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Assembling the Baroque

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Introduction²

The baroque is a foreign country. They do things differently there. But *how* do they sense them? *What* do they experience? And what might we *learn* from how they understood the world? How we might use the skills and the sensibilities of the baroque or the questions that it poses to help to work *empirically* in the contemporary social science and humanities. These are the questions I tackle in this piece.

The baroque is contested and controversial. We will need to wrestle with the fact that there are many baroques. We will also need to recognise that for many in the contemporary world it is also unappealing. But the issue is not to recommend 'the baroque'. The argument needs to be much more limited. It is that if whatever passes for 'the baroque' understood the world differently, then we may have something to learn if we look at what it did. Perhaps that distant place asked questions

¹ This picture comes from Wikimedia Commons at

http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/4c/Ecstasy_St_Theresa_SM_della_Vittoria.jpg

² I am grateful to the participants at the workshop on 'The Baroque as Empirical Sensibility' June 11th-13th 2011 at the Manchester Museum in the University of Manchester who brought the topic of the baroque in the contemporary humanities and social science to life. This introduction reflects many themes raised in that meeting. The workshop was sponsored by the UK's Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Centre for Research in Socio-Cultural Change (CRESC), and I am grateful to CRESC and the ESRC for financial support for the event. I am particularly grateful to Annemarie Mol, Ingunn Moser, Hugh Raffles, Evelyn Ruppert and Vicky Singleton for extended conversations about the baroque and related matters.

that are important but have been forgotten in the contemporary academy. But since the focus is empirical, I start in a specific place with a specific work of art.

Look at the picture above. This shows a sculpture by Gian Lorenzo Bernini. Created in 1647, it's in the Santa Maria della Vittoria church in Rome, and it shows the Ecstasy of Santa Teresa d'Ávila. Teresa was an exemplary inspirational figure in Counter Reformation Roman Catholicism. A visionary mystic and a pious reformer of the Carmelite order, she was a sixteenth century Spanish nun who took vows of absolute poverty and was canonised forty years after her death in 1622. The sculpture depicts a vision in which she describes how she was visited by an angel. She wrote that 'He was not tall, but short, and very beautiful', and added that his face was 'all afire'.

'In his hands I saw a long golden spear and at the end of the iron tip I seemed to see a point of fire. With this he seemed to pierce my heart several times so that it penetrated to my entrails. When he drew it out, I thought he was drawing them out with it and he left me completely afire with a great love for God.'³

For Teresa the presence of God is the most profound form of rapture. In his absence the soul is drugged. It 'does not know either what is the matter with it or what it desires'.⁴ She adds that:

'The pain [from the angel's spear] was so sharp that it made me utter several moans; and so excessive was the sweetness caused me by this intense pain that one can never wish to lose it, nor will one's soul be content with anything less than God.'

In the sculpture the angel has just withdrawn his spear. He is looking down on Santa Teresa with the love and affection that a parent might show for a child or the Christian God might feel for his children. At the same time she is in a place of ecstasy and pain, 'afire' as she puts it with his love.

We are deep in the baroque. This comes in many versions, but Bernini's Ecstasy of Santa Teresa was created in Rome in the middle years of the seventeenth century. This is the period of the High Baroque. The sculpture itself is canonical for art history. Received in Rome as a masterpiece, it has been – and remains – controversial. It is not impossible that you, the reader, find both the statue and its religious message deeply unappealing. This kind of reaction tells us that the baroque is many ways far removed from the contemporary world, even if it is not without resonances. But if we're interested in what we might learn from it a way of understanding then we'll need to ask: what a statue like this *doing*; how it enters into *experience*; how it *differs* from the ways in which we now go about *knowing*; and most important, what we want to *learn* and *take* from it and what we'd prefer to avoid. Let me start with three preliminary reflections⁵.

First there is the issue of *subject matter*. Spiritual ecstasy is unlikely to be high on the list of preoccupations for most people in the twenty-first century academy. Some might be interested in analysing the techniques for *representing* religious ecstasy, but we rarely set out to write texts intended to induce this in the reader. This extends to loss of self in any other form. Academic

³ Teresa of Ávila (1964, 164).

⁴ Teresa of Ávila (1964, 163).

⁵ In what follows I draw on Wittkower (1997 [1955]; Wittkower:), Hibbard (1990), Avery (1997), Toman (1998) and Hills (2007).

knowing is only rarely about unbounding the person. In practice the historical baroque isn't necessarily about experiencing the spiritual – it may be utterly worldly – but in one way or another it is very often about transcending the person. So there are three points here. First, and straightforwardly, the baroque recognises *different things*. Second, those things may have to do with the *spiritual* life. And, third, they belong to a world that is *extra-ordinary* and doesn't fit with mundanity. I will return to this, but perhaps we might say that the baroque offers a way of acknowledging *Otherness*. And then we need to add that all of these are forms of experience more or less alien to current universities and science parks. Perhaps they belong to computer gaming, concert halls, art galleries, churches and mosques. So here is the question: do we want to bring them into the academy in any shape or form, or are they better left where they are?

