull’ultimo decennio del secolo [1500] e si chiudono con lo spirare del secondo che gli succede furono abitati da individualità sconvolgenti che rivoluzionarono i modi correnti della percezione e della sensibilità: Caravaggio, Galileo, Monteverdi, poco più indietro Tasso. Che ci sta a fare con tutto questo la fragile storia del giovinetto amato da Venere e ucciso da un porco? Che rappresenta fra quei bagliori l’esangue efebo tutto cascante di vezzi? E tuttavia la sua molle figura esercitò sui contemporanei un forte richiamo; poiché vi si avvicendarono, senza apparenti contatti, le massime menti poetiche di allora: Ronsard, Shakespeare, Lope de Vega. Lontanissimi l’uno dall’altro nello sviluppare la fama, conversero tutti nel sorprendervi uno stesso significato erotico e patetico: il fallimento dell’incontro sessuale come mezzo di umana intesa e uguaglianza, Ronsard avviliendo la donna, Shakespeare esaltando la riottosità del l’aspetti propri dell’uomo-eroe. […] Qui siamo di fronte a convergenze che hanno le loro radici nel profondo della coscienza o dell’inconscio di un’epoca, a quell’allucinante processo per cui determinati motivi si fanno transitoriamente i portatori provvisti dei sensi fondamentali dell’esistenza.
The thread of Ariadne that allows us not to get lost in the maze of Marino’s imagery is the principle that Father Pozzi codified as *la legge del due* [the law of two] which I have used extensively and proved to sustain a wide spectrum of exegetical possibilities.\(^7\)

Here are a few examples. The content of the poem is mythological but also historical for the insertion of actual events and character in the narration. The ancient referential values of the myth are kept but transformed with modern sensibility. The archetypal form is that of the tragedy, but in the end (in the last three cantos specifically) it turns into comedy. The philosophy, as Carlo Calcaterra first noticed (in his *Parnaso in rivolta* 90-93) is Platonic and Aristotelian at once. The literary genre is epic but the style is that of the lyric. The rhetorical figures are often presented in doubles, similes or metaphors with antitheses, alliterations with annominations, and therefore we are not surprised to find the chiasmus and the oximoron to testify the presence of unresolved ambiguities. Finally, the main characters themselves show a disconcerting ambiguity in their identity as well as in their role in the narration: Venus is defined by masculine attributes while Adonis is personified in the feminine.

Rather than solving the dichotomies, Marino accumulates them and intensifies the ambiguity of meaning. He defends his philosophical indetermination as the most prized quality of his poetry. His reluctance to offer unequivocal statements is programmatic. He says, at the beginning of the poem that poetry does not reveal the truth openly; rather, it hides it under “scorza mentita,” false cover (*Adone* 1.10). It is therefore totally wrong to make him pay for his alleged lack of clarity. “Carebat philosophico ingenio” said of him the rational genius of Sforza Pallavicino (in his *Vindications*) and the negative judgment has accompanied the fortune, and misfortune of the poet for three centuries. We know better now. We know that Marino is situated in the interface of two different worlds and that, at least in the *milieu* of Italian literature, he is the most eloquent voice of the great transformation of his time.

I would love to indulge in some analytical work of Baroque imagery, but we have to move on swiftly and focus on the cause of the epochal metamorphosis precipitated and represented by *L’Adone*. Marshall

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\(^7\) “La legge del due si vede applicata ovunque nell’*Adone*; o, a meglio dire, si vedono ovunque delle coppie formate da elementi così disparati che, bisogna concluderne, se sono legati insieme con questo rapporto binario e non con uno diverso, devono esserlo per via di una costante stilistica che possiamo chiamare legge del due. (*L’Adone* 2.77). On the same topic see also Guardiani, “Inventio: Dal madrigale al poema grande” in *La meravigliosa retorica dell’Adone*. 

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McLuhan, drawing from Aquinas, taught us to distinguish between efficient and formal cause. The first gives the assurance of a precise passage between two events, between cause and effect in the common sense. But the mechanical coherence of this logic makes it, for our purpose, a deficient cause, if you allow me the pun. The concept is best employed to understand events of minimal scope and implies a margin of uncertainty which widens as new factors of the same phenomenon are discovered or simply discussed. To remain in the familiar realm of literary criticism, there is the risk to rely totally on a single “revealing” element (such as a particular rhetorical figure: think of “la metafora barocca” for instance which, incidentally, is a title of a book that I found completely useless), the risk of oversimplifying with a stylistic trait a broad phenomenon that refuses to be contained in such a tight cast. The concept of formal cause, on the other hand, is at best with broad phenomena which can be defined from a dossier of contemporary events, fragmented as they may appear at first, from which it is possible to extract a common denominator, or the formal cause, since the event, in the study of culture, always comes before the consciousness of the cause.

Now, for McLuhan the greatest cultural transformation occurred in our millennium, prior to the advent of electric media, was determined by the printing press, which is then the most important, encompassing and lasting formal cause of the cultural events following its inception in the second half of the fifteenth century. But the knowledge of the cause, we just said, always comes after the event has taken place, and the more powerful, profound and wide reaching the medium, the slower its recognition will be. The new medium is very much present however, but operates only in a subliminal fashion until its identity will finally emerge in the collective consciousness. Only then, or from then, it will be applied with a reliable cognition of its effects. A couple of example will clarify this rather abstract but fundamental point.

In the first years of typography it was not uncommon to hand copy published books in order to give them the “dignity” of a “real book,” that is of a manuscript. This indicates a vision of reality projected backwards which McLuhan defines as “the rear-view mirror syndrome.” We see it in action again when the first automobile started to roam the road. It was called “horseless carriage” evoking the world of haystacks and dirt roads rather than the new world of highways, motels and suburban settlements.