Second, this suggests that the baroque mobilises particular kinds of *subjectivities*. If there is an *argument* being made by the Santa Teresa sculpture then this is surely *emotional* rather than reasonable. Do we share Santa Teresa's ecstasy? Do we, like many observers, take it that this is sexual? Or do we find the sculpture idolatrous, an exhibition of bad taste? However we respond, what we're reacting to is in part *emotional*. Twenty-first century academics have emotions, but the extent to which our texts play in registers that are overtly emotional is uncertain. So this is another division of labour within the worlds of experience. For feelings we go elsewhere, to private life, to sport, to consumption, to the novel, or indeed to art, but we don't look for it in the pages of the specialist journals. So that's the second difference. The question then is: do we want to feature explicit emotions in our academic work, or not? And if so, then how, why, and when?

Third and straightaway this suggests the need to think, too, about *embodiment*. To state the obvious, pleasure and pain (including those of Santa Teresa) are forms of bodily experience. There is plenty of writing, academic and otherwise, *about* bodies and their subjectivities. There's plenty of artwork too. What's at issue is sensuousness, bodily but also and more generally materially. In the baroque that's what experience is: it is about inducing specific forms of bodily sensibility far removed from those of asceticism. Perhaps we need to say that this is a place where the mind-body dualism isn't at work, or it works differently. At any rate, it is clearly far removed from most academic forms of knowing. So that's a third issue: how far do we wish to introduce explicit forms of embodiment – or perhaps more broadly, questions about the materiality of knowing – into the practices of the academy?

These are the initial presenting questions. One, in the academy what *subject matters* are we interested in? Are we interested in spiritual experience or in sensibility to Otherness? Two, how far do we want to practice in registers that work in explicit ways on the *emotions*? And three, where if at all, do we imagine locating *bodies* and other *materials* in our practices that have to do with understanding? And these three questions, derived from a quick visit to Bernini's Santa Teresa, also explain the reasons for being interested in the baroque. Obviously (this isn't coincidental) each of these questions also resonates with current debates in the humanities and social sciences. Otherness is on the agenda. Post-colonial scholars worry about what to make of the Gods, ghosts and ancestral beings that populate many indigenous worlds.⁶ Cultural theorists and students of science, technology and society worry about emotions and observe that the creation of 'rational

⁶ See, for instance, Verran (1998), Chakrabarty (2000), Escobar (2008), Blaser (2010) and de la Cadena (2010).

subjects' is just that, a creation.⁷ And feminists worry about how bodies disappear to generate the unmarked and disembodied subjects that populate the pages of the academic journals.⁸ This, then, is the reason for being interested in the baroque. It is not that the baroque is 'right', but what it does is to raise questions that resonate with urgent intellectual and political agendas. In short, it counts as a possible resource for thinking about these questions.

To say all this is not necessarily to argue *for* the baroque. First, as again I have noted, it is a more or less indefinitely elastic category. I will briefly discuss this below, but what it stands for is a moveable feast, and is not particularly coherent. Even a baroque enthusiast might not want – or indeed be able – to swallow it entire. Second, as I also noted, it is also contentious. Does the Bernini sculpture stick in the throat? Perhaps the answer is yes, it does. So which bits work and which don't is both a matter of sentiment and for debate. But the hope is that if we revisit it there may be moves within it that help us to think about contemporary academic questions. Third, then, to turn the argument round and put it positively, the baroque may be treated as an extraordinary though no doubt flawed resource for crafting unusual ways of understanding and writing relevant to the contemporary social science and the humanities. It is a possible source of inspiration that is simultaneously an irritant and a provocation.

Six Techniques of the Baroque

But if the baroque is elastic, incoherent and contentious, then what are we borrowing from? And what are we trying to cultivate? The answer is: it depends. As the art historians have demonstrated, there is no right answer. But one way of tackling the problem is to think of the baroque as a *set of techniques*. Potentially that list is long, and what we find also depends on where we look and what we're looking for. But since my interest is empirical, I'll also work empirically by looking again at Bernini's Santa Teresa. So my questions are these. How does this *work* as a mode of sensing or appreciation? And what are the *techniques* that it uses as it plays with subject matters, subjectivities and bodies?

1. Theatricality

Here's the first suggestion and it is scarcely controversial. Most commentators tell us that the baroque works as *theatre*. For copyright reasons I cannot show it here, but there is a revealing eighteenth century painting which shows us a space that has been set out like a stage⁹. In the middle you can see Santa Teresa and the angel. They are being brightly lit from above by a hidden source of light. They're inside a pediment with columns on either side that is set at the back of a shallow chapel. In front there is an altar and a low balustrade. And then on either side of the chapel there are onlookers in *prie dieux* that look uncannily like theatre boxes. All in all it's like a stage in a

⁷ The argument has been worked up historically (see especially Shapin (1984) and Shapin and Schaffer (1985) who describe the creation of a division of labour between religious knowledge and that of the natural philosophy at a moment that coincides, historically, with the end of the High Baroque in Italy. For a recent attempt to undo the division in empirical practice see Raffles (2010), and for commentary on the latter see Law (2011).

⁸ See Butler (1990). For examples of the latter two genres see Haraway (1997), who is also commenting on the Shapin and Schaffer. See also Mol (2001).

⁹ It is reproduced at (Avery: 1997, 144); see also <http://www.lessing-photo.com/dispimg.asp?i=40070649+&cr=2&cl=1>.

theatre. So this is the first and perhaps the most fundamental point about Bernini's baroque technique – and the baroque more generally. It is *theatrical*. It is all about the theatrical, its effects, its dialogues, its scenery and the multiplication of its artifices.

Comment. It is not, of course, that we don't know about theatre in the twenty-first century, and no doubt there is much that is theatrical going on outside the theatre too. (Product launches come to mind, and public lectures, and degree ceremonies and royal weddings and Oscar ceremonies, the list goes on). But most of the time inside the academy we don't go about knowing by staging *theatre*. Perhaps plenary addresses get performed like that, but most of our papers aren't written that way.

2. Boundlessness

If it is theatrical, then second and as a part of this, the baroque works by *undoing boundaries*. Look back at the picture I mentioned above. This old painting appears in most of the commentaries on the sculpture precisely because it's more or less impossible to get an overview of the chapel: you can't get far enough away to see it as a whole or photograph it, or to do so you need to use a fish-eye lens.¹⁰ In practice, then, to see it at all, you are already being forced to step inside the theatre. But then the question is: where does the spectacle end? Who or what is inside, and who or what isn't? The answer is that it isn't very clear, or perhaps it doesn't end at all. Rudolf Wittkower, historian of Italian baroque art and architecture, argued what is happening is not at all like the Renaissance. Rather he argued that the baroque is about 'the elimination of different spheres for statue and spectator'¹¹.

So it is with Bernini's chapel where we can also see overflows in multiple and material forms. So Santa Teresa's bare foot hangs below the marble clouds on which she is lying¹². The golden rays of light behind her have burst out and are shining down from heaven to illuminate and frame the divine grace being endowed on her in her moment of holy but transient irradiation¹³. The pillars and pediment framing the sculpture look as if they are in the process of being blown open by the force of that grace. Look at the ceiling and the illusion is extended. Up above, and reaching down in a *trompe d'oeil* from far beyond the roof of the chapel, we can see the Christian dove – the Holy Spirit – bursting through billowing clouds that are being blown aside by angels and (another artifice of boundlessness) those clouds also extend beyond the vault into the nave of the church. And here is yet another, for the marble spectators in the *prie dieux* are looking in different directions. They form part of the spectacle, but at the same time they don't. Indeed one is even looking out at the visitor. Crucially she, the visitor, isn't just looking on either. As I said a moment ago, she's too close to detach herself and is also being included in the exchange of gazes afforded by the spectacle. And finally, in the floor of the chapel the skeletons of the dead are looking up and gesticulating in hope. The theatre of the chapel overflows into the groundlings of the underworld as well.

So this is a second technique of the baroque. It works its artifices to *elide the division between inside and outside*. It resists the perspectival picture framings of the Renaissance, but it also sits uneasily

¹⁰ Wittkower (1997 [1955], 158).

¹¹ Wittkower (1997 [1955], 15).

¹² It's important that her foot is bare: she was the founder of the discalced – the shoeless – Carmelites.

¹³ 'By contrast to the calm, diffused light of the Renaissance, this directed light [of the baroque] seems fleeting, transient, impermanent.' Wittkower (1999 [1958], 14).

with how we know in the academy. So-called postmodernism celebrates unboundedness with its ironic intertextualities and quotations, and problems of inside and outside are rehearsed in anthropology as it wrestles with the ethnographic imagination and its post-colonial conscience. But though the artifices that work to unbound may be highly developed in the shopping mall or the cinema, they are less usual in academic forms of knowing. We report. We describe. We interpret. We push out words in the form of journal articles. But we mostly do so by describing from the outside. If our object is to learn about something, then too much entanglement is most often treated as a problem, the sign of a failure to achieve appropriate distance. The subjectivities of the baroque, more to do with submission on the part of the viewer, are all wrong.¹⁴

3. Heterogeneity

The baroque is *heterogeneous* too. It works by mobilising all the media available to it. Indeed opera and theatre were its crowning achievements. A visitor to Rome wrote that ‘Bernini ... gave a public opera wherein he painted the scenes, cut the statues, invented the engines, composed the music, writ the comedy, and built the theatre.’¹⁵ In other contexts Bernini also organised fireworks, and designed carnival floats, squares and fountains. No doubt he was exceptional, but the baroque push was towards overlapping art-forms – and indeed towards a universal art¹⁶. These do not collapse into a single art-form, but architecture, sculpture, painting, and urban design, all these media are chained together. ‘What is the group,’ asked Wittkower, ‘of *St Teresa and the Angel*? Is it sculpture in the round or is it a relief?’¹⁷ His point was that the question cannot be answered in that form.