We need more than a century, to go back to our argument, to reach that phase of development that McLuhan calls of “applied technology,” which brings us to the years of Marino, Shakespeare and Bacon, Lope and Góngora (all born in the same decade, 1560s and most active around
the end of the century). Incidentally, it is most interesting that Amedeo Quondam, in his exhaustive, “La letteratura in tipografia” opens the essay with Francis Bacon’s *Novum Organum* (1620) to indicate a mature consciousness of the effects of the (not so new anymore) typographic medium.

A detailed inventory of these effects is in McLuhan’s *Gutenberg Galaxy*. Suffice it here to recall the following: first of all, a democratization of culture with a new emphasis on the individual perception; moreover, an anatomical fragmentation of the objects in the perception of reality, corresponding to an equally revolutionary fragmentation of the aesthetic experience; and finally, a new technicism in the arts and the use the language leading to great debates on literary genres and to the production of the first Italian dictionary.

Now the moment of applied technology, in which we have placed Marino and his contemporary is not a single point in time in which we spot a conscious change of direction, but rather a quite ample season of overlapping, albeit contrasting, tendencies. And this is exactly where we have to focus to capture the essence of the transformation. We are at the interface of the late Renaissance and the early enlightenment, a moment of uncertainties and ambiguities that favored blitz and metamorphoses in all aspects of cultural life. As the two cultures of manuscript and typography come to a final confrontation we witness, in McLuhan’s words, “the crossing, or hybridization of media with the release of a great new force as by fission of fusion” (cf. *Understanding media*, chapter 5, “Hybrid Energy”). We shall recall this vortex of energy, in Marino best exemplified by the stubborn tension-building unresolved dichotomy of the “law of two,” as we turn to the parallel revolution of the electric media that we define as Neobaroque.

**Gap 2 Neobaroque**

In ideal agreement with Pozzi’s law of two, we find here, to caption the rest of the picture, the praise of the double by Windham Lewis [from *Blast N. 1*, 1914]:

You must talk with two tongues, if you do not wish to cause confusion.
There is nothing so impressive as the number TWO.
You must be a duet in everything.
For the Individual, the single object, and isolated, is, you must admit, an absurdity.
Why try and give the impression of a consistent and indivisible personality?

The double personality indicated by Lewis is a critical reality destined to enlighten every aspect of the cultural life of the twentieth century. McLuhan refers to it to illustrate the contemporary creative and dynamic relation that the double establishes between the cliché and the archetype, or, with the terms of gestalt psychology, between figure and ground (text and context, medium and message).

More than a century after Gutenberg, as already mentioned, we had to wait for the new medium of typography to flex its muscle and come to the epochal confrontation with the previous medium that led to the Baroque metamorphosis. And more than a century, again, we had to wait for the electric technology to bring us here, in the middle of another no doubt greater metamorphosis. The very same technology that brought the telegraph gave us the computer, after a fast paced march through telephone, radio, and television. And it is only now, now that the electromagnetic medium, with the computer, has touched the lives of billions of people that we are caught in the middle of another cultural confrontation. The old medium is now print, stubbornly resisting the bytes of history (pun intended). So, again, we are in the eye of the storm. And the vortex of energy that the oppositional forces generate is again the theater of blitz and metamorphoses.

I can’t even begin to describe the effects of the ongoing transformation. But you only have to look around you to find them. The old *guerre des anciennes et des modernes* has returned with disquieting implications. The idea of progress as lineal development has vanished, and so is the chronological sequence structure of history. Of all the people who have dealt with this cultural condition, two have specifically referred to it as Neobaroque, Omar Calabrese (cf. *L’età neobarocca*) and Severo Sarduy (“El barroco y el neobarroco,”) both lacking, in my opinion, a solid theoretical framework for their fundamentally correct analyses. It is interesting to verify in them a real obsession with the representation of the body, the human body that fascinated Marino in *L’Adone*. In the seventeenth century poem, with the hybridism of the main characters, we even find a physical anatomy of the human organism. The modern critics, on their part, insist on the relationship between the shape of the body and the psychology associated with it, from body building, in Calabrese, to gender crossing, in Sarduy (especially in his latest works of fiction). McLuhan, in this regard, spoke of discarnation, resulting from the instantaneous projection that the electric media make of the human body.
diffusing the icon in the world of telecommunication, in the global village, now Internet, the widest place “immarginable.”

**To recap**

Baroque leads to modernity while Neobaroque moves away from it. Is this an invalidation of the similarities we have indicated? On the contrary, the dynamics of the change characterize both phenomena as interfaces, and as center of innovative forces, regardless of the different direction the rush of creativity will take.

The formal cause that for Baroque transformation was the printing press is now, for Neobaroque, the electric medium. From Kafka to Joyce, from Cézanne to De Chirico we have had countless of intuitive demonstrations of the epochal transformation in which we are now immersed. At the present time, in the phase of applied technology, we have verified their prophecies and live in a stage of unsettling, and perhaps even frightening instability. The new Cassandras (Alvin Toffler for one) predict decades, if not centuries of gloom: the classless society, the democratic society that we have come to accept as the logical and irreversible development of human society is in danger. The very same institutions of which most of us here are part, as print users and producers, are decaying if not in spirit, in economic health. We are, and it is clear to everyone, on the verge of a massive epochal change. So, again, we are in a hybrid situation, not unlike that of the late 1500s in the entire European context. We have more consciousness of where we are going but our vision of the future is still blurred until, at least, we make good use of the process we have learned and train our sensibility to face the effects of the metamorphosis. History, after all, tells us that we have been here before.

**WORKS CITED**


Pozzi, Giovanni. See Marino, Giovan Battista.