This expresses itself in material practice in the Santa Teresa chapel. The pillars and the walls are made of rich marbles of different colours. Then there is the highly polished white marble of the statue itself. The ceiling is made of stucco, and is painted, as we’ve seen, as a *trompe d’oeil*. There are flat reliefs, again made of stucco, at the back of the *prie dieux*, perspectival renderings that meld into and appear to extend the architecture of the church itself.¹⁸ The frame for the sculpture is architectural in form. So three-dimensional sculptural work (the statue itself) melds into bas relief, which in turn melds into two-dimensional perspectivalism, which is then interwoven with architecture. This isn’t opera. Music and the spoken word don’t last, or better, they have to be done again and again – though there are depictions of words here (one of the *prie dieux* figures is reading and several seem to be talking). But within the limits set by the ephemeral qualities of certain kinds of materials, this is a world of materially heterogeneous artifice that also combines different art forms which work in terms of more or less dissimilar conventions. If we were to go hunting for a contemporary analogue we might think of museums or *son et lumière*, or the digital, or clubbing, and then we would need to reflect that most academic outputs come in the form of more or less

¹⁴ This is the topic of considerable discussion in science and technology studies. The focus of the latter on the practices of science often means that it also explores how subjectivities are generated in those practices. Haraway (1991) comments critically on the politics of what she calls the ‘God Trick’ in which the knower erases himself. See Shapin (1984) for an historical account of this process.

¹⁵ John Evelyn, quoted by Wittkower (1997 [1955], 13).

¹⁶ Deleuze, 1993 #884, 123}.

¹⁷ Wittkower (1999 [1958], 14).

¹⁸ Wittkower, 1997 [1955] #3546, 158}.

homogeneous texts such as the one you're reading now – which means, of course (and no doubt this is not a coincidence) that they are also relatively transportable.¹⁹

4. Folding: both one and two

But how to think about unboundedness? How is it done? What is the artifice at work? This leads us to a fourth baroque technique: that of the *fold*. For the unboundedness of the baroque isn't just about the absence of boundaries. It's more complicated. It works by pleating insides and outsides together. On the one hand they're still separate, the insides and the outsides, but on the other hand they aren't separate at all²⁰.

Look at the folds of Santa Teresa's gown. Yes, in the most obvious way it covers her. We cannot see her body. There is scarcely a hint of its shape. But in another and more important respect it doesn't cover her at all, for the grace of the Christian God stands outside her in angelic form but it is also within her, in the form of her ecstasy. We're witnessing spiritual transcendence and immanence, two aspects of the same overwhelming force. But, here's the question, how might one *represent* that simultaneous separation and unity? In part Bernini's answer is: in the folds of her gown. These express the both the separation, but more particularly the identity, of spiritual power. Like a Möbius band, the gown has two sides, but at the same time only one: the two surfaces are being folded together. Both express the single grace of the Christian Holy Spirit²¹.

Similar artifices are at work in other parts of the chapel in other forms. Consider again the figures in the boxes. Are they outside? The answer is yes. After all, they are (or perhaps are not) looking on. At any rate they are apart from Santa Teresa and the angel. But at the same time they are not separate, for they are also a *part* of the theatre. And we, the spectators, are in a similar position. We're looking on so we're outside. At the same time we are also being folded in. Such, at any rate, is the conclusion we might draw if we attend to the figure lurking at the back of the *prie dieu* on the right who is watching not only the figure turned away from us (who seems to be talking to him) but is also (as we've seen) looking at us as well. So we're being included too, pleated into the mixture.

¹⁹ The issue of the durability of forms of knowing, their transportability from location to location, has been explored in the literatures of social studies of science, and especially by Latour (1987; 1990) talks about the importance of 'immutable mobiles' which hold their shape as they move. Arguably such immutable mobiles come in a variety of material incarnations including documents, devices, and well-drilled people, and no doubt the pilgrimage is less important for the scholar than it was before the invention of the printing press – or indeed the internet – though there are pilgrimages aplenty, both within and beyond the academy. How far forms of knowing need to hold their shape has also been a matter for discussion. See Mol and Law (1994).

²⁰ The argument comes from Deleuze (1993); see also Hills (2007) who explores Deleuze's argument in part with an account of Bernini's Santa Teresa.

²¹ The argument comes from Deleuze. 'And when the folds of clothing spill out of painting, it is Bernini who endows them with sublime form in sculpture, when marble seizes and bears to infinity folds that cannot be explained by the body, but a spiritual adventure that can set the body ablaze.' (1993, 121-122). Though Hibbard (1990, 140) offers an alternative reading that deserves serious attention. His suggestion is that it is the angel who is partially clothed in fire, 'a clinging, flame-like drapery'. By contrast, the saint is clothed (he suggests) in a 'coarse cloth' and seems 'almost earthbound, as if dragged down by the weight of material that seems to suffocate her.' The effect, he adds, is a 'poignant contrast between spirit made flesh and flesh made spirit'. Perhaps, then, we need to see the folds of the two gowns themselves as folded. For further commentary see Hills (2011a, 28).

This is the fourth technique of the baroque. The artifice of the fold separates inside and outside, but undoes that separation too. It's like a screen, a fabric with two sides that are only one side²². To put it differently, it is also an artifice that works through endless tension, or perhaps better displacement, between within and without. *To experience in the baroque is to be outside and to be inside* at the same time. And, to be sure, it is to accept and appreciate this as a condition of understanding. This is the fourth artifice of the baroque and it leaves us with the question: where do we find this in the contemporary academy?²³ And, if it is an interesting technique, then how might we work it better into our knowing practices?

5. Distribution, Movement and Self-Consciousness

If the baroque works through unboundedness and folds then this suggests the need to think about a fifth set of artifices. These have to do with *distribution* and *movement*. In the baroque understanding is spread around. It is located in different places. But the corollary is that it also becomes crucial to generate ways of moving between them.



To see this, turn again to Santa Teresa. The sculpture of the saint and the angel lie in the spatial centre of the chapel, but something much more complicated is going on for the onlookers. I've noted that in the *prie dieux* there are conversations. Someone is reading a text (no doubt Santa

²² I am misquoting Leibniz here. See Leibniz (1998), but of course the point is Deleuze's.

²³ There are some responses to this question. Kwa (2002) argues that there is a subordinate but long-term baroque tradition at work in parts of the natural sciences, including meteorology and environmental science, where outsides are found within. Arguably so called 'actor-network' theory also works in terms of a similar – and monadological – sensibility folding insides and outsides together. See, for instance, Callon and Latour (1981) and Latour (2001). For further commentary see Law (2004).

²⁴ This picture comes from Wikimedia Commons at

http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/a/a0/Cornaro_SM_della_Vittoria.jpg

Teresa's *Life*) and even those who seem to be looking at her can't really see her because Teresa is invisible from where these sculptured viewers stand. What's happening is a *multiplication of viewpoints*, though whether anyone can actually see the Saint is unclear. So what to make of this?

The message is that there can be no one way of knowing the grace of God or the ecstasy of Santa Teresa. It arises out of vision. It arises out of visions in the plural. It grows out of the study of texts. It is achieved through piety and prayer. We can see that it arises in discussion. It may come in the form of sculpture and art work. The assumption is that human beings are limited. Only God can see the whole truth, while how human beings know is limited, more or less confused.²⁵ The lesson, then, and this is the fifth artifice of the baroque, that experience is *distributed*, but also that it is important to work at different ways of appreciating or understanding, and to try to hold onto them at the same time. Necessarily what we recognise is partial, but it is also multiple, allegorical, and mediated. In rejecting the humanist optimism of the Renaissance the baroque thus knows in ways that rest upon *multiplication*. To experience as best we can is to proliferate media, perspectives, and processes, it is to juxtapose these, and then it is to acknowledge that they cannot be pulled into a humanly coherent whole.²⁶

This tells us that the baroque is also about *movement*; that indeed it is a *process*. The artifices of the baroque are like literal or metaphorical Stations of the Cross; or like Teresa's four stages in the ascent of the soul through different versions of contemplation, prayer, and ecstatic union with God; or indeed like the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius Loyola – exercises that that were practised by the devout Bernini for the larger part of his life²⁷. But as we've just seen, we are being moved between modes of sensing and experience within the Cornaro chapel too. So, here's a final twist: the baroque artifice is also a matter of *self-consciousness*. It is to practise forms of recognition that also know that they are just *another* form of recognising. But I need to add a warning. To say this is not to suggest that understanding in the baroque can be treated as a version of post-modern irony, for there is nothing ironical here. Rather it is to note that any particular form of experience appreciates that since it is limited, it will always be important to move on and work within another practice of understanding; and then another; and another.

This, then, is a form of self-consciousness that is also modest in a very particular way. It knows itself to be located, and but it also knows that location is to be found within in a very particular spiritual or theological hierarchy.²⁸ So it is contexted – this is the modesty part – but at the same time it is also about the possibility of moving through or rising up that hierarchy. Modesty and a kind of grand ambition are combined together in a recognition that the journey to the next Station of the Cross is beckoning and that it may lead to somewhere better. For in the Christian theology the hope, the great ambition, is to be received in the hereafter into the grace of God's presence – through the various worldly intermediaries offered by prayer, study, devotion, and all the rest.

²⁵ I borrow from Leibniz (1998).

²⁶ The incapacity to step outside is also reflected in seventeenth century Netherlandish artistic practice, with rather different social, religious and economic effects. See Alpers (1989).

²⁷ Bernini also went to mass daily for forty years Wittkower, 1997 [1955] #3546, 56, 196}.

²⁸ I thank Hugh Raffles for discussion on this point.

How much this applies or might be applied to the contemporary academic context is uncertain. But perhaps one of the lessons being suggested to us is that what we know becomes almost less important than the processes of understanding itself. There are, as it were, no measurable 'outputs'. Understanding cannot be detached from sensuous materiality. As Kwa observes, abstraction is foreign to the baroque.²⁹

6. Otherness

Otherness: the term is anachronistic, but I use it because I want to connect with one of the core concerns of social science and the humanities. So the last of the artifices of the baroque I want to touch on is its sensibility to Otherness. The baroque, as I briefly noted above, can be understood as *a set of techniques for apprehending Otherness*; often, to be sure, though not entirely, in the form of spiritual experience.³⁰

Move back for a moment to subjectivities and emotions. Understanding is about being seized and transported somewhere else passionately, sentimentally, ecstatically, and/or fearfully. As we have seen, this is the work that Bernini's Santa Teresa is doing or is intended to do. For this is the materialisation of a story that would have been entirely familiar to its seventeenth century viewers. It is the rendition of a powerful *upward movement* from mundanity to spiritual mystery. Wittkower proposes three levels here. There's the human: you, me and the Cornaros in their boxes. At this first level we are more or less in the dark, both literally and figuratively. We are looking on, we are trying, we are praying or reading, we are hoping that we will be swept up, but we are also thoroughly mundane. Then there's Santa Teresa, in her ecstasy, pierced by the love of God. She is the brilliantly lit intermediary, human but transported beyond the human. So she is the second level. Then, third, and high above us there is God in the form of the *trompe d'oeil* ceiling, for if we enter the illusion properly, then there is no ceiling. Instead we are gazing up, as Wittkower puts it, at 'the unfathomable infinity of the empyrean'³¹. Such is the spiritual hierarchy that is being engineered here, a move from the dark below to the limitless light of the Christian Holy Spirit.

It is easy to respond positively or negatively to the Catholic message. But, like Wittkower, we may also make the argument in more secular terms. 'If', he writes, '[the viewer] yields entirely to the ingenious and elaborate directions given by the artist, he will step beyond the narrow limits of his own existence and be entranced within the causality of an enchanted world.'³² The point he is making has in part to do with irreducible *difference*. The divine cannot be contained within the mundane, and the challenge is: how do we go about trying to apprehend it? But this is what the baroque is attempting. It's a set of artifices for recognising, acknowledging, and embracing the otherworldly; for experiencing the work of the Holy Spirit. Push the thought into the realm of the secular, and it becomes a possible set of techniques for recognising and relating to Otherness.

If we return to the contemporary academy the salience of the question that this poses is clear. How might we recognise Otherness? What are the techniques and the devices that we might mobilise if

²⁹ Kwa (2002).

³⁰ For the argument that the baroque as understood by Walter Benjamin, can be understood as an aesthetics of Otherness, see Buci-Glucksmann (1994).

³¹ Wittkower (1997 [1955], 158).

³² Wittkower (1997 [1955], 158).

we want to apprehend it? How might we improve our sensibilities to that which does not fit, to that which cannot be reduced to the conformable homogeneities of our more standard knowing practices? Or is this a set of sensibilities that would be better left to forms of experience worked up and practised in churches, synagogues, art worlds, and the pleasures and the griefs of private life?

The Performativity of the Baroque

This is the stall that I want to set out. The baroque may be imagined as a possible set of more or less experimental resources for understanding and appreciating the empirical differently. Such is the challenge. At the same time, as I have noted above, the baroque has often been the object a bad press. Indeed, the word started life in the eighteenth century as a pejorative term to describe its supposedly misshapen and inappropriate exuberance.³³ And leaving the aesthetics aside, there are also political reasons why we might not want to go near the tradition. For, as Protestants well-recognised, the art and architecture of the High Baroque was embedded in and played a key role in an elaborate and well-developed *strategy of power*. This suggests that if we engage with Santa Teresa and the Cornaro chapel on anything approaching Bernini's terms then we are also engaging spiritually, emotionally and physically with a Roman Catholic version of the grace of the Christian God. As a part of this, and along the way, we're also embedding ourselves in the set of intermediaries – the papacy, including the worldly power and wealth of popes – that go along with Roman Catholicism. Include in this pantheon the rich and powerful Cornaro clan, for as we gaze at Santa Teresa the person looking directly at us is none other than Cardinal Frederico Baldissera Bartolomeo Cornaro, son of one Venetian Doge and brother of another. So the question is: what are we doing in his family chapel which is also, let's remember, his sepulchre? The answer, alongside everything else, is that we're subjecting ourselves to his scrutiny in addition to that of God. Are we behaving ourselves spiritually and politically? Well, perhaps we are, and perhaps we're not, but either way there is a power strategy embedded in the chapel and more generally in the high baroque. It is to *shock, to awe, to move, to demand participation, and then to dominate*.

Perhaps, then, we have no choice. To be interpolated by the baroque is to collude with it. José Antonio Maravall carefully shows how the Spanish baroque may be understood as an absolutist response to the multiplication of seventeenth century crises, economic, social and military. The issue was how control might be maintained in a precarious urban world of embryonic mass culture in which the material certainties were under threat, but the nascent inquiring individualism and freedoms of the Renaissance could not be pushed back into their box. The answer was the creation of what he calls the 'guided culture' of the baroque: '[i]t was not a question of merely imposing silence but also of guiding.'³⁴ He argues (we've seen this in the Cornaro chapel) that it worked by turning spectators into accomplices, both by incorporating them into unfinished scenes, and then by working on their emotions. So the lesson is clear: unless we're committed to versions of hierarchical social control appropriate to mass culture then the provenance of the baroque suggests that it would be wise to treat this with considerable caution. But if the category is elastic, then this also suggests that it isn't *necessarily* authoritarian. And such is indeed the case. Let me mention just two instances in which it works quite differently.

³³ Maravall (1986, 208).

³⁴ Maravall (1986, 73).

First, that it is politically – and artistically – complex is witnessed in a series of Latin American historical contexts. Yes, it was part of the colonising Spanish culture. Shock, awe and dominate, these were the agendas of the *conquistadores* and their successors. But then absolutism and Catholicism moved on to metaphorical seduction in the form of elaborate ceremonies, expansive town squares and ornate baroque churches.³⁵ But what's also important is that 'the baroque' didn't stop there. It also went on to turn itself into a mode of resistance. Arguably the demands for conformity were precisely converted into a resource for other exuberant and non-conformist but equally baroque agendas. Thus Bolivar Echeverria draws on Georges Bataille to argue that it was the repression in Latin American that made transgression possible. '[I]n its theatrical use of the indisputable formal canon, baroque art found the opportunity to animate all its petrified gestures and to revitalize the situation in which it was constituted as a negation and sacrifice of the Other.'³⁶ In this reading division and resistance turned around an opposition between the formal and the informal, and in particular between the rational calculations of the quantitative and the vital energy of the qualitative. Quite simply, the baroque was a culture in tension. It was indeed repressive but it wasn't just about forms of regulated immanence and transcendence. It was also (and therefore) about the *transgressions* of lively excess, about 'obeying without fulfilling'.³⁷ The argument, then, is that daily life always exceeds any attempt to control it, and it does this by seizing on the resources available: in this case the baroque with its armoury of methods for joining the mundane with the extra-ordinary, and moving its subjects from one to the other.

Second, and perhaps better known to an English speaking audience, Walter Benjamin also rescues the baroque from the original sin of political conservatism. His rejected *Habilitation* thesis on German tragic drama³⁸ foreshadows his later concern with the possibility of redemption through attention to fragmentation. The simple stories of history and necessity, myths he called them, are broken up in the desolation and hopelessness of seventeenth century tragic baroque drama. And the tool is allegory. 'Allegories are,' he famously insisted, 'in the realm of thought what ruins are in the realm of things.'³⁹ They are broken and incomplete, set alongside one another they don't hold together, and they resist – or offer the basis for resisting – the smoothing stories of history that otherwise work to paper over the cracks. They work as mute witnesses to the alternatives that have been written out of the record. It follows that the task of the baroque scholar is to find ways of giving them voice – for Benjamin in the form of the card index and the juxtaposed notes that make up the ruins of his unfinished *Arcades Project*.⁴⁰ His fragmented albeit ambitious story is thus a parable about the importance of cultivating a baroque sensibility to the alternatives, indeed the ruins, to the Others that have been lost⁴¹. Allegory becomes a tool for arresting history and

³⁵ Though he feels uneasy with the term baroque, see DaCosta Kaufmann (2011).

³⁶ Echeverria (2005), in somewhat shaky translation. Echeverria's argument is picked up and explored by Gandolfo (2009).

³⁷ Echeverria (2005).

³⁸ Benjamin (1985b).

³⁹ Benjamin (1985b).

⁴⁰ Benjamin (1999). He writes about the card index as 'the conquest of three-dimensional writing' in *One Way Street* (Benjamin: 1985a, 62). For commentary see Buck-Morss (1989).

⁴¹ Buci-Glucksmann (1994).

recuperating what has been erased by the storm of progress⁴². And, indeed, this is a sensibility integral to the modern world in its earliest manifestation – the baroque.

The baroque, then, isn't simply conservative. But this suggests that we can think of it as a set of resources that can be detached from where they came from and used in novel and different ways. But there is a larger lesson here. This is that it is *interventionary*, and deliberately so. It describes or represents the world – the ecstasy of the Saint – but doesn't just describe, for as it describes it also seeks to make a difference. Representation and intervention are knowingly bound together. To put it differently, *the baroque is explicit about the fact of its own performativity*. It is about shaping the world, operating upon it, and formatting it one way or another. Descriptions are never idle.⁴³

So the baroque is knowingly performative. But what should we make of the *elasticity* of the category? Art historians remind us that it appears in different modes in different parts of the world at different times⁴⁴. They remind us that the label was pasted onto what it describes long after the event. They add that this labelling may itself have performative effects⁴⁵. And indeed the commonalities between (say) Bernini, Caravaggio, Rembrandt and Rubens, not to mention the eighteenth century baroque architecture of Latin America frequently become hard to discern, whether we are thinking in terms of their aesthetics, their conditions of production, or their politics.⁴⁶

But then the meaning or the significance of the term has shifted, too, in the stories told of it by the commentators⁴⁷. As I have just noted, the term started out as a term of *retrospective disapprobation*, pinned to artwork that was taken to be misshapen, excessive and exuberant. Then it got turned into a *period of artistic production*, one that supposedly followed the Renaissance (perhaps as the Renaissance 'gone wrong') but preceded the constraints of neo-Classicism. And then it appeared in a third incarnation as an *artistic style*. So Wölfflin treated the baroque as a what he called a 'complex of symptoms'⁴⁸: first it was 'painterly', suggesting displacement and movement by attending to vague forms, for instance in the form of light and shadow; second it was massive, amorphous and intimidating, rendering matter supple and turning corners into curves; and then,

⁴² A misquote from the ninth of Benjamin's *Theses on the Philosophy of History* with its commentary on Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus*. '[The angel's] face is turned towards the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise ...' Benjamin (1992, 249).

⁴³ For this argument applied to the conditions for felicitous speech in religion and developed in a different direction see Latour (2010). The argument about performativity has been widely extended to other contemporary forms of knowing including those of technoscience. See, for instance Latour and Woolgar (1986).

⁴⁴ See the essays collected in Hills (2011b) and Hills' introductory essay to this volume (see Hills (2011a)), but also Lambert (2004). On art markets and the conditions of art production in the Netherlands in its seventeenth century 'Golden Age' see Alpers (1988).

⁴⁵ Caygill (2011).

⁴⁶ DaCosta Kaufmann (2011).

⁴⁷ For accounts of this shift, see Lambert (2004) and Hills (2011a).

⁴⁸ Wölfflin (1984, 17).

third, it worked through movements – especially upward movements – of curves, rhythmic sequences, dissonances, and incompletenesses in which form dissolved fleetingly into light⁴⁹.

So its history covers denunciation, period, and style. But the term is still on the move. More recently still it has transformed itself into identifiable *operating principles*, though the character of these principles depends upon who you read. Indeed we've come across such principles in two versions already. Thus I've touched both upon both Benjamin's move to freeze allegorical ruins and their redemptive juxtapositions, and Deleuze's quite different insistence on folds and pleats. '[W]e all', concludes the latter in *Le Pli*, 'remain Leibnizian because what always matters is folding, unfolding, refolding'⁵⁰. And if we're listing operating principles, we would need to add Foucault's archaeological analysis of the classical episteme to the list. Here the baroque becomes a table of representations, a linguistic grid preoccupied with the endlessly uncertain classifications and taxonomic orderings of signs.⁵¹

No doubt the list might be further extended. But its variety and the way it has recently shifted to attend to operating principles and functions suggest not only that it isn't just politically conservative. It also reveals an increasing propensity to think of it as a set of *tools for formatting experience, forms of understanding and realities* as a response to contemporary questions. The focus, as I noted above, is on the *performativity* of the baroque. In this way of thinking it becomes a set of techniques for recognising the world that may (but need not) be borrowed and adapted by the contemporary academy. It also becomes a set of resources for exploring how it is that we inhabit the work – or the working practices – in which we are entangled. For if the focus is on *productivity* then the questions become those I have been asking. What are its *questions*? What is it *good at*? What kind of a *person* does it imply? What does it recognise that we're *not* so good at knowing? *What* might it format and *how*, in empirical social research?

End words

There is a large volume of writing in the social sciences and humanities about 'the baroque'. Much is historical and empirical, some seeks to explore the 'neo' or the 'contemporary baroque'⁵², but in the social sciences at least, it often takes the form of exegeses and commentaries on authors such as Benjamin, Deleuze and Foucault. But what might we learn if our concern were not primarily to contribute to the already large theoretical literatures on the baroque? What would happen if we were to avoid, too, any thought of strengthening a new baroque moment in contemporary academic work? What might we learn if we were to explore a much more specific question: what the baroque, its histories, its practices, its philosophies and its politics, might do in particular ways for *empirical* research in the social sciences and the humanities. How might we mobilise its sensibilities if this were our concern? If we were to treat it as a set of sensitising resources?

⁴⁹ 'The baroque', wrote Wölfflin, 'never offers us perfection and fulfilment, or the static calm of 'being', only the unrest of change and the tension of transience.' Wölfflin (1984, 62); and Wölfflin (1984, 64).

⁵⁰ Deleuze (1993, 137).

⁵¹ Foucault (1972). There's a hole in the middle, a gap, which is the invisible absence of the capacity to represent representation. Such is the point of his deconstruction of Velasquez' *Las Meninas*.

⁵² Bal (1999).

In this essay I have made some suggestions. Theatricality, heterogeneity, boundlessness, folding, sensitivity to Otherness, together with a receptiveness to knowing as distribution, movement, and incompleteness – these are some of the preoccupations that we might take from the baroque as we work empirically in the social science and the humanities. But, and I deliberately end this working paper without a conclusion, this is work in progress. It is unfolding. Or, perhaps I should add, it is work that is folding too, as it attends in ways that are only partially connected, to links and assemblages, to experimental material forms for and performances of knowing; to movements and unusual forms of subjectivity; to boundlessness, to the unconformable hinges between the mundane and the excessive, and the extraction of stories from that which might otherwise remain silent.

The hope is thus that the baroque is a non-coherent resource for working in ways such as these⁵³. The further hope is that it can be set alongside other less than standard resources in order to open up new methods for appreciating the empirical. But even if these hopes were fulfilled, as I have just suggested, there will be no 'baroque social science'. There would, instead, be new empirical techniques and forms of sensibility in the ways in which we work that don't add up to form a single whole. The result would interdisciplinary or non-disciplinary. It would be uncomfortable, unsettling, and more or less risky. We would need to live in tension in our ways of knowing. We would need to work in experimental and uncertain ways as we tried to appreciate the world differently. Perhaps we would need to turn to sculpture, play music, or take up cookery. Our subject matters, our subjectivities and our materials would all start to reshape themselves. No-one can write a guidebook to this foreign country, but the hope is that if we travel within it we will be able to swap stories and artefacts with other adventurous souls along the way.

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⁵³ An issue that I have not discussed here is the monadology that is arguably implicit in the historical baroque and its successor projects. Philosophically, the contrast may be understood as a distinction between Leibniz' (1998) compossible monadology, and that of Whitehead (1978) which explores non-compossibility.

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